

**John 2:13–22**

<sup>13</sup> Since the Passover of the Jews was near, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> He found in the temple area those who sold oxen, sheep, and doves, as well as the money-changers seated there. <sup>15</sup> He made a whip out of cords and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep and oxen, and spilled the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables, <sup>16</sup> and to those who sold doves he said, “Take these out of here, and stop making my Father’s house a marketplace.” <sup>17</sup> His disciples recalled the words of scripture, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” <sup>18</sup> At this the Jews answered and said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” <sup>19</sup> Jesus answered and said to them, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” <sup>20</sup> The Jews said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?” <sup>21</sup> But he was speaking about the temple of his body. <sup>22</sup> Therefore, when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they came to believe the scripture and the word Jesus had spoken. <sup>23</sup> While he was in Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, many began to believe in his name when they saw the signs he was doing. <sup>24</sup> But Jesus would not trust himself to them because he knew them all, <sup>25</sup> and did not need anyone to testify about human nature. He himself understood it well.



*Christ Driving the Money Changers out of the Temple* by Valentin (1618) | Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome | PD-US

**The Cleansing of the Temple in the Gospels**

The temple narrative in John consists of two parts: Jesus’ actions in the Temple (vv. 14–17) and Jesus’ saying about the destruction of the Temple (vv. 18–22). The temple narrative is set at Passover (v. 13); the expression “the Passover of the Jews” would seem to either be a formal description or a subtle distancing of the Fourth Evangelist and his community from the religious observances of the Jewish community.

The other gospels each have an account of a cleansing of the Temple (Matt. 21:12–13; Mark 11:15–17; Luke 19:45–46). The Markan account is the fullest, but even so it is shorter than John’s. John differs from Mark in mentioning oxen and sheep, the scourge of cords, the word for “money changers” (v. 14),

the “*spilling*” of the money and the command, “*Take these out of here.*” John’s word for “overturned” is different from that in any of the Synoptic gospels, and whereas they say that Jesus quoted Isaiah 56:7 followed by Jeremiah 7:11, John does not speak of him as citing any Scripture. But he does say that the disciples remembered Psalm 69:9, which none of the other gospels record. He does not mention, as Mark does, Jesus’ prohibition of carrying anything through the Temple (Mark 11:16; seemingly “don’t make the Temple a shortcut to somewhere else”). Mark says that Jesus overturned the seats of the sellers of doves, John only that he told them to take “these” things away. But the most important difference is one of time. In this Gospel the cleansing of the Temple is the first great public act of Jesus’ ministry; in the other Gospels it is among the last associated with his passion.

Many believe it is unlikely that Jesus performed this bold act twice, so the two traditions probably narrate the same event. The synoptic chronology is thought to be the more historically reliable, because it is difficult to see how the Jewish religious authorities would have tolerated such a confrontational act at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. That being said it could also be argued that the practices in question were ones that were likely to have restarted soon after Jesus’ action thus there was not a permanent end to the practices. Perhaps, the act was indeed repeated several years later.

Assuming there was only one occurrence, the later cleansing of the Temple was moved by St. John to the beginning of his Gospel because it serves a symbolic function for him.

**The Meaning of the Cleansing in John** The temple cleansing in John completes the inaugural event begun with the Cana miracle. John 2:1–11 revealed the grace and glory of Jesus and the abundant new life Jesus offers. John 2:13–22 highlights the challenge and threat that new life poses to the existing order (cf. John 5:1–18).

From the beginning of the Fourth Gospel there has been a theme of newness and of creation. The Prologue refers to the power and role of the Word of God in the story of Creation. Then, very subtly, it continues to recount a new creation in the Incarnation of Jesus. In John 1:29 you see the phrase, “*the next day*” as John the Baptist testified to Jesus. “*The next day*” the first apostles are called in v.34 and following. The “*next day*” (v.43), now day four of the new creation week, Philip and Nathanael are added as disciples.

The passage immediately before our gospel passage in the Wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11). Our gospel is followed by the account of Jesus and Nicodemus (John 3:1-21). “*On the third day...*” (Jn 2:1) we find ourselves, according to the Johannine imagery, on the seventh day of the new creation week. The creation week reaches its climax - the unveiling of the public life of the Anointed One of God. The account of the wedding at Cana is relatively short (11 verses) and yet it is filled with a variety of images, theological and sacramental.

It may be significant for St John that the wedding feast account occurs on the 3rd/7th day. In *Nb 19* these are the days on which the ritually impure were sprinkled with water so that they were (a) rejoined to the people of Israel and (b) could re-enter the Temple. Without this rite of purification they were cut off from chosen people of God. This view is supported when in *Jn 2:6* we are told that the six stone jars were for the Jewish rites of purification. But what purification is needed here? I believe that St John is connecting this event to the baptism of John. That baptism was a call of repentance to Israel as a means of purifying themselves for the arrival of the Consolation of Israel; for a new covenantal relationship with God.

All of these Johannine accounts speak of newness, renewal, or creation – the cleansing of the Temple is a part of this thread. This physical purification of the temple might remind us of the type of symbolic deeds acted out by the prophets; and, indeed, Jesus’ approach to the temple on this occasion resembles that of Jeremiah (Jer 7). The action, though not a miracle, is a sign, a double sign. The temple, soon to

be destroyed, stood in need of purification. And its function would be replaced by the risen body of Christ.

### Commentary

<sup>13</sup> *Since the Passover of the Jews was near, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> He found in the temple area those who sold oxen, sheep, and doves, as well as the money-changers seated there.*

**The Temple and Money Changers** The “temple” signifies the whole of the Temple precincts, including the various courts as well as the holy place. It is most certain that the area of action occurred in one of the courtyards. It is certain that the selling mentioned took place in the outer courtyard, the court of the Gentiles. The reason for the practice was, of course, the convenience of having at hand a supply of animals required for the prescribed sacrifices.

From Josephus, a Jewish historian who wrote in the later part of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, we know that in this period the temple functions were under the control of the Sadducees and the high priest Annas. As high priest he also served as the Treasurer of the temple with his sons as assistant treasurers. Their avarice and greed for money lead this spectacle to be called the “bazaar of the sons of Annas.” They used the ritual of Temple religious life to implement a scam on the people of Israel: temple sacrifices brought from home were mandatorily inspected for blemish, for a fee. Blemish was always found. But a pre-inspected, blemish-free sacrifice could be purchased in the temple compound, for an exorbitant price, but not with Roman coinage (the images violated the law). The money changers exchange Roman coins into specially minted temple coins, at a profit. It is against this background that Jesus cleanses the temple.

Those “exchanging money” plied their trade because it was permitted to make money offerings in the Temple only in the approved currency. People from other countries would bring all sorts of coinage with them and this had to be changed into acceptable coins. An astonishing number of commentators affirm that the reason for the unacceptability of other currencies was that the coins bore the Emperor’s image or some heathen symbol. Whatever the reason, people had to change their money before making their offerings and this required that money changers would be at work somewhere.

**Cleansing the Temple** <sup>15</sup> *He made a whip out of cords and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep and oxen, and spilled the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables, <sup>16</sup> and to those who sold doves he said, “Take these out of here, and stop making my Father’s house a marketplace.”*

Jesus’ actions in the Temple are narrated in one long complex sentence in the Greek text (vv. 14–16), which creates a mood of urgency and haste, thereby underscoring the intensity of Jesus’ actions. Just as Jesus never hesitates as he moves through the Temple, so, too, vv. 14–16 never hesitate. John alone among the Gospels mentions sheep and cattle and the detail of Jesus’ whip. John’s picture of Jesus in the Temple is large and dramatic, as Jesus herds animals and people out of the temple court, pouring out money and overturning tables as he goes.

Given that these offerings of sheep, cattle and doves are prescribed and commanded in the Law (also see Leviticus 1 and 3), one can certainly argue that Jesus is not condemning the sacrificial offerings, but rather the location of the necessary market place in Temple precincts and the extorting monetary practices that surround it, enriching the priests and leaders of the Temple. But if one looks ahead in the Gospel of John (4:23-24) and the dialogue with the Samaritan woman at the well, could Jesus actions of cleansing the Temple simply be prologue to the powerful challenge made to the very authority of the Temple and its worship: <sup>23</sup> *But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth; and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him. <sup>24</sup> God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth.*”

There were inevitable abuses of the temple system, but in vv. 14–16 Jesus confronts the system itself, not simply its abuses. This is apparent in the words he speaks to the dove sellers (“*Take these out of here, and stop making my Father’s house a marketplace.*”) In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus quotes Isa 56:7 and Jer 7:11 (see Matt 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46), verses that focus on the distortion of a place of worship into a “den of robbers.” These OT verses are absent from John, however, and Jesus may allude instead to Zech 14:21 (“*And there shall no longer be traders in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day*”). In a play on the word for “house” (*oikos*), Jesus complains that his Father’s house has become a “house of trade.” Is Jesus’ appearance in the *oikos* a signal that it is no longer necessary to maintain the cultic system of sacrifice and tithes? If so, then Jesus’ charge is a much more radical accusation in the Gospel according to John than in the other gospels.

**Which Temple?** <sup>17</sup> *His disciples recalled the words of scripture, “Zeal for your house will consume me.”* In v. 17, the focus shifts to the disciples and their recollection of these events. They are interpretive witnesses (see v. 22). John, like many other NT writers, sees Psalm 69:10 as pointing to Jesus’ death (e.g., Matt 27:34, 48; Mark 15:23, 36; John 19:28; Rom 15:3). Verse 17 alters Ps 69:10 slightly, however, and that alteration is theologically significant. In the Hebrew and Greek versions of Ps 69:10, the verb “consume” refers to past events, but in the disciples’ recollection of the verse, the verb is translated as a future tense (“*will consume me*”). Psalm 69:10 thus functions as a prophecy of the time when Jesus will be consumed—that is, his crucifixion. This use of Ps 69:10 gives the temple cleansing a christological emphasis. In the synoptic Gospels, the OT quotations draw attention to the Temple, but Ps 69:9 fixes the reader’s attention on Jesus. John’s temple story is ultimately about Jesus’ fate, not the Temple’s.

**The Need for A Sign** <sup>18</sup> *At this the Jews answered and said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?”*

The cleansing of the Temple was a startling act. It had its implications not only for the condemnation of the Temple traders, but also for the Person of Jesus. It was a messianic action. The Jewish leaders demanded that Jesus authenticate his implied claim by producing a “sign” (*sēmeion*). Interestingly they did not dispute the rightness of his action. They were not so much defending the Temple traffic as questioning Jesus’ implied status. Their demand arose from the facts that the Jews were a very practical race and that they expected God to perform mighty miracles when the messianic age dawned. Thus their test for a messianic claimant was, “can he do the signs of the Messiah?” St. Paul thought of the Jewish people as seekers of signs just as typically as the Greeks were pursuers of wisdom (1 Cor. 1:22). In the Temple cleansing the Jews discerned a messianic claim (note again how faithfully John records anything that bears on Jesus’ messiahship), and they demanded accordingly that he authenticate himself by a sign.

**Misunderstanding** <sup>19</sup> *Jesus answered and said to them, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.”* <sup>20</sup> *The Jews said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?”*

In vv. 18–20 we see the first example of the Johannine narrative technique of misunderstanding. The Jews respond to Jesus’ words about the destruction and raising of the Temple with a very pragmatic protest (v. 20) that reveals that they understand only the surface meaning of Jesus’ words. This interchange of misunderstanding will be repeated in the story of Nicodemus (3:3–5) as well as during the encounter with the Samaritan Woman at the well (although with a much different result than Nicodemus). This dynamic recurs in this Gospel (e.g. 6:41, 51; 11:11; 14:7).

Clearly standing in the Temple precinct, the words “*this temple*” will naturally lead to assuming Jesus is talking about the Temple built by Herod the Great. The rebuilding of the Temple was begun roughly

19 BCE. The reference to forty-six years of construction would suggest a date of 27 CE for this exchange between Jesus and the Jews. That date is historically plausible.

Perhaps interesting is the phrase “*Destroy this temple.*” The word destroy (*lysate*) appears in the imperative – as though a command – but also allowed to be understood as a conditional “if...then.” It raises the possibility that there is an implied “You! Destroy this temple” or “If you destroy this temple...” Perhaps the Jewish leaders are simply perplexed, “Why in the world would we ever destroy this temple?” That might be one hint there is an alternative meaning in play.

A second hint might be that Jesus does not talk about reconstruction of the Temple. In Jesus’ response, he does not say “rebuild” but rather “raise.” While the three days is perhaps vague, it was part of Jewish thinking that the spirit of a person hovered at the grave for three days before departing – so there is some basis for pausing to reconcile 46 years vs. three days. Added to that, the verb Jesus uses to speak of the raising of the Temple (*egeirō*) points to a second, more symbolic level of meaning. That verb is also used to speak of resurrection (John 2:22; 5:21; 12:1, 9, 17; 21:14).

There may well be a lot that pointed away from the natural assumption of pointing to the Temple edifice. Given that, the leaders of the Jews have choice (as will Nicodemus and the Samaritan women) as to how they will understand Jesus’ response. The leaders choose to respond to Jesus’ words about the physical Temple and do so with contempt (v. 20).

**Clarity** <sup>21</sup> *But he was speaking about the temple of his body.* <sup>22</sup> *Therefore, when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they came to believe the scripture and the word Jesus had spoken.*

Verse 21 makes the second level of meaning of Jesus’ words explicit. The Evangelist tells the reader that Jesus speaks of “the temple of his body.” Since for Judaism the Temple is the locus of God’s presence on earth, v. 21 suggests that Jesus’ body is now the locus of God. Verse 21 recalls 1:51 where the Son of Man replaces Jacob’s ladder as the locus of God’s interaction with the world.

John’s commentary in v. 21 thus interprets the dialogue between Jesus and the Jews, so that the reader can discern the full meaning of Jesus’ words and the nature of the misunderstanding between Jesus and the Jews. The Fourth Evangelist frequently interjects his own voice into the narrative of the Fourth Gospel to provide the reader with insight and information the characters in the stories do not have (e.g., 6:6; 11:13, 51–52; 12:6, 33). Verse 21 enables the reader to see the sign the “Jews” miss: Jesus has the authority to challenge the temple system because he is the locus of God’s presence on earth.

**In the light of the Resurrection** Verse 22, like v. 17, focuses on the interpretive witness of the disciples; but unlike v. 17, it explicitly locates their witness after Jesus’ resurrection. It recounts what the disciples “remembered.” In John 14:26, Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit “*will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.*” In John, remembrance is active reflection on the past in the light of the resurrection with the aid of the Spirit. Such reflection leads to faith and deepened understanding (see 12:16). In 2:22, remembering the past with the aid of the Spirit reveals the truth of Scripture and Jesus’ word in new ways. The combination of Scripture and Jesus’ word in v. 22 shows that the early church began to grant Jesus’ word the same authority it had already granted Scripture.

Verse 22 makes explicit the post-resurrection perspective from which the Gospel was written. Each of the Gospels is written from a post-resurrection perspective, but in John that perspective is intentionally integrated into the Gospel narrative. The distance between the disciples of Jesus in the Gospel stories and the disciples who read the Gospel stories is bridged by v. 22, because this verse points to a time beyond the end of the Fourth Gospel narrative, to a story that gets underway as the Fourth Gospel story

draws to a close. Verse 22 points to the interpretive activity of believers as they remember and claim the stories and sayings of Jesus as their own.

**Reflection by Gail R. O'Day** [545]

John 2:13–22 is popularly interpreted as an example of Jesus' anger and hence his humanity. Jesus' actions of taking the whip, herding out the animals, and overturning the tables are pointed to as evidence that Jesus could get angry. Such attempts to amass evidence to prove Jesus' humanity actually undercut the power of the incarnation, however. To focus on isolated attributes or emotions as proof of Jesus' humanity is in effect to seek after signs, to base one's faith on the surface evidence without perceiving the deeper reality. The underlying reality of the Fourth Gospel narrative is that "the Word became flesh" (1:14). Jesus' humanity thus pervades everything he says and does in his ministry. The scandal of John 2:13–22 is not Jesus' anger as proof of his humanity, but the authority this human being claims for himself through his words and actions.

Jesus, a complete outsider to the power structure of the Temple, issues a challenge to the authority of the Temple that quite literally shakes its foundations. Jesus throws the mechanics of temple worship into chaos, disrupting the temple system during one of the most significant feasts of the year so that neither sacrifices nor tithes could be offered that day. It is no wonder that the Jews who were gathered at the Temple asked for a sign to warrant his actions (2:18). Jesus was a human being just as they were; who was he to derail their worship?

Jesus explains his actions in the Temple by pointing to his death and resurrection (2:19–21). Jesus has the authority to challenge the authority of the Temple because his whole life bears testimony to the power of God in the world. John 2:13–22 is not about how Jesus' anger makes him like other people; instead, Jesus' bold, prophetic act in the Temple reinforces what 1:19–51 and 2:1–11 have already shown: There will be nothing hidden about Jesus' identity in John. Jesus is the locus of God's presence on earth, and God as known in Jesus, not the Temple, should be the focal point of cultic activity.

The far-reaching implications of Jesus' complaint and his actions in the Temple should caution the interpreter against advocating a one-dimensional theory of the superiority of Christianity over Judaism when expositing this text. Jesus is not against Judaism per se. John presents Jesus as an observant Jewish male who travels to Jerusalem at the pilgrimage feasts (2:13; 5:1; 7:10; 12:2). Jesus' challenge to the authority of the dominant religious institution in Judaism is not anti-Jewish, because it is in line with the institutional challenges of prophets like Amos and Jeremiah. Jesus challenges a religious system so embedded in its own rules and practices that it is no longer open to a fresh revelation from God, a temptation that exists for contemporary Christianity as well as for the Judaism of Jesus' day.

Jesus' dramatic actions in 2:13–16, through which he issued a radical challenge to the authority of the religious institutions of his day, issue a similar challenge to the institutionalism of the contemporary church. Christian faith communities must be willing to ask where and when the status quo of religious practices and institutions has been absolutized and, therefore, closed to the possibility of reformation, change, and renewal. The great danger is that the contemporary church, like the leaders of the religious establishment in the Gospel of John, will fall into the trap of equating the authority of its own institutions with the presence of God. All religious institutional embeddedness—whether in the form of temple worship, unjust social systems, or repressive religious practices—is challenged by the revelation of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

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**Notes**

**John 2:13** *Since the Passover of the Jews was near, Jesus went up to Jerusalem:* Jesus goes up to Jerusalem at Passover time at the beginning of his ministry. This stands in contrast to the other Gospels, in which Jesus goes to Jerusalem but once, and then at the very end of his ministry. With regard to multiple visits, John is probably more correct historically. Our author has considerably more interest in Jerusalem than the other evangelists, an indication that his roots are more oriented in Jerusalem than in Galilee. The temple purification, however, probably occurred toward the end of Jesus' life, as the Synoptists (Matthew, Mark, Luke) indicate, serving as a final straw leading to Jesus' condemnation. John may well have transferred the story to this initial phase in Jesus' life because it fits so well into his "newness" theme and because he intends that Lazarus' resurrection (ch. 11) be the incident leading to the crucifixion. **Passover:** this is the first Passover mentioned in John; a second is mentioned in Jn 6:4 a third in Jn 13:1. Taken literally, they point to a ministry of at least two years.

**John 2:14** *oxen, sheep, and doves:* intended for sacrifice. The doves were the offerings of the poor (Lv 5:7). Money-changers: for a temple tax paid by every male Jew more than nineteen years of age, with a half-shekel coin (Ex 30:11–16), in Syrian currency. The festivals were times for "remembering"—that is, to liturgically recall and relive past events—as well as for feasting and celebrating. During all the pilgrimage festivals (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles), huge crowds of pilgrims would congregate in Jerusalem (Josephus estimates as many as 2,700,000). Large numbers of animals were required, especially at Passover.

**money changers:** While the money changers served as the interface between Roman coinage (bearing the emperor's image) and temple coinage, there are texts which describe certain image-bearing coins as being acceptable because of the constancy of their content of precious metals.

**John 2:17** *Zeal for your house will consume me:* The wording from Ps 69:10 is changed to future tense to apply to Jesus.

**John 2:19** *Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up:* This saying about the destruction of the temple occurs in various forms (Mt 24:2; 27:40; Mk 13:2; 15:29; Lk 21:6; cf. Acts 6:14). Mt 26:61 has: "I can destroy the temple of God..." In Mk 14:58, there is a metaphorical contrast with a new temple: "I will destroy this temple made with hands and within three days I will build another not made with hands." Here it is symbolic of Jesus' resurrection and the resulting community (see Jn 2:21 and Rev 21:2). **In three days:** possibly an Old Testament expression for a short, indefinite period of time; cf. Hos 6:2. **Raise...up:** The verb used is *egeirō* basically means (transitive) *waken, incite, excite, raise* or intransitively *awaken, be active, stand up, rise*. It appears in the NT most often as a synonym for "resurrect."

**John 2:20** *forty-six years:* based on references in Josephus (Jewish Wars 1, 21, 1 #401; Antiquities 15, 11, 1 #380), possibly the spring of A.D. 28.

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