

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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The First Passover -- Cleansing the Temple

by Dan Trygg

“He found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵ And He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables; ¹⁶ and to those who were selling the doves He said, ‘Take these things away; stop making My Father’s house a place of business.’ ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume Me.’”

John 2:14-17

The Gospel of John offers some unique perspectives that the other gospel writers do not include. The account that John gives helps to clarify and correct some impressions that we would have if the only information we had was from the first three gospels. **This passage includes two examples of this:**

First, a reading of the other gospels gives the impression that Jesus’ ministry may have lasted only one year. **John tells us that there were *four* Passovers** (2:13; 5:1 [literally, “the feast”, which many commentators see as a reference to Passover, *the* most significant feast]; 6:4; 11:55). **By this, we know that Jesus’ ministry was over three years in duration.**

The second example of John’s unique contribution is that **he alone mentions *this* cleansing of the temple that occurred at the *beginning* of Jesus’ ministry.** The others mention a similar episode that happened at the *end* of His life, on the eve of the final Passover week. Some think that John was merely describing the same event, but a careful examination of the other gospels reveals that there were different motivations and issues involved. Many scholars believe that John, who was obviously aware of the other gospel accounts, was once again adding what he felt to be a significant part of the story that had not previously been told. (Compare this with Mk 11:15-18. What is different between the two incidents?) **Jesus cleansed the temple *twice*: Once at the beginning of His ministry, and once at the end.**

Vs. 13 tells us that “the Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.” **The feast of Passover was instituted by God in Exodus 11-13. It was to commemorate the deliverance of Israel out of slavery in Egypt.** God had already confronted Pharaoh and the Egyptian people with nine plagues, each designed to reveal the powerlessness of the Egyptian pantheon of gods before Yahweh of Israel. Pharaoh continued to stubbornly resist the warnings of God through Moses and Aaron, God’s appointed spokesmen. In this final plague, which would secure their release, **Yahweh intended to slay all the first-born of humankind and animals in the land of Egypt, because the Egyptian king refused to release God’s “first-born”, Israel** (Ex. 4:21-23; 11:4-7). The people of Egypt thought that the Pharaoh himself was divine. This plague would take Pharaoh’s first-born son as well, thus **it would establish once and for all the powerlessness of the king of Egypt before Yahweh, the God of Israel.** After warning the Egyptians, Moses was instructed to make preparations which would not only bring about their protection from this plague, but would also prepare them to leave in haste when the Egyptian king finally gave in before Yahweh. **Part of the preparations included slaying an unblemished lamb, and sprinkling or daubing its blood on the two door posts and over the top of the doorway to their houses. As Yahweh passed through the land at midnight, He would see the blood on the doorway and would “pass over” that house** (hence, the name “Passover” – Ex. 12:23). All inside would be safe from the plague. However, any first-born found out in the street, or in a house *without* this marking of blood would *not* be passed over. They would die from the plague. “And Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians; and there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was no home where there was not someone dead. Then he called for Moses and Aaron at night and said, ‘Rise up, get out from among my people, both you and the sons of Israel; and go, worship Yahweh..., and go, and bless me also’” (Ex. 12:31,32). **This was the birthday of the nation Israel, and was to be commemorated throughout their generations** (Ex. 12:42). The reason that Jesus went up to Jerusalem was that **Old Testament law required that all Jewish males were to up to Jerusalem for three religious feasts each year:** the Passover (Unleavened Bread); Pentecost (Harvest); and the Feast of Booths (Ingathering). Cf. Ex. 23:14-17.

John records that **when Jesus came into the temple, He found “those who were selling oxen, sheep and doves”** (vs. 14). This practice undoubtedly began as a service to those traveling from a distance. **Having a ready source of priestly-inspected animals available to purchase for sacrifices was a benefit to pilgrims. Human greed and corruption had entered in over the years, however.** By Jesus’ time, the price of these animals had become highly inflated. Furthermore, crooked priests often would disqualify perfectly acceptable animals brought to the temple from family farms. This forced worshipers to purchase the temple animals, which were often *visibly inferior* in quality. **It was an abuse of spiritual authority for the sake of money.** The fact that these booths for selling animals had made their way into the actual temple courts is an indication of the partnership of the priesthood in this regard. **Those allowed to market their animals in the temple enjoyed a virtual monopoly, supported and protected by corrupt and greedy priests.**

Jesus also found *moneychangers*, sitting at their tables . Who were these “moneychangers”, and why were they there? The Law required every man in Israel to pay a yearly “temple tax”, for the upkeep of the temple (cf. Ex. 30:11-16; Matt. 17:24-27). This amounted to one half of a *shekel*, or two days’ wages, and was usually paid just before or at the Passover. This, and all other offerings in the temple, were supposed to be paid *in* Hebrew *shekels*, due to ecclesiastical tradition and to avoid “pagan currency”. Moreover to use *shekels* outside of the temple courts was illegal, under Roman rule. **The moneychangers were on hand to exchange foreign currency into the acceptable temple coinage, and to make change, if necessary, for those who desired to make other purchases in the temple.** Again, this probably began as a convenience to foreigners, but had often become corrupted due to the ease of manipulating exchange rates, or of charging large fees for a service that was only available in the temple courts. **The practice of tyrannical and manipulative charges of temple moneychangers is well-documented in secular literature of that time.**

In addition to the injustice the worshiper would have to endure in order to make an offering to God was the reality of the marketplace environment that resulted from these activities. This was not some Western supermarket, where shoppers pick out their merchandise and then pay at the check-out counter. ***This was modeled after the Middle-Eastern market, or bazaar, ...where there were individual vendors of goods and services, who were calling out to prospective customers, haggling over prices, sometimes arguing with dissatisfied patrons.*** Added to this din was the *bleating* of sheep and goats, the *lowing* of cattle, and the *calling* of the birds that were for sale. Certainly the noise and bustle which was invading the temple courts, would have made worship more difficult. **Things were so bad, ...so out of control and out of perspective..., that Jesus felt that there was a need to take drastic action.**

Jesus responded to the abuse, corruption and chaos He found, “...making a scourge of cords, He cast out all” (vs. 15). **First, He made or fashioned a whip of ropes.** The word for ropes is the same as is used in Acts 27:32 for the ropes that held the skiff to the ship. These were not just light cords, nor was the whip only a prop. It was a real whip, capable of inflicting pain and commanding respect. **The fact that Jesus stood there and took the time to make it indicates that His action was not just explosively impulsive. It may have seemed drastic, but it was definitely deliberate and calculated.** *He drove out all ...He poured out the coins ...and overturned the tables....* There can be no question that this was a scene of noise and violence. How else could Jesus have cleared the temple court so quickly? **We must remember, too, that Jesus was a carpenter by trade**, which in those days meant the heavy work of constructing houses from stones and large beams, and using hand planes, saws, hammers, and chisels (there were no power tools!). **A man who worked a job like this must have been a well-muscled, physically intimidating individual** (in spite of the impressions that some traditional art works may tend to give us about Jesus’ appearance), **especially when wielding a whip, yelling, and moving quickly and unpredictably. No one attempted to resist Him**, physically at least. Marcus Dods, in The Expositor’s Greek Testament, describes well what it must have been like: “It was a scene of violence: the traders trying to protect their property, cattle rushing hither and thither, men shouting and cursing, the moneychangers trying to hold their tables as Jesus went from one to another upsetting them. It was indeed so violent a scene that the disciples felt somewhat scandalized until they remembered, then and there, not afterwards, that it was written: ‘Zeal for Thy house will consume Me’” (Psalms 69:9).

What was He crying out, as He drove them out? **“Take these things away. Stop making my Father’s house a house of merchandise!”** This is the cause Jesus gave for His action (vs. 16). (*Different* from the reason in Mark 11:15-18.)

The Jewish leaders demanded an explanation for Jesus’ action, ...an outward, miraculous sign to indicate by what authority He did this. Like so many politicians of our day, they couldn’t bring themselves to just own up to the truth of His objection. It is interesting, however, that **they did not arrest Him** when He did not answer them as they had indicated. What did He say in response? *“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up”*. As was often the case with the religious leaders, **Jesus did not give them the kind of answer they expected. He spoke in a parable to them, but in actuality His resurrection would truly be the best sign to demonstrate His authority** (Vss. 19-22).

The “Jews” mention that it took 46 years to build the temple (vs. 20). Herod the Great began this project in the 18th year of his reign (ca. 20 B.C.). **This gives us a fixed point for the beginning of Jesus’ ministry -- about 26-27 A.D.** This coincides with a prophecy in Daniel, that the Messiah would show up 483 years after a command to rebuild Jerusalem. From the time that the Persian King, Artaxerxes, commissioned Ezra’s return (457 B.C.), until 26 A.D. was 483 years. It is also the year that Luke documents as the beginning of Jesus’ ministry (Dan. 9:24-26; Ezr. 7:8; Lk. 3:1).

Though many “believed” in Jesus, upon witnessing the miracles He was doing (mentioned, but not recounted by John), **He knew better than to trust in the fickleness of human popularity** (Vss. 23-25). **This is one of a number of times where John mentioned that people “believed in” Jesus, but their faith was not dependable.** On the one hand, John is writing to bring us *to faith* in Christ (20:30,31), ...and John says that “believing in Jesus” is what brings us to new birth (1:12), ...yet, intellectual faith does not seem to be enough. There must be an *ongoing pursuit of Christ* (8:31). **People will fail us, but God is always trustworthy. Jesus entrusted Himself to God** (I Pet. 2:23), **but not to people.**