

# JOHN 12

## S. THE CLOSE OF JESUS' PUBLIC MINISTRY (12:1-50)

John has practically concluded his account of the public ministry. Chapter 13 begins the section on the final discourses addressed to the disciples in the upper room after which John goes on to the events surrounding the Passion. This chapter then contains Jesus' last teaching and acts before the general public. John selects three incidents: the anointing at Bethany, the triumphal entry, and the visit of the Greeks to Jesus. Then he rounds the section off with an appeal to prophecy, showing why it was that some did not believe, followed by a rousing call to faith, spoken by Jesus himself.

### 1. *The Anointing at Bethany (12:1-8)*

*1Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. 2Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. 3Then Mary took about a pint<sup>a</sup> of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, 5"Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages.<sup>b</sup>" 6He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. 7"Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was meant that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. 8You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."*

a. 3 Greek *a litra* (probably about 0.5 liter)

b. 5 Greek *three hundred denarii*

There are accounts of an anointing of Jesus by a woman in all four Gospels, and the question of the relationship between the accounts is complicated. The first is found in Mark 14:3-9 ( Matt. 26:6-13). It tells of an anointing in Bethany by a woman who poured “very expensive perfume, made of pure nard” over Jesus’ head. This provoked great indignation among some who thought the perfume might have been sold and the money given to the poor. But Jesus defended the woman, saying, “She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial (Mark 14:8). The second story is in Luke 7:36-50. It appears to take place in Galilee earlier in Jesus’ ministry and is located in the house of a Pharisee. His name is given as Simon, but he is not called a leper (as in Mark), nor indeed could he be under the circumstances. In any case Simon was one of the commonest of names, so we need not think of these persons as identical. The woman who carried out the anointing is called “a sinner.” She first wet Jesus’ feet with her tears, then wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and finally anointed them. This led the Pharisee to think that Jesus could not even be a prophet, and this opened the way for Jesus to speak of the greatness of the woman’s love. The story in John is clearly different from that in Luke. There is no reason for equating Mary of Bethany with Luke’s “sinner” and, although the anointing is of the feet, and the hair is used to wipe them, the time, the circumstances, and the discussion are all different.<sup>1</sup>

It is otherwise with the Markan story. There the similarities are great.

1. Yet some argue that all three accounts refer to the same anointing. A variant is that put forward by, for example, Bernard. He argues that Mark and John describe the same incident, and that Luke describes an earlier incident with the same woman. He identifies Mary of Bethany with Mary Magdalene and thinks of her as saved from a life of sin by Jesus. The first anointing expresses her penitence and gratitude; the second recalls the first, which is why the feet are anointed and why the hair is used. But this time there are no tears, for Mary cannot go back to her earlier emotions. Perhaps the strongest argument for this view is that the present passage clearly indicates that Mary of Bethany had an interest in Jesus’ burial, yet none of the Gospels speak of her at the tomb, whereas all four mention Mary Magdalene. Bernard further points out that the identification of Mary as the one who anointed Jesus’ feet and wiped them with her hair (11:2) demands that only one woman had done this. If two did the same thing, it would not identify her. Temple, Bailey, and others take up similar positions.

Strachan thinks that John is working on oral tradition that included details from the traditions underlying both the Marcan and the Lucan stories. Dodd thinks that Mark, Luke, and John all worked on oral tradition, but “each evangelist used independently a separate strand of tradition, and the strands overlapped” (*HTFG*, p. 172). Brown holds that Luke tells of a woman who wiped tears from Jesus’ feet and Mark and John of Mary as anointing Jesus’ head, but that during the period of oral transmission details were transferred from each story to the other. The strength of the case is the difficulty of understanding why in the one story feet should be anointed, and why in the other perfume should be wiped off.

Both use the most unusual expression “pure nard”<sup>2</sup> for the perfume. Both locate the incident in Bethany, and if Mark says the house belonged to Simon the leper,<sup>3</sup> John does not say to whom it belonged. Perhaps he means that the house belonged to Lazarus and the sisters, but more probably he does not say whose it was because the owner had no part in his story. Particularly strong are the resemblances in the reaction aroused by the anointing. In both the suggestion is made that the unguent should have been sold. In both a sum of three hundred denarii is mentioned (in Mark the price is “more than” this), and in both it is suggested that the money be given to the poor. In both Jesus’ answer includes “Leave her alone” and a reference to his burial. The chief differences are that Mark appears to place the incident after the triumphal entry,<sup>4</sup> John before, and second that Mark speaks of an anointing of the head<sup>5</sup> and John of an anointing of the feet.<sup>6</sup> The amount of perfume used is considerable, and we should bear in mind that Jesus speaks of his “body” as being anointed (Mark 14:8), which is an unusual way of referring to the head (or for that matter, the feet). Carson is surely right when he says, “it is reasonable to suppose that what actually happened was comprehensive enough to generate” both accounts.<sup>7</sup> There are also minor differences of wording and

2. *νάρδου πιστικῆς*. This highly unusual expression is nowhere attested before the Gospels. H. E. Edwards refuses to see in it evidence of literary dependence: “We might compare it to the phrase ‘a mess of pottage’, which, as nine people out of ten will tell you, was the price for which Esau sold his birthright. The phrase is not to be found in Scripture at all, either in Genesis, where the story is told, or in Hebrews, where allusion is made to it. It has come down to us orally, preserved in our memories by its pithy and unusual form” (*The Disciple Who Wrote These Things* [London, 1953], p. 98).

3. R. A. Cole thinks that Simon the leper was the father of Lazarus and the sisters. Thus the house was his, but for practical purposes belonged to the children. He reminds us of Uzziah living in isolation while his son Jotham reigned (*The Gospel according to Mark*<sup>2</sup> [Leicester and Grand Rapids, 1989], p. 285).

4. Yet it is to be borne in mind that neither Matthew nor Mark dates the incident with precision. Both simply recount it in immediate juxtaposition to Judas’s betrayal. The place where they insert it may be due to a desire to draw a sharp contrast with the traitor rather than to put it in its correct chronological position. C. E. B. Cranfield says, “As Mark seems to have interpolated vv. 3-9 between vv. 1f. and 10f., it may be that the Johannine dating is more correct” (*The Gospel according to Saint Mark* [Cambridge, 1959], p. 415). W. L. Lane also argues that Mark has “intercalated” the anointing story (*The Gospel according to Mark* [Grand Rapids, 1974], p. 492, n. 18).

5. The anointing of the head is probably to be understood as a recognition of Jesus’ royal place as Messiah. Cf. R. V. G. Tasker: “she pours the fragrant perfume, her most costly possession, over His head as though she were anointing a king” (*The Gospel according to St. Matthew* [London, 1961], p. 242).

6. Anointing the feet is most unusual, to say the least. In neither incident is a reason given for such an anointing, but it appears to indicate the taking of a very lowly place.

7. Cf. the anointing of Aaron in Ps. 133:2 when the oil ran down his beard and

word order, and Mark's words about the woman's having done a good work are absent from John, as is the reference to people being able to do good to the poor when they will. Mark does not name the woman, but John says it was Mary. Mark speaks of the woman as breaking an alabaster cruse to release the unguent, and he reports Jesus as saying that wherever the gospel is preached the story will be told in memory of the woman, neither of which is in John. He also refers generally to some of those present as being indignant, whereas John says that Judas objected.<sup>8</sup>

In some points John's account is nearer that of Matthew than of Mark. Thus Matthew says it was "the disciples" who were indignant (John specifically names Judas), and he omits Jesus' words about being able to do good to the poor at any time.

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that Matthew, Mark, and John all refer to the same incident. But Luke's story appears to be different.

1 "Therefore" (which *NIV* omits) ties this section of the narrative to the preceding. The chief priests and the Pharisees were seeking to put Jesus to death. He had no intention of rushing needlessly into danger and accordingly had retired to a quiet spot (12:54). But this Gospel is written out of a deep conviction that Jesus came to die for sinners. It was in the purpose of God that he should lay down his life for others. "Therefore" at the set time he came to the city where he would be delivered up to death. John's interest in precise detail comes out in that he tells us exactly when Jesus came to Bethany, locating his arrival characteristically with a reference to one of the great feasts. Six days before Passover<sup>9</sup> would be the Sabbath, presuming that the 14th of Nisan that year fell on a Friday. Jesus may have arrived on the Friday after sunset, or alternatively he may not have traveled very far so as not to exceed the Sabbath Day's journey. John proceeds to

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"over his body," as Leslie C. Allen translates (he points out that the traditional "over his collar" is linguistically unsatisfactory and that the beard would extend below the collar (*Word Biblical Commentary: Psalms 101–150* [Waco, 1983], p. 212).

8. J. F. Coakley, in an important article "The Anointing at Bethany and the Priority of John" (*JBL*, CVII [1988], pp. 241-56), argues that John's account is independent of the accounts of anointings in the Synoptic Gospels and that it may readily be understood on the hypothesis of the priority of John. He draws attention to a number of anointings of feet attested in ancient literature, so that Mary's gesture was not as unusual as is often argued.

9. He does not in fact say six days before the Passover," but πρὸ ἕξ ἡμερῶν τοῦ πάσχα, that is six days before, beginning from the Passover. Some think the construction is a Latinism, but Moulton points out that the earliest Greek examples are pre-Roman and finds "the hypothesis of Latinism utterly improbable" (*M*, I, p. 101). The construction is certainly like *ante diem tertium Kalendas*, but in view of the early occurrence of the Greek all that we can say is that the similar Latin may have stimulated its use. A parallel expression is found in Amos 1:1, πρὸ δύο ἐτῶν τοῦ σεισμοῦ G. D. Fee informs us that in p<sup>66</sup>, instead of ἕξ, we have the singular reading πέντε (*JBL*, LXXXIV [1965], p. 71).

characterize Bethany by the great miracle he has just described. It was the place “where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.” The repetition of the name Jesus in this verse may be a way of emphasizing the personal activity of the Lord.

2 The result of Jesus’ visit was a dinner.<sup>10</sup> John does not say who arranged it, and his “they” may mean the people of the village who were impressed by the miracle, though, of course, it could denote the people of the household. Martha is mentioned first, which may indicate that she was acting as hostess. She was active in serving (Moffatt, “waited on him”; the imperfect tense denotes a continuing activity). This agrees with Luke’s portrait of her on another occasion when Jesus visited the family (Luke 10:40; “the work” there is cognate with “served” here).<sup>11</sup> Lazarus is placed among the guests; he was one of those who reclined at table with<sup>12</sup> Jesus. This is perhaps a more natural remark if the meal were in another house than Lazarus’s own. His presence among the guests could be assumed in his own home.

3 John introduces a third consecutive verse with “therefore” (*NIV*’s refusal to translate it means that the reader misses the way John is tying the anointing in with the preceding happenings). Mary now took “about a pint”<sup>13</sup> of very costly unguent.<sup>14</sup> This would be a scented oil that might be poured

10. δείπνον can denote a meal at any time of the day (see LS). In the New Testament, however, it appears to be the main meal of the day, held toward evening. Elsewhere in this Gospel it is used only of the Last Supper.

11. The words are διακονία and διακονέω. Morgan makes the point that in the Lukan passage where she served a meal for four people Martha was distracted; here she probably had seventeen, but “there is not a word here about being distracted. Martha had learned something on that sad, dark day. . . . Her service had not ceased, but some secret had been learned, which kept her from distraction.”

12. “With” is σύν, a preposition found elsewhere in this Gospel only at 18:1; 21:3. If, as is generally held, its use is a mark of literary rather than spoken Greek, it is of interest that it occurs 4 times in Matthew, 6 times in Mark, but 23 times in Luke, and 52 times in Acts.

13. λίτρα is a Latin loanword that equals *libra*. It is a measure of weight, not volume and denotes a Roman pound, that is 12 ounces, or 327.45 grams (BAGD). It is found again in the New Testament only in 19:39.

14. There are some difficulties about this perfume. νάρδος is fairly straightforward. It refers in the first place to the plant and in the second to the perfumed oil the nard plant yields. But the adjective πιστική is more difficult. It is not found before the Gospels, so that there are no earlier passages with which to compare this one. There seem to be four possibilities. The word may derive from πίστις with a meaning like “faithful,” “trustworthy,” hence “genuine” (hence *NIV*’s “pure”). Nard was apparently adulterated on occasion, and this would mean that this specimen was of the pure type. A second view is that it derives from πίνω and means “drinkable,” that is “liquid” (LS favors this view); BAGD is surely right in regarding this as “very improbable.” The third view connects the word

on the head as a mark of festivity. "Perfume" gives the sense of it. The quantity Mary used is quite a large one and this perfume was expensive, so that Mary's was a very costly action. John goes out of his way to emphasize the cost involved. The use of unguents was very common among first-century Jews, especially on festive occasions. But the oil was normally poured on the head, and the peculiar thing about this anointing was that Mary poured it on Jesus' feet. This is probably to be taken as an act of utter humility. Mary is taking the lowliest possible place. A little later in this Gospel there is an incident in which Jesus rebuked the disciples by washing their feet, a menial task that none of them would willingly undertake (13:2ff.). To attend to the feet was the task of the most lowly slave, so that Mary's action involved great humility as well as great devotion. This is further emphasized by her using her hair to wipe the feet. It is perhaps curious that the oil was wiped off at all. In the case of the incident in Luke 7 it is understandable that the tears be wiped off before the oil was applied, but wiping off the perfume is different. But Coakley points out that a large amount of perfume was used and that Mary was simply dealing with the excess; some of the perfume would remain.<sup>15</sup> Be that as it may, the use of the hair rather than a towel or the like may also indicate something of personal involvement. The act is all the more striking in that a Jewish lady never unbound her hair in public. This was apparently seen as a mark of loose morals.<sup>16</sup> But Mary did not stop to calculate public reaction. Her heart went out to her Lord, and she gave expression to her feelings in this beautiful and touching act. The repetition of "feet" may be a way of stressing Mary's willing acceptance of the lowliest place. Lightfoot reminds us that Jesus' words to Peter in connection with the feet washing imply that the washing of the feet "is equivalent to a complete washing" (13:9-10). He adds, "possibly the same principle may hold good here. If so, the reader is invited to see in Mary's action a symbolical embalming of His body for burial, as though He were already dead." Calvin thinks the reference to the feet means that the "whole body

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with πιστάκια, "pistachio tree," but it is hard to understand how this is relevant. The fourth view sees in it a place name (so Augustine) or a trade name "pistic nard," the significance of which now eludes us. A small point in favor of the last is the absence of καί before πολυτίμου, for this may indicate that νόρδου πιστικῆς is being treated as something like a compound noun (so Abbott, 2168).

15. "The Anointing at Bethany," p. 251.

16. In Num. 5:18 the priest loosed the hair of the woman suspected of adultery; cf. also *Sot.* 8a where the priest undoes the hair of the adulteress. J. Lightfoot cites a rabbinic passage: "Kamitha had seven sons, who all performed the office of high-priests: they ask of her, how she came to this honour? She answered, The rafters of my house never saw the hairs of my head" (*HHT*, p. 361). A respectable woman always kept her hair covered.

was anointed down to the feet.” John recalls that “the house was filled with<sup>17</sup> the fragrance of the perfume.” This looks like the reminiscence of someone who was there. It is possible also that it has a further significance. There is a rabbinic saying: “(The scent of) good oil is diffused from the bed-chamber to the dining-hall while a good name is diffused from one end of the world to the other.”<sup>18</sup> If some such thought is in mind, this may be John’s equivalent of the saying that the action would be spoken of throughout the world (Mark 14:9).

4 Mark simply tells us that “Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another . . .” (Mark 14:4). John, however, singles out Judas for mention and characterizes the man in three ways: he gives his surname, Iscariot (see on 6:71), he speaks of him as one of Jesus’ disciples, and he reminds us that he would betray Jesus.<sup>19</sup> He does not launch out on a tirade against the traitor. The only way he brings out the enormity of the offense is by setting side by side the statements that he was a disciple and that he would betray the Lord.

5 Judas points out that the nard was valuable. He asks why it was not sold for 300 denarii and the proceeds given to poor folk.<sup>20</sup> The sum is a large one. A laborer was paid a denarius a day (Matt. 20:2), so that, allowing for Sabbaths, it was about “a year’s wages” for a laboring man (*NIV*).

6 Such a gift would have been a worthwhile benefaction especially considering the small size of the apostolic group. But John now volunteers the information that Judas did not speak in this way out of concern for the poor<sup>21</sup> but from motives of dishonesty (Tenney remarks that his words here “revealed that he had a sharp sense of financial values and no appreciation of human values”; *EBC*). This is the one place in the four Gospels wherein Judas is shown to be of bad character prior to the betrayal. John characterizes him as “a thief,” his word indicating something like a sneakthief.<sup>22</sup> He also

17. This is the one place in the New Testament where πληρώω is followed by ἐκ. This preposition follows γέμω in Matt. 23:25 and γεμίζω in Luke 15:16; Rev. 8:5, but it is rather rare with all verbs of filling.

18. Eccl. Rab. VII.1.1 (Soncino edn., p. 166).

19. John has a similar statement about Judas in 6:71, but characteristically in repeating it he makes slight changes. The word order is different, for while in the earlier passage, ἐκ is used before τῶν δώδεκα, here it is not (some MSS have it here, but this does not seem to be the true text); there we have τῶν δώδεκα, here τῶν μαθητῶν, to which αὐτοῦ is added; and while the former has ἔμελλεν this passage reads ὁ μέλλων.

20. There is no article with πτωχοῖς, so that the meaning is “to poor people” rather than “to the poor.”

21. The construction is impersonal, οὐχ ὅτι περὶ τῶν πτωχῶν ἔμελλεν αὐτῷ. The only other example of this construction in John is in 10:13 where it is used of the hired hand who “cares nothing for the sheep.” This may be more than a coincidence.

22. κλέπτῃς.

gives us the information that Judas was the “treasurer”<sup>23</sup> of the little band, which argues that he was a man of some ability. It also meant that he would be in a position to help himself from time to time.<sup>24</sup> It further opens up the possibility that disappointed avarice may have been one of the motives leading Judas to betray Jesus. This is especially clear in the arrangement of the narrative in Matthew and Mark. These two Evangelists speak of Judas as going away to the chief priests and making his agreement with them immediately at the close of this incident. The impression left is that Judas, seeing one source of personal enrichment lost, hastened to create another. And if this is the character of the man, we may well feel that he was dissatisfied with the way the mission of Jesus was turning out. Certainly he would have hoped for better pickings when he first attached himself to the little band.

7 Jesus immediately took Mary’s part. He would have nothing to do with the criticism brought against her, though there is difficulty in understanding the precise bearing of his defense. In the first place it is curious that he should refer to his “burial.”<sup>25</sup> Anointing was usually a mark of festivity. Its omission was an act of discourtesy toward a guest (Luke 7:46). When people were engaged in solemn activities such as fasting, they sometimes refrained from anointing as a way of drawing attention to what they were doing, a practice that Jesus discouraged (Matt. 6:16-17). Anointing was thus associated with revelry rather than with funerals. A remark about a burial is not at all what we would have expected. We must take this as a measure of the extent to which the Passion was in Jesus’ mind at this time. It loomed large in his thoughts and therefore an action that at another time might arouse very different associations he immediately linked with his death. And he associated Mary with this view. He may mean that she had entered more fully into his mind than others and knew that the end could not be far off. Or he may mean

23. τὸ γλωσσόκομον ἔχων. The noun denotes a small box or case, originally one for the mouthpiece of a flute (γλωττοί). From its proper use for the flute it appears to have been used for any small case, but in the New Testament its two occurrences (here and 13:29) both refer to a money box. MM comments: “This out-of-the-way-looking word proves to be decidedly vernacular, and quite in place in Jn 12<sup>6</sup>, 13<sup>29</sup>, where it is ‘money-box’ (cf. RV marg.): its original meaning, as ‘receptacle’ (χομίζω) for the ‘tongues’ or mouthpieces of flutes, had long been forgotten, and influenced it only by stamping on it generally the sense of small size and portability.” They cite numerous examples. See also Field, p. 97. What is clear is that it referred to a box made of wood or other rigid material, not a “bag” (as *NIV*) or “purse” (*REB*).

24. βαστάζω has a double meaning, not unlike the English word “lift.” It means “to carry” (as *KJV*, “bare”), but it may also mean “to carry away” and thus “to pilfer” (see MM). Judas not only “carried” what was put in the box, but “carried it off.”

25. ἐνταφιασμός refers properly not so much to the burial as to the “laying out” of the corpse, the preparation for burial (MM). In 19:40 the wrapping in linen with spices is described as the Jewish custom ἐνταφιάζειν.

that she had procured the perfume with a view to his final anointing. Probably the former.

Another difficulty is in understanding what meaning we are to put into the word “save,”<sup>26</sup> for Mary had just done the very opposite of “saving” the perfume. She had poured it out, and it was irrevocably lost. Perhaps the meaning is that Mary should “save” the perfume for the use she had in mind, and not devote it to the use of which Judas had spoken. That is to say, she had kept it for a special purpose. In view of Jesus’ imminent death now was the time to accomplish that purpose.<sup>27</sup> Little appears to be said for the view of Bernard, Richardson, and others that part only of the perfume was used and the rest kept until the burial (cf. v. 3; Mark 14:3).<sup>28</sup> Such a view is difficult to reconcile with Judas’s remarks. He was complaining that the perfume had been wasted, not that it was being reserved for a wrong purpose.<sup>29</sup>

**8** Opportunity is to be seized while it is there. The poor are always present (cf. Deut. 15:11). But Jesus<sup>30</sup> is not. He will not live to old age but will soon be taken from among them. The time for actions of devotion toward him is much shorter than those at table think.<sup>31</sup> Jesus accordingly welcomes Mary’s action.

26. There is some difficulty with the construction ἄφες αὐτήν, ἵνα τηρήσῃ. Moulton points out that ἄφες is possibly used more or less as an auxiliary, which would here give the meaning “let her keep it.” The accusative αὐτήν, however, and the similar expression in Mark 14:6 are against the auxiliary idea, and favor “Let her alone: let her keep it” (M, I, pp. 175-76). The former interpretation is behind *ARV*, “Suffer her to keep it,” but the latter seems preferable with *NRSV*, *GNB*, *REB*, etc. Barrett lists a number of possible meanings but concludes, “It cannot be said that any of these is wholly satisfying.”

27. This accords with the view of Lagrange, who points out that τετήρηκεν of the received text, while not the true reading, has yet preserved the true sense. Compare the words of Jesus, “She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial” (Mark 14:8). See also Lindars, “The occasion is symbolically equivalent to the day of burial, and for this reason she was right to keep the ointment and use it in this extravagant way.” Bruce gives the meaning as “Let her keep the credit of having performed the last rites for me here and now, against the day of my burial.”

28. Jesus does not refer to part of it, but to “it” (αὐτό). Moreover, Mark refers to the alabaster cruse as having been broken (Mark 14:3), which makes it unlikely that any significant amount could have been retained.

29. Torrey makes the words a question: “should she keep it for the day of my burial?”

30. The emphatic ἐμέ set at the beginning of the clause places Jesus in the sharpest contrast with τοὺς πτωχοὺς.

31. There are Jewish expressions that indicate that care of the dead takes precedence over almsgiving. Thus *Sukk.* 49b praises *Gemiluth Hasadim* (“the practice of kindness”) above charity, among other reasons because it can be done both to the living and the dead, the later of which is explained as, “By attending to their funeral and burial” (Soncino edn., p. 233, n. 8).

## 2. The Triumphal Entry (12:9-19)

*9Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 10So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, 11for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him. 12The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. 13They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna!"<sup>a</sup> "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"<sup>b</sup> "Blessed is the King of Israel!" 14Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written, 15"Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt."<sup>c</sup> 16At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him. 17Now the crowd that was with him had continued to spread the word that he had called Lazarus from the tomb, raising him from the dead.<sup>d</sup> 18Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him. 19So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!"*

a. 13 A Hebrew expression meaning "Save!" which became an exclamation of praise

b. 13 Psalm 118:25, 26

c. 15 Zech. 9:9

d. 17 Or *Now the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead were telling everyone*

The narrative of the triumphal entry is found in all four Gospels. At this point accordingly John's story links up with those in the Synoptic Gospels. John does not include all the details we find elsewhere, and, for example, he says little about the procuring of the ass, saying only that Jesus "found a young donkey and sat upon it" (v. 14). But John tells us enough to bring out the royalty of Jesus. Characteristically he does not think of this as a glorification of Jesus (for that he looks to the cross, v. 16). But he leaves no doubt but that the challenge of Jesus was felt and appreciated. He has some touches of his own. He alone dates the incident on the Sunday preceding the Passover. He alone mentions the palms, the reference to the raising of Lazarus, the fact that the disciples did not understand the significance of these happenings until after Jesus "was glorified," and the pessimistic utterance of the Pharisees.

**9** It was not difficult to make the journey from Jerusalem to Bethany, and a great crowd of people came. The expression is similar to that which

*KJV* renders “the common people” in Mark 12:37, but the word order is different,<sup>32</sup> and it would seem that John’s meaning is “the great crowd.” While obviously this will include many of the “common people,” yet this is not what John says and his intention should be respected. The crowd is described as “of the Jews” (*NIV* omits the article), an expression which in this Gospel naturally applies to Jesus’ enemies rather than to those who were disposed to be friendly toward him. They came to know<sup>33</sup> that Jesus was there, and so they came. John makes it plain that Lazarus was a great attraction for them. They came not simply to see Jesus but on account of Lazarus. To this man’s name John adds “whom he had raised from the dead.” He does not let his readers lose sight of the stupendous miracle.

**10-11** John now records the effect on the high priests. They took counsel in order that they might kill Lazarus<sup>34</sup> (the construction indicates purpose). This seems a strange desire since death had not been able to hold him in the face of Jesus’ command. But the “as well” is significant. They wanted to destroy both Lazarus and the Man who had raised him. Perhaps, too, they felt that the raising had not been genuine so that if they could really secure Lazarus’s death it would be an end to the mischief that the reports of his raising were causing. Caiaphas had said, “it is better for you that one man die . . .” (11:50). But one was not enough; now it had to be two. Thus does evil grow. For the Sadducees Lazarus was a double embarrassment. Not only did he cause people to go over to the side of Christ, but he was also a standing condemnation of their doctrine. They denied that there would be a resurrection and here was a man who had lived through death. “Many of the Jews,” that is of the group normally opposed to Jesus, “were going over to Jesus.”<sup>35</sup> John uses the imperfect tense, which may indicate continuity, in which case he sees the process as going on for quite some time. Or it may be inceptive, “they

32. Mark has ὁ πολὺς ὄχλος, and John appears to read ὁ ὄχλος πολὺς with the adjective in the predicate position. This is the reading of **Ⲙ B\*** *al.*, and, though most authorities omit the article, it should probably be accepted. A text without it would read smoothly and there seems to be no reason for inserting it, whereas the omission from a text containing it would seem a fairly obvious correction. There is a division of authorities again over the same expression in verse 12. If we accept the reading ὁ ὄχλος πολὺς, we have another problem. The expression ought to mean “the crowd is great,” but the context makes it clear that “the great crowd” is meant. Lightfoot thinks the unusual expression may be meant to recall the crowd of 6:2, 5 (ὄχλος πολὺς and πολὺς ὄχλος), for that crowd had followed Jesus in Galilee and sought to make him King. Westcott regards ὄχλος πολὺς as a “compound noun.” This would simplify the situation, but he gives no reasons.

33. Ingressive aorist.

34. The καί before Lazarus looks back to 11:53 where they plotted to kill Jesus. Now they include Lazarus *also* in their plans (*NIV*, “as well”).

35. The verb is ὑπήγον, a common verb in John. It seems to be used here with the meaning “depart from one’s allegiance” (i.e., to the chief priests). Cf. its use in 6:67.

began to go away,” “they began to believe.” The construction used for “putting their faith” in Jesus is that which John habitually uses for a deep and genuine faith (see Additional Note E, pp. 296-98).

**12-13** “The next day” is a typical Johannine note of time, and refers back to verse 1. “The great crowd”<sup>36</sup> is the same expression as that used in verse 9 (where see note), but it does not refer to the same people. There it designated the people from Jerusalem who went out to Bethany; here it refers to the people from other parts who were coming up to Jerusalem for the feast, probably many of them from Galilee.<sup>37</sup> Some of them had apparently reached Jerusalem and now “went out” to meet Jesus. These would accordingly be people among whom the greater part of his ministry had been exercised, a fact that perhaps explains their enthusiasm. Doubtless many of them had felt for some time that Jesus’ teaching and miracles showed him to be the Messiah. But until now he would not make the claim. He would never set himself up as King. When on this occasion he did not reject their acclamation, their enthusiasm knew no bounds. He was now doing, they thought, what they had always wanted him to do. As John tells it, these people did not happen to be in the way as Jesus came. They heard<sup>38</sup> that he was coming and went out of set purpose to meet him.<sup>39</sup>

They took palm branches and they cried out (the imperfect tense means that they cried out persistently; cf. *Berkeley*, “shouting all the while”). Both the actions and the words expressed their praise. John’s word for “branches”<sup>40</sup> is

36. The article is read by  $\rho^{66*}$  B L  $\Theta$  f1 syr<sup>s</sup> boh. As in v. 9 it should probably be accepted.

37. Great numbers assembled at Jerusalem at Passover time. Josephus speaks of a crowd exceeding 2,700,000 (*Bell.* 6.425). Even allowing for some exaggeration it is clear that large numbers could be expected at this feast. J. Jeremias estimates that on such occasions the city could accommodate 150,000 persons (*Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* [London, 1969], pp. 82ff.).

38. The plural ἀκούσαντες, coming as it does after the singular noun ὄχλος and the singular participle ἐλθών, is to be noted. It would not be so strange if it came after the plural verb ἔλαβον. Perhaps John is putting some emphasis on plurality in the crowd, which may also be in mind in the adjective πολύς.

39. εἰς ὑπάντησιν αὐτῶ. Moulton has a note on the expression in which he denies that it is a Semitism, and regards it as synonymous with εἰς ἀπάντησιν. Of the latter he says, “It seems that the special idea of the word was the official welcome of a newly arrived dignitary” (*M*, I, p. 14, n. 3). Similarly *MM* speaks of it as “a kind of t.t. for the official welcome of a newly arrived dignitary.” This, of course, is very much in place in the present context.

40. βαΐα. He speaks of τὰ βαΐα τῶν φοινίκων, which is peculiar in that either βαΐα or φοινίκων could denote palm branches (though the latter might also mean “palm trees”), so that the whole means “palm branches of palm trees.” βαΐον is apparently taken over from the Coptic *bai* (*BAGD*). Some scholars suggest that what is meant is the *lulab* or branch of palm, willow, and myrtle used at the Feast of Tabernacles, but no sufficient