

**THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE**  
**(JOHN 2:13-22)**

**BY**

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## The Cleansing of The Temple

“13. When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem.14. In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. 15. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.16. To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!" 17. His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me." 18. Then the Jews demanded of him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" 19. Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." 20. The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" 21. But the temple he had spoken of was his body. 22. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.”<sup>1</sup>

This paper will follow chronologically, dealing first with the wedding feast at Cana and its relationship to the core passage of Jesus cleansing the temple, and finally how Jesus’ actions in the temple relate to Nicodemus’ secret meeting with Jesus. This is significant because it will enable the reader to gain a greater understanding of Jesus as the long awaited Messiah who comes to replace the Jerusalem Temple with himself. Within this framework special attention will be devoted to the important, surprising, and difficult elements contained therein. Also treated, will be how the central text (John 2:13-22) relates to the overall Johannine narrative, as well as to the larger surrounding communities where cross-influence seems the strongest. Finally specific attention will be devoted to the theological significance of Jesus’ actions in the Temple and its effect on us all.

Beginning first with the wedding feast at Cana is important due to its indirect relationship with the Cleansing of the Temple in John 2:13-22. Jesus’ first sign that was performed during the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee (2:1-11) where he turned water into wine is significant for establishing Jesus’ divine authority both as a miracle worker

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<sup>1</sup> New International Version, John 2:13-22.

and Messiah. According to Sanders, “the wedding-feast is a parable of the Messianic kingdom (cf. Matt.xxii.2ff.; xxv.Iff.; Mark ii.19; Rev. xix.9).”<sup>2</sup> Jesus’ first sign, turning water into wine tacitly implied that the old system which the Jews had become accustomed to is now being replaced by a better system – Jesus Christ, the Messiah.<sup>3</sup> This theme of replacement will then repeat itself in similar fashion in the Cleansing of the Temple passage (John 2:13-22).

Traditionally the jars of water were used for ceremonial washing purposes, but when Jesus changes the water to wine it indicates that the time for ceremonial purification is completely fulfilled; the new order, symbolized by wine has come.<sup>4</sup> Sanders points out that for John, the water in the pots represented the “old dispensation, superseded by the wine of the gospel.”<sup>5</sup> Mark’s language and usage of wine is different than John’s, but a similar concept emerges -- Jesus comes to replace the old wineskins with new wine skins: “...he pours new wine into new wineskins” (Mark 2:22).<sup>6</sup>

As Brown points out, it is a “sign of who Jesus really is,” as well as what he represents to the Jewish people of his day -- that, all “previous religious institutions, customs and feasts lose meaning in his presence.”<sup>7</sup> It is interesting that whereas wine is

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<sup>2</sup> J.N. Sanders and B.A. Mastin, A Commentary on The Gospel according to St. John, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers), 109

<sup>3</sup> Raymond E. Brown, The Gospel According to John I – XII, The Anchor Bible, eds. Wm. Myles M. Bourke and Terence J. Cooke, (Garden City, N.Y.; Doubleday and Co., 1966), 104.

<sup>4</sup> DA Carson, The Gospel According to John, (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991), 174.

<sup>5</sup> Sanders, 111.

<sup>6</sup> In the book of Amos wine signifies the Messiah; the abundance of wine is the sign of Messianic times: “The mountains shall flow with wine and the hills will overflow with it” (Amos 9:11).

<sup>7</sup> Brown, 104.

seemingly significant at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, it also finds expression at the end of his ministry on the cross: "29. A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. 30. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit" (John 19:29:30). Jesus' ministry begins with changing water into wine and then is brought to fruition by drinking it. It is thus John's way of saying that the old system is being replaced by the new system, the Kingdom of God – the time of true Messianic fulfillment has come!

Before delving into the core passage (John 2:13-22) it is important to treat the transition passage that connects the wedding feast with the Cleansing of the Temple, as it proposes some narrative problems in space and time (John 2:12). There is a real connective difficulty concerning Jesus' trip from Capernaum to Jerusalem. Traveling from Capernaum to Jerusalem is much more difficult than it is from Cana to Jerusalem. Brown posits that the difficulty with this passage emerges from an independent tradition that resulted from an early Johannine tradition.<sup>8</sup> However, narratively while at first it appears difficult to understand why the Capernaum route was taken instead of the Cana one, it is conceivable since his hometown and ministry according to the synoptic tradition is based in Capernaum.<sup>9</sup> To journey home first would make better sense if they were picking up provisions as well as to rest before their long Journey to Jerusalem in order to celebrate the Passover. As Sanders points out, "the few days at Capernaum were spent in

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p113.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

making up a party for the journey to Jerusalem,”<sup>10</sup> This interpretation then should solve any connective difficulties regarding the transition passage (John 2:12).

When Jesus arrives in Jerusalem and sees the money-changers exchanging pagan money for Jewish tokens, in a fit of rage he does the unexpected, and begins to drive out everyone who is doing business in Temple precincts. Several difficulties emerge from Jesus’ cleansing actions in the Temple. It is hard to conceive that Jesus’ actions didn’t provoke an immediate arrest. Carson points out that “the destruction or desecration of a temple or other place of worship was judged a capital offence in the Graeco-Roman world.”<sup>11</sup> According to the synoptic tradition Jesus is put to death shortly after cleansing the Temple. In John’s Gospel, however, an entire two years passes before he is arrested.<sup>12</sup> The fact that he was not immediately arrested is probably due to public acceptance by the crowd.<sup>13</sup> Brown points out that “to be in a position to cleanse the temple precincts Jesus had to have public status as a prophet and a numerous following.”<sup>14</sup> It is most likely though that the synoptic tradition presents a more accurate chronology of events than John’s version.<sup>15</sup> Or is it possible that there were two cleansings, one at the beginning and the other at the end? Most scholars, however, would argue for one cleansing.<sup>16</sup>

If the synoptic accounts are more accurate chronologically in this respect, why does John put the cleansing scene at the beginning instead of at the end? It may be that

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<sup>10</sup> Sanders, 115.

<sup>11</sup> DA Carson, 181.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, 117.

<sup>13</sup> DA Carson, 178.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p117.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p118.

<sup>16</sup> Brown, 124.

narratively the author or redactors wanted to convey a direct link between Jesus' crucifixion with his actions in the temple, in order to establish the primacy of Jesus as the Messiah. Notice the early pronouncement made by Andrew: "The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (John 1:41). In Mark's account Jesus is not designated as Messiah until near the end of his ministry by Peter (Mark 14:16). John is interested in showing his audience early on that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah, and as such, he is divinely empowered from on High to purge the Temple of its impurities. Brown points out that his protest is like that of the Old Testament prophets who railed against the "profanation of God's house," which functioned as a sign that the "messianic purification of the Temple was at hand."<sup>17</sup> Which is further attested in the book of Malachi: "He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver..."(Mal 3:3).

Moreover, in John 1:21 the Pharisees ask John the Baptist if he is the Prophet to come. This prophet is predicted by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:18 and 1 Maccabees 14:41-42: "Also that the Jews and priests were well pleased that Simon should be their governor and high priest for ever, until there should arise a faithful prophet..."<sup>18</sup> The meaning conveyed is that when this Prophet arrives the religious authorities would have to step down from their place of leadership. By the time Jesus arrived on the scene the High Priest and religious leaders had grown to a level of comfort and power, that they were incapable of relinquishing their authority to the Messiah. When Jesus cleanses the temple and declares to them to "destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it," he is

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<sup>17</sup> Brown. 121.

<sup>18</sup> The Apocrypha: King James Version, 1 Mac 14:38-45, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995)

implying that the time is fulfilled, that as the true Prophet predicted in scripture has come, and that it was time for them to step down from their positions of power and make room for the new system which would be inaugurated by his death and resurrection. Jesus is thus the true replacement of the Temple – his claim to destroy it is resonant with historical Messianic motifs.

The need for replacement is due to the corruption within the Temple. The priest can avert God's judgment if they will destroy the Temple. The idea is that when the true Messiah appears he will rebuild the Temple, of which Jesus claims to replace with himself as the Messianic Temple:

Just as the OT offered background for the purification of the Temple, so it also speaks of rebuilding the Temple. Ezek xl-xlvi describes in detail the rebuilt Temple; Tob xiii 10(12) and xiv 5(7) speak of a rebuilt Tabernacle or house of God; the Qumran community had copies of an Aramaic Description of the New Jerusalem (5Q15), based on Ezekiel, which describes an ideal Temple. As Simon, *art. cit.*, points out, the hope of a new Temple survived the destruction of the Herodian Temple, for the fourteenth of the *Eighteenth Benedictions* (see p. LXXIV) unites the expectation of the rebuilding of the Temple and the coming of the Messiah.<sup>19</sup>

But the Jewish leaders' understanding of Messiah and Jesus' are antithetical. While they are awaiting for a strong, Messianic deliver who will set them free from Roman occupation, Jesus has other ideas about what the role of the Messiah should be, which is that the true Messiah must first be put to death first before he ushers in the Kingdom of God.

While the religious authorities rejected Jesus as the long awaited Messiah, it is possible that the common people would have recognized him as such due to the miracles that he performed in Jerusalem (John 2:23). However, this is problematic as Carson

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<sup>19</sup> Brown, 122.

points out, that the faith generated by Jesus' miracles in John 2:23 was spurious; that is, they were not genuinely believing in Jesus, which is why verse 23 is followed by: "But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man" (John 2:24-25).<sup>20</sup> The difference between the faith of the disciples and the people (v.23) is the difference between divine and human faith. The faith they exhibited in Jesus was imperfect and inadequate, in that they misunderstood who he really was since later they tried to make him a king (John 6:15).<sup>21</sup> Schnackenburg points out that they probably had hopes of gaining "material" as well as "political liberation" through Jesus.<sup>22</sup> When Jesus is later confronted by the crowd he says to them "do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you..."(John 6:27). His idea of liberation and sustenance was completely antithetical to theirs. While their understanding of the Messiah was connected to a material kingdom, Jesus' was connected to a spiritual one – one where true liberation would come by way of his death and resurrection.

But is there more to Jesus' actions than simply wanting to declare himself as the long awaited Prophet? Are there additional reasons for his actions in the Temple other than being the true replacement of the Temple? The answer lies in his relationship with the money-changers. In defense of the money-changers it is argued that there was nothing wrong with the financial system that was set up by them, since they were doing a service for God and were keeping the Temple from being profaned by exchanging Roman for

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<sup>20</sup> DA Carson, 184.

<sup>21</sup> Sanders, 122.

<sup>22</sup> Rudolph Schnackenburg, The Gospel According to St. John I - IV, vol. 1 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 358.

Jewish tokens which were free of idolatrous images.<sup>23</sup> Unless of course those engaged in the practice were charging an unjust amount of commission or bribing the priests.<sup>24</sup> But there is no evidence that the “animal merchants and money-changers or the priestly authorities who allowed them to use the outer court were corrupt companions in graft.”<sup>25</sup>

Haenchen maintains that Jesus rejected the delusion that man can buy God’s favor with sacrifices. In other words the corruption in the Temple was not due so much to what they were doing as it was in why they were doing it. Their endeavor to buy God’s favor is what fueled Jesus to cleanse the temple precincts.<sup>26</sup>

However, the most compelling argument for Jesus’ actions in the temple is not that they were selling or were guilty of bad business practices, but that they should not have been doing business in the Temple area at all:

Instead of solemn dignity and the murmur of prayer, there is the bellowing of cattle and the bleating of sheep. Instead of brokenness and contrition, holy adoration and prolonged petition, there is noisy commerce.<sup>27</sup>

Jesus’ rage in the Temple caused a major stir throughout the community of religious authorities, especially since a large part of their revenue would have come from this system. Upsetting the tables of the money-changers was a direct front and threat to their lively hood. It is no wonder then, why John puts the cleansing of the Temple scene up front instead of later on. For John this is important, because he wants to convey the idea that what contributed to Jesus’ arrest and death was his so-called profanation against the

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<sup>23</sup> Sanders, 116.

<sup>24</sup> Brown, 121.

<sup>25</sup> DA Carson, 179.

<sup>26</sup> Ernest Haenchen, A Commentary on the Gospel of John I – VI, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980), 184.

<sup>27</sup> DA Carson, 179.

Temple, and that it would be through his death and resurrection that he would fulfill the role as Messiah. Thus, “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Ps 118:22-23).

In the next episode after the Temple scene Nicodemus makes a guest appearance before Jesus in order to confront him about the signs that he performed while he was in Jerusalem. He says: “for unless God is with him, no one can perform the signs that you perform?” It isn’t clear as to which signs he is referring to since the only one we have record of to this point in John’s narrative is the changing of water into wine at Cana. D.A. Carson points out “that Jesus performed many miracles other than the ones found here (20:30; 21:24-25).” If so, this means that Jesus performed several miracles between his first miracle at the wedding feast of Cana and his meeting with Nicodemus in chapter three.<sup>28</sup> It may be that the reason the redactor(s) thought it wise to exclude the other miracles because it would have interfered with the replacement motif they were trying to convey to their audience – that Jesus has come as the true replacement of the Temple.

In any case, what follows in conversation between Nicodemus’ and Jesus concerning the signs is interesting. Jesus plainly tells him that “no one can see the kingdom of God without being begotten from above” (John 3:3). The Greek word according to “*Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*” for “see” is “eido” (i’-do), which has several possible meanings: “to know, be aware, perceive, be sure, or understand.”<sup>29</sup> While speculative in nature, Jesus may have been tacitly implying to Nicodemus: ‘that unless you are born from above you will not be able to understand or perceive my

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p187.

<sup>29</sup> Strong, James. The New Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990)

miracles or cleansing actions in the Temple. When you are born from above then you will understand that I am the true replacement of the Temple in which you will come to worship.’

It is more probable though that Nicodemus understood and recognized Jesus to be a true prophet on account of the miracles he performed, and came to Jesus at night to inquire of what he would have to do to share in the life that he possessed. This would make better sense since most Jews were preoccupied with the notion of: “what must I do to share in the world to come?”<sup>30</sup> Jesus understood Nicodemus’ concerns and bluntly declared that if he wanted to share in the world to come he would need to be born from above (John 3:3). According to Schnackenburg the idea of a “new creation” (being born from above) would not be a foreign concept to Jews since it is attested by texts of Qumran.<sup>31</sup> It makes complete sense for John to utilize this language since it is contemporaneous with the Qumran community. In fact, John’s Gospel is more contemporaneous with the Qumran community than any other religious movement of its day; even Gnosticism.

Although it has been argued that Gnosticism shares a great deal with John’s Gospel, the evidence is inconclusive since Gnosticism is a Second Century phenomenon - not a First. The literature found at Nag Hammadi in 1947 is carbon dated to about the fourth Century, and since John’s Gospel was written about 90 A.D. the argument is tenable that John borrowed from the Gnostics. Although Rudolph Bultman would argue from Irenaeus’, “*Against Heresies*,” that John borrowed from the Gnostics, it is inconclusive based on the lack of heavier Gnostic influence.

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<sup>30</sup> Schnackenburg, 366.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p367.

A stronger connection, however, can be made between John's Gospel and the community at Qumran than there is with Gnostic literature. Several ideas lead to this conviction. First, there is a sense of a modified dualism that emerges from the Qumran Literature. Whereas Gnostic dualism is very strong and hard the teachings found at Qumran are not. Concepts such as light and darkness are clear examples of this (John 1:4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 3:19, 20, 8:12, 9:5) Second, the Qumran community stressed the importance of the community. John's Gospel is replete with this, and like the Qumran community the accent is toward its members instead of outsiders (John 13:34-35, 15:12, 19). Also significant is the language of the Holy Spirit (John 1:32-33, 3:5-6, 14:17) and the apocalyptic nature that are exhibited in both (John 5:24-25).

The most compelling evidence for this study is the language concerning the Temple. The Qumran community notoriously rejected the Temple at Jerusalem for its corrupt system of Jewish Temple worship, which is one of the main reasons they moved away.<sup>32</sup> In contrast the Qumran community saw themselves as a type of Temple, and Jesus speaks of the believer as such: "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14:23). Jesus' speech and actions are much more inflammatory toward the temple than Mark's account. In Mark Jesus alludes to the Temple's destruction (John 13:2), but in John, Jesus blatantly declares to the religious leaders to "destroy this temple, and I will raise again in three days" (John 2:19). The point is that the similarities between John and Qumran are more contemporaneous with each other than any other religious idea of its day. The similarities are not close enough to say that they copied from one another, but

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<sup>32</sup> Brown, 122

close enough to indicate that they came from the same idea.<sup>33</sup> But more important is the relationship the New Testament shares theologically with the Johannine Temple narrative (John 2:13-22).

Commencing Jesus' resurrection, the New Testament refers to a spiritual Temple which resonates with theological significance. According to Ephesians 2:19-21 and I Peter 2:5 the Church or Body of Christ is spoken of in terms of a Holy Temple (living stones), who are being built up into a spiritual house to be a Holy Priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices to God. More specifically, I Cor 3:16; 6:19, and II Cor 6:16, refers to the believers physical body as the Temple of God for whom the Spirit of God indwells. Whereas Eph 2:19-21 and I Pe 2:5 refer to individual believers that collectively make up the Church as the Temple, I Cor 3:16; 6:19 and II Cor 6:19 speak of the believers body as the Temple of God. While the one speaks of the Church collectively, the other is more individuated. Further, Heb 9:11-12 and Rev 11:19 and Heb 9:11-12 refer to the heavenly Temple where God dwells. While Jesus' perfunctory duties included pouring his blood upon the Mercy Seat in order to obtain eternal redemption for us (Heb 9:11-12), it also refers to God's habitation place (Rev 9:11-12).<sup>34</sup> Temple theology then, within the New Testament, is operative on three distinct and yet, collectively unified levels: the Church, the believer, Jesus, and Heaven itself, which culminates in the experience of true 'Worship.' The duty of every Christian is true worship which elicits a nuance of forms: prayer, attending church, doing devotionals, reading the bible, confession, feeding the poor, tending to the sick, etc. The point is that the New Testament teaches a Temple

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<sup>33</sup> The above ideas concerning the similarities between the Qumran and Johannine communities are adapted from class lecture notes taught Fr. C. Anthony Ziccardi of Immaculate Conception Seminary.

<sup>34</sup> Brown, P. 124.

theology that encompassing the Church, the believer, Jesus, and Heaven itself -- all within the context of worship.<sup>35</sup> It should not surprise us then why John is interested in showing Jesus as not only the Messiah but the true replacement of the Temple; the Temple is the place of worship and Jesus is the New Temple in which all of humanity should worship!

It seems then that the redactor(s) of John's Gospel are most interested in the theme of replacement. That is, they seem interested in delineating a replacement motif on three levels collectively held together levels: the old wine is replaced by the new wine of the Kingdom (2:1-11); the Temple is replaced by the risen Lord and Messiah (2:19); and Jesus' reference to a new birth is his Messianic claim of saying that the old has gone and the new has come (3:3).<sup>36</sup> This theme finds its fullest expression in Jesus, the long awaited Messiah, who comes not to rebuild a physical but a spiritual kingdom. One in which every believer can come to worship. A person is no longer required to make an animal sacrifice in the Temple for his sins. Jesus did this once and for all. If this were not the case, "then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb 9:26).

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<sup>35</sup> Sanders, 120.

<sup>36</sup> DA Carson, 166.

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