

Asbury Theological Seminary

JESUS IN THE TEMPLE:
A THEOLOGICAL STUDY OF JESUS' TEMPLE ACTION
IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

Submitted to Dr. Ben Witherington III
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
BT660 Theology of the New Testament

By:
Benjamin D. Kickert
April 1, 2008

With overturned tables and scathing accusations, Jesus' action in the temple serves as a unique nexus between the themes of judgment, incarnation, inclusion and sacrifice. This paper seeks to identify the theological significance of Jesus' temple action in the synoptic gospels. Because of the limited scope of this paper, certain methodological approaches need to be noted. First, the historical reliability of the accounts will only be briefly analyzed in favor of a more text critical approach.¹ Second, the temple act will be explored as a single event with discussion of the divergent Johannine chronology. Third, the theological implication of the entire episode will be considered as a unit while still accounting for the unique stylistic and theological approaches of each gospel writer. In order to grapple with the theology of this Passion Week event a multi-pronged approach will be employed. The first segment of this paper will provide a close reading of the synoptic accounts. The second segment will place these pericopes in their larger context with an emphasis on the role of the temple. The third segment will explore the Johannine account and its implication. Finally, the larger theological significance of these accounts will be discussed.

Close Reading of the Text

By in large the synoptic accounts provide a vastly similar description of Jesus action in the temple; however, it would be impossible to say each account is identical in form or emphasis. In fact, only a handful of exact phrases occur in all three synoptic gospels and each gospel includes elements not found in the other two. A close reading of the text will allow for a comprehensive understanding of the temple episode while also revealing unique theological patterns. In this analysis, a Markian priority will be assumed and significant deviations, both additions and subtractions, will be noted.

¹ For an in depth discussion of the historicity of Jesus' temple action, see the interchange between David Seeley and P. M. Casey in the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*: David Seeley. "Jesus' Temple Act." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (1993): 263-283; P. M. Casey. "Culture and Historicity: The Cleansing of the Temple." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (1997): 306-332; David Seeley. "Jesus' Temple Act Revisited: A Response to P. M. Casey." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2000): 55-63.

The most basic set of textual observations lie in the material unique to Mark. These phrases were assumedly left out by the other gospel writers as they composed their own manuscripts.² There are two unique phrases within the Markian account which are exegetically significant. First, as seen in Mark 11:16 is the only author to note that Jesus would not allow people to carry things through the temple. Second, in verse 17, Mark is the only author that records Jesus as saying his house is to be "a house of prayer for all the nations." This unique phrase is easily one of the most important in seeking to understand the theology of the episode.

The Gospel of Matthew is notable not only for what it leaves out, but also for what it adds. The Matthean account of Jesus temple action is the longest of the three synoptic gospels. A significant portion of this added length is found in 21:15-16 with the additional details concerning the children in the temple singing praises to Jesus and the resulting conversation between Jesus and the leaders. The second bit of unique material in the Matthean is verse 14 with the additional details concerning Jesus curing the blind and lame that entered the temple.

In comparison to Mark and Matthew, the Lucan account is by far the shortest account and provides few exegetically significant details. Luke is the only gospel writer that list "the leaders of the people" among those opposing Jesus as found 19:47 and is the only writer to mention that those opposing him could not find anything they could do in response to his actions – a reference found in verse 48. Additionally, Luke includes a temporal note in verse 47 not found in the other gospels when he says Jesus was teaching everyday in the temple. In terms of dually attested phrases, the only one of note is that Luke does not mention those buying in the temple and also omits the details about Jesus overturning the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves, which Mark and Matthew both attest to.

² This assumes either the two-document hypothesis or the four-document hypothesis. For a brief treatment of these theories see: Paul J Achtemeier, Joel B. Green and Marianne Meye Thompson. *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 69-73.

Because this paper seeks to explain the temple action of Jesus as one event, it is helpful to gather all the unique details together. The following is a composite reading which is the result of aggregating the three synoptic traditions:

Then they came to Jerusalem and Jesus entered the temple and began to drive out all those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. And he was teaching and said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations' but you have made it a den of robbers." The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. <Everyday he was teaching in the temple>. But when the chief priests and the scribes and the leaders of the people saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became angry and said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself'?" They kept looking for a way to kill him for they were afraid of him, but they did not find anything they could do because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching [and] by what they heard. And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples left them [and] went out of the city to Bethany and spent the night there.³

A full treatment of variations within the synoptic accounts can be found in Appendix I.

The gospels agree on this: Jesus entered the temple, disrupted the daily operation of the markets, and chastised those listening. Additionally, all tell of the response from the community leaders. This paper will explore these four elements as well as the Matthean details about the healings and the children praising Jesus.

The temple episode begins with Jesus' entrance. In each of the accounts the word used is ἱερόν. This is the more common of the two words that can be translated as "temple" with the other being ναός. The former generally refers to the temple complex as a whole while the latter focuses on the actual sanctuary of the temple.⁴ This complex of buildings and structures that Jesus entered would have been the Herodian reconstruction which was begun in 20 B.C.E and

³ This composite includes the following passages: Matthew 21:12-17; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-48. All citations in this paper are from the NRSV. In forming this composite account if additional words appear in an account, those were included. If there was variance among the texts (usually tense related) the majority phrase was used. The use of chevrons < > indicates a phrase that does not precisely fit into the aggregate (usually chronological) while brackets [] are used when inserting words not found in any text, but essential for flow.

⁴ W. von Meding, "ναός," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 3:781-785; Colin Brown, "τό ἱερόν," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 3:785-789.

covered a sprawling area of 172,000 square yards.⁵ There is general consensus among the scholars that the scene for Jesus' temple action was the Court of the Gentiles, which was the outermost court of the complex and was open to all people.⁶ This area was not a part of the original temple, but was introduced with Herod's expansion.⁷

After entering, Jesus immediately begins to expel people. Luke leaves out some of the details that the other authors include,⁸ but the imagery is obvious: Jesus is disrupting the activities in the temple with an emphasis on interrupting the market atmosphere. The word used to describe the driving out of the merchants here is ἐκβάλλω. Mark and Luke choose to pair this word, used as an infinitive, with the aorist middle of ἄρχω. This construction can be translated as "he began to drive out." Matthew on the other hand simply uses an aorist middle of ἐκβάλλω to get his point across. The significance of the phrase is not necessarily in its construction, but with the imagery it holds. Emilio Chávez has pointed out that this is the phrase used when referring to the casting out of demons.⁹ It is unclear how direct of a connection the authors wish to make between these actions and exorcism, but even at its most basic level the word conveys the idea of removing something unwanted from one's presence.

The gospel writers identify at least four categories of people that Jesus confronts: buyers, sellers, money changers and sellers of doves. The buyers and sellers were most likely engaging in the trade of sacrificial animals. The fact that this trade was occurring in the temple structure

⁵ This is the equivalent of over 35.5 acres. Carol Meyers. "Temple, Jerusalem." *Logos Library Software*. Version 2.1g 1995. Print ed.: David Noel Freedman, ed. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

⁶ E. P. Sanders. *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 67.

⁷ B. Chilton, P. W. Comfort and M. O. Wise. "Temple, Jewish." *Logos Library Software*. Version 2.1g 1995. Print ed.: A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds. *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 2000).

⁸ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 691-693. The author points out this may have more to do with what Luke chooses to emphasize rather than what he chooses to deemphasize.

⁹ Emilio G. Chávez, *The Theological Significance of Jesus' Temple Action in Mark's Gospel* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 137-138.

appears to be a recent development under the high priesthood of Caiaphas, who was competing with the established markets found on the Mount of Olives.¹⁰ In many ways, traders were providing a service to those who would have travelled to Jerusalem, saving them the trouble of transporting their sacrifice.¹¹ It should be noted that Jesus not only drives out the sellers, but the buyers as well; this distinction indicates that Jesus' action is not only directed at merchants, who may or may not be dishonest, but more importantly at the market structure as a whole. The money changers in the courts also seem to be providing a necessary service. They were on hand at the temple to convert the pilgrim's coinage into the necessary Tyrian sheckle.¹² The presence of the tables in the temple indicates that it was the time of year that the temple tax was being levied.¹³ Finally, the dove sellers catered to a sacrificial need of a particular audience – the poor. In Judaism, doves were used for those who could not afford a standard sacrifice.¹⁴

Mark alone includes the reference to Jesus' refusal to allow anyone to carry things through the temple. A couple theories emerge in regard to the significance of this. This could refer to the items being bought and thus serve as a continuation of the previous details or it could refer to possessions in general. Lane contends this is simply an extension of existing rules which disallowed people from carrying items such as a staff, sandals or a wallet through the temple area.¹⁵ Regardless of the specifics, the implication is that the flow was disrupted. It is easy to assume Jesus' response was one of anger and reaction, but the text actually paints a picture of an intentional and specific act.

¹⁰ B. Chilton, P. W. Comfort and M. O. Wise. "Temple, Jewish."

¹¹ R. T. France, *Matthew*. The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 301.

¹² Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 84.

¹³ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 405.

¹⁴ Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 314.

¹⁵ Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 406. See also: Casey, "Culture and Historicity," 310-311. Here the author explores other options, all of which relate to the market practices of the temple.

The question of magnitude still remains. Did Jesus really expel everyone from the area as Matthew's use of the inclusive word πάντας might suggest? Some have argued that yes in fact Jesus, with the presumed help of his disciples, did in fact cast out all those in the area.¹⁶ While this may be possible, the more likely explanation is that this serves as hyperbole in regards to a much smaller symbolic action. This stance is further strengthened when one takes into account the sheer magnitude a feat like this would be, especially when one considers a single merchant could have up to 3,000 sheep as Ben Witherington has pointed out.¹⁷

Jesus' actions in the temple are followed by a reprimand. The audience is not named, but from the context it can be assumed he is addressing those in the temple, presumable even those he had "driven out." Based on the reactions that follow, it is also fair to assume the religious leaders were on hand. All three gospel writers narrate Jesus as quoting from Isaiah 56:7 and all appear to be quoting directly from the LXX which reads ὁ γὰρ οἶκός μου οἶκος προσευχῆς κληθήσεται πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν. Mark is the only author to leave the entire phrase intact while Matthew and Luke omit the final words which are translated "for all the nations."¹⁸ Luke also leaves out the word for "called." The natural tendency is to understand this scripture quotation as referring primarily to the role of the temple in regards to worship and prayer, and while this implication cannot be ignored, it is just as important to understand the context from which Jesus is quoting. Isaiah 56 is a chapter concerned with Gentiles and their worship at the temple. The chapter details how those who earnestly seek the LORD will find their place in the house of the LORD. Even when Matthew and Luke leave out the final designation of the temple as a house of prayer "for all the nations" it is implied by the passage from which Jesus is quoting.

¹⁶ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 527.

¹⁷ Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 315.

¹⁸ No account includes the word γὰρ, but the rest of the phrase is identical.

Jesus contrasts the imagery of inclusive worship and prayer with an accusation that the house of God has become a den of robbers.¹⁹ The partnering of this phrase with the fact that those expelled dealt in money may indicate Jesus is speaking against unfair market practices; however, two other theories have emerged which may offer a more accurate assessment of the meaning of this phrase. Scholars have noted that the term used here for robbers does not carry the same connotation as it would in English. Instead of simply thieves, this is the term often used to describe zealots and warriors. If this was the case, it would seem to indicate that Jesus was speaking out against those who used violence to get their way especially in regards to the Jewish relationship with Rome.²⁰ The other theory contends that Jesus is stringing together two quotations in his pronouncement against the people. The phrase *πήλαιον ληστῶν* occurs only once in the LXX and that is in Jeremiah 7:11 where the prophet asks if the house of God has become a den of robbers. This chapter, like the Isaiah passage, deals with worship in the temple. However, the focus in Jeremiah is on the presence of YHWH dwelling and the response of the Israel. The chapter begins with a call for reform and the need to act justly. The charge of the temple becoming a den of robbers is in response to those who enter the temple seeking God, yet continue with their abominations. The prophecy goes on to deliver a threat of judgment if the people do not change their ways. The implication is clear: Jesus is warning the people that they are not behaving appropriately in regards to God's dwelling place and that judgment is called for.

It is at this point in the narrative that the synoptic accounts begin to diverge. Luke and Mark move directly into the response from the leaders, but Matthew includes two short episodes: the healing of the blind and lame and then the praise from children. The details about the healing seem to be dropped in out of nowhere – especially when you consider that no other gospel account includes them. However, the presence of this story carries significant exegetical weight.

¹⁹ While the use of the first person genitive here may in fact carry significance and indicate that Jesus sees the temple as his own, the simplest explanation is that Jesus is quoting directly from scripture.

²⁰ For discussion of this possibility see: Casey "Culture and Historicity," 319-320.

France points out that according to 2 Samuel 5:8, the blind and lame would have been excluded from the Temple.²¹ It is hard to say if that would have included the court of the Gentiles, but the imagery presented is that of a reversal: those in the temple market are being cast out and those who are normally excluded are being welcomed in and offered wholeness.²²

The second passage found only in Matthew narrates children crying out praises and the resulting exchange between Jesus and the religious leaders. All three gospels record these leaders getting upset, which will be addressed shortly. Matthew specifically indicates their angst is the result of children crying "Hosanna to the Son of David." The key phrase in these praises is "Son of David." The implication of such praise is clearly messianic with an understanding that the Son of David would cast out foreign nations, judge the earth and bring all people under his reign of wisdom and righteousness.²³ Additionally, since it was the son of David (Solomon) who built the temple, the title carried with it an expectation that the temple would be restored.²⁴ If the religious leaders were upset about the children's praises, the response of Jesus surely infuriated them as he quotes to them from Psalm 8:2.²⁵ The power of this response comes not only from his refusal to turn away the praises of the children, or to correct them, but in the fact that he quotes a passage ascribed to God in regards to himself.²⁶ At this point, it is not only the children making messianic and Christological statements, but Jesus as well.

²¹ France, *Matthew*, 302.

²² M. Eugene Boring, "Matthew." in *The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible Including the Apocryphal / Deutrocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes*. Vol VII. Edited by Leander E. Keck et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 406.

²³ D. R. Bauer, "Son of David." *Logos Library Software*. Version 2.1g 1995. Print ed.: Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight, eds. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Intervarsity, 1992).

²⁴ Ben Witherington III. "Singular Jesus in a Pluralistic Culture." (class lecture for BT660 Theology of the New Testament, Asbury Theological Seminary. Wilmore, KY, March 6, 2008).

²⁵ Psalm 8:3 in the LXX.

²⁶ R. T. France. *The Gospel of Matthew*. New International Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 789.

Mark and Luke include a more general ending to their accounts. Mark frames the story with the religious leaders looking for a way to kill Jesus but unable to because of the spellbound crowds. On the other hand, Luke frames it in a way that indicated the religious leaders were prompted to look for a way to kill him precisely because of those same crowds. However one views it, the result is the same: what Jesus did in the temple was controversial enough to warrant a plot for his death. Then, with the crowds still reeling, Jesus and his disciples retreat out of the city to Bethany.

Contextual Clues

A close reading of the synoptic accounts of Jesus' actions reveals much, but this information is only truly unfolded and understood in light of the larger context. Simply looking at the selected text allows for a variety of interpretations: Jesus could have been speaking against the market atmosphere in the temple; he could have been upset by the neglect of the Gentiles; he could have been speaking judgment against the temple; he could have been using the occasion as a chance to affirm his messianic claim. While all of these are valid options, it is the rest of the gospel context which narrows and refines the possibilities.

The immediate context of the pericopes is of great importance. All three synoptic gospel writers locate their story on the upward swing of the passion narrative. Additionally, all three use the triumphant entry of Jesus in some way to introduce the episode. The Markan account provides the clearest contextual literary device for reading the story. Unlike the other gospels which quickly transition between the triumphant entry and the temple cleansing, Mark introduces a bit more time into his story. After entering Jerusalem, Jesus sizes up the temple and then returns to Bethany. On the way back to Jerusalem the next day he finds a fig tree not producing fruit and curses it. It is only after the temple episode that the fig tree is found barren. In this use of intercalation Mark firmly links the fate of the temple with the fate of the fig tree. This same episode occurs in Matthew, but there it is a single episode after Jesus' temple action. Lane expounds on the obvious meaning of this: Just as the fig tree is cursed for not producing fruit, so

too the temple is cursed for not producing.²⁷ Douglas Oakman has done extensive research on the details of the fig tree episode and has concluded just as figs have a season, so too did the temple of YHWH. An institution, like a plant, is only useful when it produces what it is intended to produce – a conclusion that will be probed more later.²⁸

In Matthew, it is what follows that provides the most insight. The author transitions from the cursed fig tree into a series of parables. Each parable serves to explain the temple action in a new light. In 21:28-32 the story is found of the two sons – one son says the right things the other does the right things. In the end it is the son who acts appropriately that is honored. The next parable is that of the wicked-wine growers and the death of the landowner's son. The climax is found in understanding that the landowner sacrifices his own son for something that should already belong to him. Chapter 22 opens with the parable of the wedding banquet. Here Jesus affirms that those who are honored are those who respond to the invitation.²⁹ The rest of chapters 22-23 in Matthew's gospel contains heated interactions between Jesus and the religious leaders – evidence of the growing rift between the two.

Mark's account of what follows Jesus' action in the temple is similar. After the fig tree is found to be cursed, Jesus engages in a debate with the religious leaders concerning his authority. Then Mark introduces the same parable of the wicked vine growers. Mark then transitions back to arguments with the leaders. The end of chapter 12 finds Jesus once again in the temple, but this time overlooking the treasury. It is here that we find the story of the widow who gives all she has. The gospel writer uses this encounter to emphasize that the truly righteous are those who respond from their heart. Luke also includes this story in his passion narrative. These parables and actions on the part of Jesus drive home an emphasis on inclusion and sincerity of heart.

²⁷ Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 400.

²⁸ Douglas E. Oakman, "Cursing Fig Trees and Robbers' Dens: Pronouncement Stories Within Social-Systemic Perspective: Mark 11:12-25 and Parallels." *Semeia* 64 (1993): 253-272.

²⁹ The conclusion of this parable with the casting out of the improperly dressed wedding guest seems to point to a person who is not ready for the host's occasion. Morris contends that this guest must have refused the garments the king would have provided. Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 555-557.

These contextual clues are useful for ascertaining meaning, but perhaps no passage is more revealing than the opening verses of chapter 13 in the gospel of Mark. It is here that the following exchange is found between Jesus and his disciples:

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." (Mark 13:1-2)³⁰

Sanders points out that for all the devastation implied by Jesus' response "is in the form of a simple prediction with no implication of a threat."³¹ These words from the lips of Jesus accurately describe the destruction of Jerusalem and her temple that would come in 70 AD under the military power of Titus.³² Josephus described the chaos:

The whole temple mount appeared to flame, from foundation to top, but the blood streams were greater than the fire streams. Piles of corpses covered the ground, and over the heaved-up dead the soldiers ran to catch those yet alive.³³

This is not the only place where Jesus reveals his foresight concerning the future of Jerusalem. In Matthew 23:37-39 and Luke 13:31-35 Jesus is found weeping over the city. Each of these prophetic accounts is deserving of an in-depth exegetical analysis, but for now it must suffice to say that Jesus expected judgment to come to Jerusalem and to the temple. This historical backdrop sheds light on the gospel accounts concerning the temple's destruction, which then in turn sheds light on interpreting Jesus' temple action.

Apart from the immediate context of the temple cleansing and the allusions to the destruction of Jerusalem, there are two additional passages that need to be explored. The first comes as Jesus is presented before Caiaphas. All three synoptic gospels record this affair, but only Mark and Luke connect it with the temple:

³⁰ See also: Matthew 24:1-2 and Luke 21:5-6.

³¹ Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 71.

³² Mina C. Klein and H. Arthur Klein. *Temple Beyond Time: The Story of the Site of Solomon's Temple at Jerusalem* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1970), 109-112.

³³ Quoted in Klein, *Temple Beyond Time*, 112.

Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" But even on this point their testimony did not agree. (Mark 14:57-59)³⁴

As this scene unfolds, Jesus refuses to answer until he is asked if he is the Christ, to which he responds affirmatively and includes a Son of Man statement. Caiaphas responds by tearing his clothes, crying blasphemy and calling for death. Luke mentions this later response but leaves out the questioning about the temple. What these passages make clear is the fact that the priests took threats against the temple seriously and used connections between Jesus and the temple against him at his trial. This claim that Jesus threatened to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days is also found in Mark 15:29 and Matthew 27:40 where it is used in mocking Jesus on the cross. Sanders comments on this connection between the temple and execution of Jesus as he argues, "His overturning of the tables was probably the immediate cause of his death."³⁵

The final contextual clue is found in all three synoptic gospels, but will only be explored briefly here. Upon the death of Jesus, as he breaths his last breath, the narrators inform their readers "the curtain of the temple was torn in two."³⁶ Entire books have been written about this symbolic event, and certainly a detailed exegetical treatment of the text would reveal significant finding; however, for the purposes of this study, it is sufficient to say that the person, life and death of Jesus was connected with the temple and its purpose and in his death the temple is altered.

Johannine Account

Jesus' casting out of the merchants is one of the few stories found in all four gospels. John records the account as follows:

³⁴ Parallel passage found in Matthew 26:60-61

³⁵ E. P. Sanders, "Jerusalem and Its Temple in the Beginnings of the Christian Movement." *Judaism* 46, no. 2 (1997): 191.

³⁶ Matthew 27:51, Mark 15:38, Luke 23:45

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. (John 2:13-22)

Despite the fact that John includes many unique details, it is easy to tell that the basic narrative is the same. Many of the elements found in the synoptics appear here. This paper will look at the details that shed light on the theological implications of the synoptic accounts.

The first issue that arises is one of chronology. John places the temple episode at the beginning of his gospel right after the initiation of Jesus' ministry as opposed to the end of Jesus' ministry like the synoptics do. There are two possible explanations: either John has rearranged the material for theological purposes or Jesus in fact drove people out of the temple on multiple occasions. Leon Morris examines both of these possibilities in his commentary on John without falling on one side or the other.³⁷ If John is describing the same event that transpires in the synoptics then he is being intentional about framing the ministry of Jesus in terms of the temple. Gail O'Day contends that by moving this event to the front of Jesus' ministry he is emphasizing the overall newness that Jesus is initiating.³⁸ Those who argue for two events look at the story's placement within a block of non-synoptic material, as well as the likelihood that such an act would need to be repeated in order to be effective. Furthermore, they argue that the reason the witnesses before Caiaphas in the synoptics are unclear as to their story is because it occurred

³⁷ Leon Morris. *The Gospel According to John*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 166-169.

³⁸ Gail R. O'Day, "John." in *The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible Including the Apocryphal / Deutrocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes*. Vol IX. Edited by Leander E. Keck et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 543.

several years before.³⁹ While arguing that Jesus cleared the temple twice may answer a few questions, in the larger scheme of things a single episode clears up more. This is all the more true when one considers the theological emphases found throughout the gospel of John as well as the fact that Jesus' action in the temple seems to be more a symbolic statement rather than a full-on effort to bring about systemic change.

In terms of actual details, despite the difference in phrasing, there is quite a bit similar. The episode is set around Passover; Jesus enters the temple and drives out the merchants and money changers, and the sellers of doves. Jesus also criticizes the practices found inside. In the synoptics, Jesus quotes Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11, but here it appears he is referring to Zechariah 14:21, which reads: "and there shall no longer be traders in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day."⁴⁰ This prophetic passage, like those found quoted in the synoptics, addresses the right worship of YHWH in light of foreign invaders. The lack of traders in the house of the LORD is indicative of the way things should be.

After Jesus disrupts the flow of the temple, the leaders confront him and demand a sign. It is here that the phrase quoted in the synoptics before Caiaphas is found. Wherein Matthew, Mark and Luke do not put this on the lips of Jesus, John does. What John also does is include an editorial comment saying "The temple he had spoken of was his body." Morris offers up two helpful insights into the theological significance of this statement. First, he argues this is clearly referring in some way to the resurrection. Second, he affirms that Jesus is pointing to a supersession of the temple – the old temple was physical, the new temple is spiritual.⁴¹ O'Day furthers this thinking by saying, "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."⁴²

³⁹ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 166-168.

⁴⁰ O'Day, "John," 543.

⁴¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 178-179.

⁴² O'Day, "John," 544.

For John, the theme of the temple is essential. His placement of Jesus' temple action at the beginning of Jesus' ministry is only the beginning. Alan Kerr has recognized this Johannine emphasis and has written an entire book on the temple themes in the fourth gospel.⁴³ For the purposes of this paper, only Jesus' interaction with the woman at the well in John chapter 4 will be explored. Here, in his discussion of the worship practices of Jews and Samaritans, Jesus states in verse 21, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem." He goes on in verses 23-24 to say, "But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth." The woman then implies that Jesus may be the Messiah, and Jesus affirms this assertion. The significance here is that Jesus understands true worship in a manner that is no longer tied to the physical temple in Jerusalem.

Theological Implications

With a close reading of the synoptic accounts in hand and a survey of the contextual clues including those in John, the larger theological implications of Jesus' action in the temple can now be explored. In order to remain faithful to the text, a theological explanation needs to account for the following textual observations: Jesus' temple action itself focuses on the market, not just the sellers; judgment over a failed purpose is implied through the fig tree episode; the scripture Jesus quotes involves true worship and in some ways the inclusion of Gentiles; Jesus knows of the impending destruction of Jerusalem; Jesus understands a correlation between himself and the temple, specifically the death of Jesus is connected with the temple; it must account for the Messianic overtones which are present; and finally, it must understand the temple in terms that are not merely physical. Additionally, any conclusion must fit within a broader understanding of the biblical theology of the temple.

⁴³ , Alan R. Kerr, *The Temple of Jesus' Body: The Temple Theme in the Gospel of John* (New York: Sheffield Academic Press), 2002.

The work of E. P. Sanders on understanding Jesus and the temple has certainly left its mark on scholarship. It is nearly impossible to find a scholar that engages the accounts of Jesus' temple action without making at least passing reference to Sanders significant work in *Jesus and Judaism*. In this book, as well as more recent pieces by Sanders, he lays out several possible interpretations for this episode. The first option is that of a traditional cleansing; put another way, Jesus was trying to remove defilement and dishonesty from the temple establishment. This would paint him as a moderate Jewish reformer. The second option is to understand Jesus as a radical reformer who fundamentally disapproved of the temple and priestly system. This view would include a focus on the acceptance of Gentiles as the people of God. The third option is that Jesus was performing a prophetic act in anticipation of the upcoming destruction of Jerusalem.⁴⁴

Sanders places himself in this third category. He argues that there is not enough evidence to support the radical reformer option because the gospel accounts generally do not include a negative perception of the temple and because Jesus never before questioned the cultic practices.⁴⁵ In fleshing out his own understanding of the event, Sanders paints Jesus as an eschatological prophet who not only prophecies about the destruction of Jerusalem, but fully expects God to act in the present age. Sanders argues that Jesus must have envisioned the coming time when God would intervene in human history and rebuild the temple with divine hands, thus signifying the presence of the Kingdom of God. In this, Sanders who tends to cast Judaism in a more positive light than most commentators, depicts Jesus as a moderate who saw no problem with the actual temple.⁴⁶

While Sanders' contributions are to be lauded, he often overstates some things and understates others. A survey of the gospels with specific scrutiny on the temple episode reveals that Jesus is in fact concerned with the welfare of the Gentiles. His choice of scripture quotations

⁴⁴ Sanders, "Jerusalem and Its Temple," 191-192; Sander, *Jesus and Judaism*, 61-71.

⁴⁵ 189-192.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 191-192.

as he scolds those in the temple cannot be overlooked with their inclusionary implications. Also, Sanders fails to account for the clear interpretive clues provided by the fig tree, especially as they occur in the gospel of Mark. The idea presented through the fig tree intercalation is more than just prophetic – it is judgmental. Finally, Sanders ignores Jesus' comments to the woman at the well and about his body being the temple. While his interpretation offers the vision of a temple that is more than just physical, it neglects the Christological nuances from John 4 and the possibility that true worship can exist outside a structure. In the end, Sander's theological construction is overly external and does not account for how Jesus views himself, his role, or his relationship with the Gentiles.

Craig Evans offers another possible theological framework as he argues for the traditional understanding of the episode as being a temple cleansing.⁴⁷ In responding to Sanders, Evans levels many of the same criticisms that are found above. After an in depth analysis of both biblical and extra biblical texts, Evans concludes, "the cleansing idea is too firmly entrenched in the tradition to be so easily set aside."⁴⁸ Besides his objections with Sanders' conclusion, he adds that because the destruction of the temple was not a common messianic expectation, there is no reason to assume Jesus was symbolically prophesying its destruction. Finally, he contends that historic corruption within the temple would have given reason for Jesus to conduct a cleansing.⁴⁹

Without doubt, Evans contributes a great deal to the discussion, especially in his tempering of Sanders' arguments. He makes several valid points, and exposes holes in Sanders' conclusions. The arguments Evans makes are well grounded in the biblical text, but unfortunately he too leaves some questions unanswered. Even though Evans is responding directly to Sanders, his argument includes many of the same shortcomings: he too fails to

⁴⁷ Craig A. Evans, "Jesus' Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (1989): 237-270.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 270.

account for the emphasis on Gentile inclusion; he also ignores Jesus' self understanding, especially in regards to the prophetic destruction of the temple.

Sanders and Evans, despite their thorough work, are both guilty of over compartmentalization. That is to say, both argue for one understanding or the other rather than seeking to develop a synthesis of all the factors. Two scholars that offer explanations that hold the various aspects of the temple episode in tension are Emilio Chávez and N. T. Wright.

Few have put as much work into understanding Jesus' action in the temple as Chávez in his book *The Theological Significance of Jesus' Temple Action in Mark's Gospel*. After exhaustive research he takes an inclusive approach and concludes that Jesus' action is eschatological in regards to the formation of the coming kingdom; it is Messianic in as much as it reveals the true nature of God and it is judgmental in its criticism of the temple.⁵⁰ The only evident fault of Chávez's approach is that while he affirms the broad spectrum of possibilities, he leaves his reader with a nebulous understanding of the actual temple action. In book that is over 200 pages in length, very few of those pages actually deal with Mark 11:15-19.

Wright begins his analysis of Jesus' action in the temple by starting with a discussion of temple theology. He frames the episode by first contending:

The temple thus functioned as the central political, as well as religious, symbol of Judaism. It pointed not only to YHWH's promise to dwell with his people, and to his dealing with their sins, their impurities, and ultimately their exile, but also to his legitimization of the rulers who built, rebuilt and ran it.⁵¹

With this basic understanding in hand, Wright proceeds to unfold his theological conclusions. His approach seeks to understand the episode not only in terms of temple theology and exegetical discoveries, but also as it relates to Messianic implications. He concludes that Jesus was in fact symbolizing the destruction of the temple because he believed God was judging Israel and he believed Rome would be the agent of God. He goes on to argue that the reason for

⁵⁰ Chavez, *The Theological Significance of Jesus' Temple Action*, 161-166.

⁵¹ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Christian Origins and the Question of God. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 411.

the judgment was Israel's failure to obey God.⁵² By offering this explanation Wright effectively takes the best from Sanders and Evans: he concludes the system is corrupt, but rather than simply cleanse the temple, Jesus prophesies its destruction.

Of the theological frameworks discussed, Wright's offers the most consistency in view of the exegetical and contextual clues; it starts with the larger picture and works backward to the specifics: Jesus is prophesying destruction, but he is doing so because of sin and unfaithfulness. The next question must be what specifically was the sin of Israel and how does that fit into an understanding of the temple episode? The answer here comes in a study of the implications of the fig tree. Mark has made it clear that the temple would be destroyed for the same reason the fig tree was: it was unproductive and fruitless.

The temple played a central role in the life of Israel. It served as the dwelling place of God where humanity and divinity could communicate. The temple was a symbol of holiness, purity, peace and justice and ultimately served as the gathering place of God's people.⁵³ In this regard the temple in Jesus' day had clearly failed. The temple episode not only points out these failures, but also rectifies them through reimagination. Despite the fact that the temple was supposed to represent the dwelling place of God, the post-exilic temple never experienced the indwelling of God's spirit like what is found with Solomon's temple in 1 Kings 8:10-11. As such, the temple failed in its primary purpose of being the connecting point between God and humanity. When Jesus entered the temple courts it can be argued that God once again was present among his people in his temple. However, instead of being found through sacrifice by the pure, he was found through healing by the lame and blind. Furthermore, if the temple was to serve the purpose of being a gathering place for the people of God, it is clear that it was failing here too due to its exclusion of Gentiles. The words on the lips of Jesus as well as his actions

⁵²⁵² Ibid, 417-418.

⁵³ Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit and Tremper Longman III, eds. "Temple." *Logos Library Software*. Version 2.1g 1995. Print ed.: *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998).

throughout the gospels only serve to solidify this opening of the Kingdom. There is no better example of this than what is found in the pericope of Jesus and the woman at the well: the day in fact has come when God can be worshipped apart from the structure of the temple.

Therefore, it is the conclusion of this paper that Jesus was in fact seeking to reform the temple because it had failed to achieve its primary purpose: to connect people with God. However, the solution to this problem was not internal revision, but rather a radical redefinition of what God's presence among his people really means. No longer is the presence of God confined to the elaborate structures of Zion, but rather God's presence is found in the incarnation. It is quite literally the body of Christ that serves to make this divine-human connection possible. God is once again present and available, but that presence is not mediated by humanity; rather, it is experienced in and among the people of God – a people that now includes the Gentiles.

Appendix I

The following is a list of textual variances found between the synoptic gospels. The notes below are based on the NRSV rendering of the text,

- Matthew says Jesus “drove” while Mark and Luke say he “began to drive out”
- Luke only mentions “buying” and not “selling”
- Luke does not mention the overturning of the tables
- Mark is the only one who mentions Jesus not allowing anyone to carry things through the temple
- Mark quotes scripture in the negative (Is it not written) while the others do not.
- Luke leaves out the word “called” in the scripture quotation
- Mark includes the text “for all the nations” in his scripture quotation
- Matthew uses “have made” when referring to the den of robbers instead of “are making”
- Matthew is the only one who mentions the blind and lame being cured in the temple
- Luke includes similar details to the others, but gives a broader chronology by saying, “everyday he was teaching in the temple”
- Luke is the only one who mentions the presence of the “leaders of the people”
- Matthew is the only one who includes the following details:
 - The amazing things done
 - Children crying out “hosanna to the son of David
 - People get angry and question Jesus about what others are saying
 - Jesus' quote about infants praising
- Matthew does not mention that people were looking for a way to kill him or the crowd's reaction to Jesus
- Mark alone mentions the leaders were afraid of Jesus
- Mark sets up the end in a way to indicate that the leaders were looking for a way to kill Jesus because of the way the crowds reacted to him, while Luke uses the phrases about the crowd reaction to express the reason why the leaders could not do anything.
- Mark says the crowd was spellbound by the teachings, while Luke says it is because of what they heard
- Mark alone gives the temporal clause concerning Jesus' departure (evening)
- Mark is the only one who mentions the disciples leaving with Jesus
- Matthew is the only one who mentions that Jesus went to Bethany to spend the night there
- Luke does not mention Jesus leaving the city

Bibliography:

- Achetemeir, Paul J., Joel B. Green and Marianne Meye Thompson. *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.
- Bauer, D. R. "Son of David." *Logos Library Software*. Version 2.1g 1995. Print ed.: Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight, eds. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Grand Rapids: Intervarsity, 1992.
- Beale G. K. *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004.
- Betz, Hand Dieter. "Jesus and the Purity of the Temple (Mark 11:15-18): A Comparative Religion Approach." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116, no. 3 (1997): 455-472.
- Boring, M. Eugene. "Matthew." in *The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible Including the Apocryphal / Deutrocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes*. Vol VII. Edited by Leander E. Keck et. al. Nashville: Abingdon, 1995.
- Brown, Colin. "τό ἱερόν." in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Vol III, edited by Colin Brown, 785-794. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978.
- Brown, Scott G. "Mark 11:1-12:12." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2002): 78-89.
- Casey, P. M. "Culture and Historicity: The Cleansing of the Temple." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (1997): 306-332.
- Chávez, Emilio G. *The Theological Significance of Jesus' Temple Action in Mark's Gospel*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002.
- Chilton, B, P. W. Comfort and M. O. Wise. "Temple, Jewish." *Logos Library Software*. Version 2.1g 1995. Print ed.: A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds. *Dictionary of New Testament Background*. InterVarsity, 2000.
- Cole, R. Alan. *Mark*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Rev. Edition. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989.
- Culpepper, R. Alan. "Luke." in *The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible Including the Apocryphal / Deutrocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes*. Vol IX. Edited by Leander E. Keck et. al. Nashville: Abingdon, 1995.
- Dawsey, James M. "The origins of Luke's Positive Perception of the Temple." *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 18, no. 1 (1991): 5-22.
- de Vaux, Ronald. *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*. Translated by John McHugh. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960.

- Esler, Philip F. "The Incident of the Withered Fig Tree in Mark 11: A New Source and Redactional Explanation." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28, no. 1 (2005): 41-67.
- Evans, Craig A. "Jesus' Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (1989): 237-270.
- France, R. T. *Matthew*. The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985.
- . *The Gospel of Matthew*. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.
- Green, Joel B. *The Gospel of Luke*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.
- Herzop, W. R., III. "Temple Cleansing." *Logos Library Software*. Version 2.1g 1995. Print ed.: Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight, eds. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Grand Rapids: Intervarsity, 1992.
- Hiers, Richard H. "Purification of the Temple: Preparation for the Kingdom of God." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 90, no. 1 (1971): 82-90.
- Kerr, Alan R. *The Temple of Jesus' Body: The Temple Theme in the Gospel of John*. New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002.
- Klein, Mina C. and H. Arthur Klein. *Temple Beyond Time: The Story of the Site of Solomon's Temple at Jerusalem*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1970.
- Lane, William L. *The Gospel of Mark*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974.
- Levenson, Jon D. *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1985.
- Meyers, Carol. "Temple, Jerusalem." *Logos Library Software*. Version 2.1g 1995. Print ed.: David Noel Freedman, ed. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.
- . *The Gospel According to Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992.
- Moulton, Mark. "Jesus' Goal for Temple and Tree: A Thematic Revisit of Matt 21:12-22." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41, no. 4 (1998): 561-574.
- O'Day, Gail R. "John." in *The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible Including the Apocryphal /*

- Deutrocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes*. Vol IX. Edited by Leander E. Keck et. al. Nashville: Abingdon, 1995.
- Oakman, Douglas E. "Cursing Fig Trees and Robbers' Dens: Pronouncement Stories Within Social-Systemic Perspective: Mark 11:12-25 and Parallels." *Semeia* 64 (1993): 253-272.
- Perkins, Pheme. "Mark." in *The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible Including the Apocryphal / Deutrocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes*. Vol VII. Edited by Leander E. Keck et. al. Nashville: Abingdon, 1995.
- Ryken, Leland, James C. Wilhoit and Tremper Longman III, eds. "Temple." *Logos Library Software*. Version 2.1g 1995. Print ed.: *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998.
- Sanders, E. P. "Jerusalem and Its Temple in the Beginnings of the Christian Movement." *Judaism* 46, no. 2 (1997): 189-196.
- . *Jesus and Judaism*, Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1985.
- Seeley, David. "Jesus' Temple Act." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (1993): 263-283.
- . "Jesus' Temple Act Revisited: A Response to P. M. Casey." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2000): 55-63.
- Smith, D. Moody, Jr. *John*. Abingdom New Testament Commentaries. Nashville: Abingdon, 1999.
- Stevens, Marty E. *Temples, Tithes, and Taxes: The Temple and the Economic Life of Ancient Israel*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006.
- von Meding, W. "ναός." in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Vol III, edited by Colin Brown, 781-785. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978.
- Wise, M. O. "Temple." *Logos Library Software*. Version 2.1g 1995. Print ed.: Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight, eds. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Grand Rapids: Intervarsity, 1992.
- Witherington, Ben, III. *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.
- . "Singular Jesus in a Pluralistic Culture." BT660 Theology of the New Testament, Asbury Theological Seminary. Wilmore, KY, March 6, 2008.
- Wright, N. T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Christian Origins and the Question of God. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.