

John 2:13-25

Any attempt to harmonize John's version of Jesus' demonstration in the temple with the Synoptic accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke risks missing John's theological "take" on this important moment in the life of Jesus.

In John, the temple scene makes a claim for Jesus' authority at the beginning of his ministry, following the wedding at Cana. In the Synoptics, it occurs near the end of Jesus' ministry, an authority ultimately based in his identity as God's Son.

We know that Jesus is in Jerusalem for Passover. As did thousands of Jews annually, Jesus practices his piety by going to the Jerusalem temple for Passover. In the temple, he finds what any pilgrim could expect to find during a festival: a place bustling with religious and economic activity. Jesus focuses not on the cattle, sheep, and doves that were used for sacrifices, but on the activity of selling.

The "people selling" and the moneychangers, exchanged, for a small fee, money that pilgrims brought from foreign lands into coinage that could be used in Jerusalem and the temple.

The effect of Jesus' actions – his driving out the sheep and cattle and possibly the merchants, his pouring out the coins and overturning the tables, his order for the dove-sellers to remove the doves (locked in cages, which is why he cannot drive them out with the whip) and for the temple to cease being a marketplace – is to bring the selling to a halt. By taking on the temple's economic apparatus in this way, Jesus

assumes the authority to dictate temple practice.

What grants Jesus such authority? Jesus' calling the temple a marketplace is not the most surprising thing he says, since commerce was a well-known aspect of the temple's identity. What stands out is his identifying the temple as "my Father's house". This provides the clue for understanding the source of Jesus' authority.

By disrupting the well-established and accepted economic practices of the temple, Jesus publicly reveals he is more than a pilgrim visiting the temple. He is Son of the God who dwells in that temple, and as such he has the authority to disrupt the temple's usual activities.

The question the Jewish religious authorities (whom John refers to as "the Jews") pose to Jesus shows that they perceive that Jesus' dramatic temple act is a claim for his authority to represent God. They ask Jesus to validate his authority, expecting that like Moses and Aaron did before the Israelites, he would be able to perform "signs and wonders" that authenticate him as God's representative.

Jesus' response leads to a misunderstanding on their part. They see it as impossible for Jesus to "raise" the temple in three days, given that the temple's expansion and renovation effort (begun by King Herod in 20 B.C.E.) still had not been completed. To clarify the misunderstanding, the narrator tells the reader that Jesus was not speaking of the temple at all, but of his body, and that this only becomes clear after the resurrection. Jesus' response is framed in resurrection language.

Although the disciples witness Jesus' temple act and his dialogue with the religious authorities, it is only after the resurrection that they fully affirm belief in Jesus as God's authoritative representative. The resurrection is the sign "the Jews" had asked for, the sign of Jesus' authority to speak and act for God, but that would not be the day for the sign.

For the Fourth Gospel, a belief based on miracles alone, and not on the true reality pointed to by those miracles, is inferior, and Jesus does not entrust himself to these half-hearted believers. Their belief lies somewhere between the rejection of Jesus by "the Jews" and the belief of the disciples. As such, their belief anticipates the appearance of Nicodemus, who is open to Jesus but not yet ready to affirm full belief in him.

Better than viewing this passage as making a negative statement against the temple's economic activity, its religious activity, or the temple institution in itself, is to see it as making a positive statement about Jesus' identity and role in the Fourth Gospel. He appears in Jerusalem making a bold statement not so much "against" anything as much as "for" his authority to represent and reveal the God of the temple, whom he knows intimately as his Father.

Moreover, rather than smear the economic activity of the temple, John's Gospel uses it to develop its Christology of Jesus as God's authoritative Son. If John uses the economic sphere of religious activity to develop his Christology, then the implicit challenge for churches today is to follow suit and structure their own economic

activity in ways that reveal the divine to the world. When others look at how Christian institutions gain and use their economic resources, what picture do they get of the God worshipped in this particular “house”?

This story of Jesus knocking over the tables in the temple and driving out the animals shakes us up but then we wonder what we should be all shook up about. Jesus’ act can be seen as the climax of repeated protests of the Hebrew prophets against the sacrificial cult in the temple. Jeremiah mocked his listeners who jabbered: “This is the temple of the Lord! The temple of the Lord! The temple of the Lord!” Then there is God’s mocking question from Psalm 50 and repeated elsewhere: “Do you think I eat the meat of bulls and drink the blood of goats?” Amos proclaims God’s hatred of festivals. Most telling are the words of Hosea that Jesus quoted: “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” There is much debate as to whether the prophets wanted the abolition of the sacrificial cult or a reformation that would bring it in line with moral values. In driving out not only the money changers but also the animals about to be sacrificed, I think Jesus is doing a bit of guerrilla theatre to prophesy the end of the temple cult, a prophecy fulfilled in 70 A.D. when the combined violence of militant Jews and the imperialistic Romans resulted in its destruction.

When asked to explain his actions, Jesus said: “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” This literalist interpretation is promptly debunked by the evangelist when he says that Jesus was “speaking of the temple of his body”.

The implication that Jesus is replacing the temple with his risen body is a strong indication that he intended to abolish the sacrificial cult. What was wrong with the sacrificial cult? The quote from Psalm 69 “zeal for your house will consume me” shows us the problem if we note the context. Psalm 69 begins with “Save me O God for the waters have risen up to my neck.” The psalmist tells God that he is suffering the same reproach people level against God: “the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.” This psalm is referred to as one of the “passion psalms” and has been interpreted as a prophecy of Christ. However, I don’t think the psalmist was gazing into a crystal ball and seeing Christ’s Passion; I think the psalmist was complaining about collective violence that was happening to him at the time. The number of persecution psalms and the fate of many prophets, suggests that the Gospels are revealing the human tendency to solve social conflicts by uniting against a victim which is precisely the outcome Jesus predicts when he explains his actions at the temple.

The prophets consistently denounced the sacrifices made on the “high places” – pagan sacrifices to deities like Moloch who even required the sacrifice of their children. The sacrifice in the temple was more humane in that it was restricted to animals, but the practice derived from the notion that “god” was angry and would be appeased only by sacrifices. The prophets’ denunciations of the temple cult were consistently coupled with denunciations of social violence and injustice where the poor were sold for a pair of sandals as Amos complained. Although it is argued that the prophets thought the temple sacrifices were acceptable, maybe even laudable,

if accompanied with righteous actions in the social sphere, but they seem to have a sneaky suspicion that the practice of sacrifice tends to encourage social injustice.

The temple setup was, after all, a terrible financial burden on the poor. (I think Jesus was not edified but outraged over the widow who gave the last two coins she had to live on.) Contemporary accounts indicate that the economic agents use their monopoly over religiously mandated goods to take advantage of the powerless worshippers. It's not surprising that Jesus is deeply angered that such injustice is done. To make matters worse, the marketplace had recently been expanded into the Court of the Gentiles, where the Gentile "God-fearers" would be worshipping this Passover. The merchants (and the temple leaders who allowed it) are committing unjust economic practices all while disrupting the worship of those who chose to follow YHWH and weren't just born into it.

Jesus then turns the tables on the leaders and expands the topic. The temple was the place where God promised to be present. Jesus makes a bold statement, not just in his cryptic pronouncement of destroying and raising, but in calling his body "this temple". Jesus is the Word made flesh who dwells among us. Jesus is the new "place" where God's presence sits. The Jerusalem temple had a lot of walls to keep people out, while Jesus walks among all people, bringing the presence of God with him.

The logic of sacrifice was that some living being was always dispensable precisely as the victims of collective violence at the times of social crises were

dispensable and their deaths “necessary”. Caiaphas stated the sacrificial logic boldly when he said that it was better “to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed”. In modern times this sacrificial logic is expressed by the regretful term “collateral damage”. These considerations suggest that the prophets were convinced that something was fundamentally wrong with sacrificial rites.

Jesus, on the other hand, has a totally different, opposite logic; a logic that Paul says is foolishness to the rest of the world. In John 6, Jesus says that everybody the Father gives him will come to him and nobody who comes to him will be driven away. The parable of the lost sheep makes the same point that it is not the will of our Father in Heaven that even one of his “little ones” should be lost. Jesus believed this so strongly that he would accept death on the cross to make the point and, more important, return as the forgiving victim to gather all who will come to him so that none of us should be lost. The pagan deities wanted sacrifices made to them. The prophets kept trying to get it across to everybody that God pours out sacrificial love to all of us through creation and redemption and that God wants the mercy God gives us in return, not sacrifices. Caiaphas was willing to sacrifice Jesus and anyone else who put a spoke in the wheel of the sacrificial logic. Jesus was willing to sacrifice himself rather than sacrifice any of us. That is why we do not slaughter bulls on this altar but pass around the bread and wine through which Jesus gives His very self to each one of us.

But, what does this have to do with us? We see in this story (and much of the rest of Scripture) that injustice makes God (and therefore Jesus) angry. We, then,

should work to tear down the walls of injustice. We see that erecting walls to keep worshippers out makes God (and therefore Jesus) angry. We, then, should work to tear down the walls that keep those seeking God from joining our worship.

We see that Jesus tears down the expectations of the religious leaders. They think they will tear him down, but Jesus rises and builds up a Church. We, then, should work to build up those around us, not tear them down.

This quote from Bonhoeffer says it all, about why Jesus cleared the temple at the beginning of his ministry in John's Gospel. He was doing a new thing and compartmentalizing God was no longer - if it ever was - ok if we are to have abundant life. Seems like things haven't changed much since Jesus' time, or Bonhoeffer's.

To the nineteenth- and twentieth-century mind, religion plays the part of the parlour, into which one doesn't mind withdrawing for a couple of hours, but from which one then immediately returns to one's business. One thing, however, is clear: namely, that we understand Christ only if we commit to Him in an abrupt either-or. He was not nailed to the cross as an ornament or decoration for our lives. If we would have Him, we must recognize that He makes fundamental claims on our entire being.

We scarcely understand Him if we make room for Him in only one region of our spiritual life. Our whole life needs to take its orientation from him alone. Of course, there are those not concerned with seriously considering the claims Christ makes on us with His questions: Do you wish to make a complete commitment or not? They should rather not get mixed up with Christianity at all; that would be better for

Christianity since such people no longer have anything in common with Christ. The religion of Christ is not the tidbit after the bread – it is the bread itself, or it is nothing. May Jesus tear down everything that gets in our way of the bond of love between us, and build us up to be his hands and feet!

Amen.