

“Selected Gospel Sections”

Spring Series 1

Lesson 9

“The Cleansing of the Temple”

Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:13-17.

Objective: To understand the message of the Gospel accounts in their context within each work independently and then to compare the accounts to each other to seek understanding of emphasis and focus. The goal is then to apply this message to our time and context in order to understand the message’s call on our lives.

Materials: To use the Greek, Syriac, and other ancient translations in order to help us understand the message of these Gospels. We will also examine the writings about these passages in journal articles, commentaries and other sources.

Procedures

1. To first translate each text from Greek and then compare it to other ancient translations.
2. To identify issues of importance within the texts and to explore possible meanings as they applied to the original audience.
3. To take the meaning for the original audience of the Gospels and to understand it how applies to our modern context and cultural situation.
4. To explore ways that these text call the disciples of Jesus to live their lives as faithful followers.

Matthew 21:12-13 ¹² And Jesus entered into the temple and cast out all the ones selling and buying in the temple and He overthrew the tables and the seats of the ones selling doves. ¹³ And He said to them, "It has been written, 'My house will be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of bandits.'"

Mark 11:15-19 ¹⁵ And they came into Jerusalem and entered into the temple and He began to rule over and to cast out the ones selling and the ones buying in the temple and the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of the ones selling doves He overthrew. ¹⁶ And He would not permit anyone to carry anything through the temple. ¹⁷ And He was teaching and saying to them, "Is it not written that, 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all the nations; but you have made it a den of bandits.'"¹⁸ And the chief priests and the scribes heard and they sought for a way to destroy Him, since they were afraid of Him, for all the crowd was amazed by His teaching. ¹⁹ And when evening came they went outside of the city.

Luke 19:45-46 ⁴⁵ And after entering into the temple He began to rule over, to cast out the ones selling ⁴⁶ saying to them, "It has been written, 'Indeed, My house will be a house of prayer, but you made it a den of bandits.'"

John 2:13-17 ¹³ And the Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up into Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And He found in the temple the ones selling cattle and sheep and doves and the moneychangers being seated. ¹⁵ And making a whip out of ropes, He cast all out of the temple both the sheep and the cattle and the moneychangers He poured out the money and overthrew the tables. ¹⁶ And He said to the ones selling doves, "Take up these things out of here, stop making the house of my Father a marketplace." ¹⁷ His disciples were remembering that it has been written, "The zeal for your house will consume me."

It is not at all unique for there to be controversy over a passage of Scripture, but the “Cleansing of the Temple” is far more disputed as to its meaning than most. Some have even put forward the idea that the early disciples of Jesus were embarrassed by this incident and sought to soften it in some way.¹ E. P. Sanders has also called into question the more traditional understanding of the “cleansing of the temple” as being concerned with corruption and mercantile activities being conducted in the Temple. He even questions the authenticity of these passages altogether accusing Mark of fabricating this incident in the form we have it in His Gospel account. He would say that even the title for this section in our Bibles portrays the traditional interpretation of these verses and indicates that in some way the temple has been profaned and therefore needs to be cleansed of that profanation and desecration. Sanders says that the sacrifices that were offered at the Temple were those which were commanded by God and they were to be without blemish. The monetary offerings were also not optional and it was not permitted to use coinage with an unapproved image on it so that the role of the money changers and the sellers of unblemished sacrifices was an essential function for the operation of the sacral system of the Temple.²

¹ Craig A. Evans, “Jesus’ Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51:2 (1989), pp. 237-270.

² E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 61-76.

The question then becomes was Jesus opposed to the Temple itself, or to the priests who were in charge of the Temple? Was the incident of Jesus turning over the tables a portent of the Temple's destruction, or was it an objection to those who ran it indicating that the opposition was to their corruption of it? A question for us today is, does our interpretation of this account make any difference to us? After all, church buildings are not the Temple, are they? According to our history in the churches of Christ they are not sacred space and so we would have no way to fall into the thing that Jesus finds objectionable in the incident of overturning the tables. The fact is that it is highly likely that all of the Gospel accounts other than Mark were written after the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in A. D. 70. This fact would surely have implications for our understanding of the way that the Gospel writers portray this event. Sanders believes that the action of Jesus overturning the tables being intended to "purify" or "cleanse" as seen at Mark 11:17 and its parallels is a later interpretation of the evangelists that has been accepted by the majority of interpreters in an uncritical manner.³

However, Evans, points out that as careful and nuanced as the interpretation of Sanders is, there are several problematic issues with his ideas. (1) His explanation fails to adequately explain the temple tradition

³ E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 68.

as it appears in the gospels. (2) His assessment of the authentic materials relating to Jesus' attitude toward the priesthood is less than satisfactory. (3) His interpretation does not fairly assess the relevant scriptural data that stands behind what Jesus says and does, which His contemporaries would have used to interpret His actions. (4) The theory of Sanders minimizes, or disregards, important evidence concerning the way that Palestinian Jews viewed the priesthood. (5) He also does not take into consideration a historical factor that may provide us with a more plausible historical reconstruction. We will elaborate on this more later.⁴

Though E. P. Sanders provides many great insights that have proven helpful in understanding the New Testament, in this instance it appears that He ignores the tradition that is found in all four Gospels. Prophecy regarding the destruction of the Temple is considered by some to be found also in the account of the cursing of the Fig Tree by Jesus (Mark 11:12-14, 20-21). Evans indicates that this illustrates the stance of Jesus toward the Temple; He was opposed to what it had become. At Mark 12:1-12 Jesus speaks out strongly in negative terms against the religious establishment, prophesying their destruction. This parable is likely

⁴ Craig A. Evans, "Jesus' Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?" *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51:2 (1989), pp. 237-270.

based upon Isaiah 5:1-7,⁵ a passage that threatens Israel and particularly the inhabitants of Jerusalem with destruction. This passage came to be understood as specifically predicting the destruction of the First Temple. This is seen in the *Targum of Isaiah* (5:2-5⁶), where God threatens to destroy Israel's "sanctuary," and this is seen even more explicitly later Rabbinic Writings where the tower of Isaiah's Vineyard Song is identified as the temple and the *wine vat* as the altar. The threat of the Markan parable may also be implied

⁵ Let me sing for my loved one a love song for his vineyard. My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. ² He dug it, cleared away its stones, planted it with excellent vines, built a tower inside it, and dug out a wine vat in it. He expected it to grow good grapes—but it grew rotten grapes. ³ So now, you who live in Jerusalem, you people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard: ⁴ What more was there to do for my vineyard that I haven't done for it? When I expected it to grow good grapes, why did it grow rotten grapes? ⁵ Now let me tell you what I'm doing to my vineyard. I'm removing its hedge, so it will be destroyed. I'm breaking down its walls, so it will be trampled. CEB.

⁶ "I sanctified them, and I made them glorious, I propped them up as a precious vine; and I built my sanctuary in the midst of them; and I gave also mine altar to make an atonement for their sins; and I thought that they should do good works before me, but they did evil works. The prophet said unto them: They have revolted from the law, and are not willing to return. Now, inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge now a judgment between me and my people. What more good could I have thought to do to them, which I have not done to them? And what is this? I have thought that they should do good; but they have done evil. And now, now I will tell you what I will do to my people; I will cause my Shekinah to remove from them, and they shall be for a spoil; I will break down the house of their sanctuary, and they shall be for a treading down." https://www.sefaria.org/Targum_Jonathan_on_Isaiah.5.5?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en

in the citation from Psalm 118:22-23⁷ where a new foundation is laid that is possibly the foundation of a new temple: one not made by hands (Mark 14:57-58⁸).⁹

Sanders indicates that he believes that there are no authentic sayings of Jesus that would suggest that Jesus was critical of the priesthood after denying the authenticity of Mark 11:17.¹⁰ This means that what Sanders does is, he rejects several sayings found in the Gospels declaring this inauthentic. The question would be on what basis does he make this assessment? Needless to say this is a controversial stance and one that I find to be arbitrary and completely unreasonable and without any good reasoning. Evans also believes that Sanders has not taken into consideration passages that, mostly indirectly, indicate controversy and animosity that suggests that Jesus is indeed critical of the priesthood. He thinks these were not properly taken into consideration by Sanders. This evidence would seem to suggest that Jesus' attack on the integrity

⁷ **The stone rejected by the builders is now the main foundation stone! ²³ This has happened because of the LORD; it is astounding in our sight!** CEB.

⁸ **Some stood to offer false witness against him, saying, ⁵⁸ "We heard him saying, 'I will destroy this temple, constructed by humans, and within three days I will build another, one not made by humans.'" CEB.**

⁹ Craig A. Evans, "Jesus' Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?" *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51:2 (1989), pp. 237-270.

¹⁰ E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 89. Mark 11:27-33; Mark 12:1-12; Mark 12:41-44; Mark 14:43-50; Matthew 3:7; Luke 3:7-9;

of the priesthood as is indicated by the temple cleansing is not without a quite reasonable contextual framework.¹¹

Another factor that stands against the view of Sander's thesis is his admission to having some doubt as to whether, or not Jesus' would have understood the symbolism of his action in cleansing the temple.¹²

There is in fact not a single surviving shred of evidence that the actions of Jesus in the temple were ever understood to mean anything other than the way that evangelists have interpreted them and conveyed in their writings. The evidence that is presented by Sanders is inferential at best, and motivated by other things at worst. There is also considerable evidence from Old Testament sources that cite accusations of religious corruption and profanation of the temple.¹³ Sanders will even acknowledge that the symbolic action of Jesus is entirely in keeping with the understanding of first-century Palestinian Judaism, following the same type of prophecies found in the Jewish Scriptures (i.e. Jeremiah 19:10-12; 27:2-7; Ezekiel 4:9-17).¹⁴

¹¹ Craig A. Evans, "Jesus' Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?" *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51:2 (1989), pp. 237-270.

¹² E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 61.

¹³ Craig A. Evans, "Jesus' Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?" *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51:2 (1989), pp. 237-270.

¹⁴ E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 70.

A question that would seem important in understanding the actions of Jesus in the Temple, that would help us to understand it, is whether there is reason to believe that there might be an expectation that His actions were a threat to destroy the Temple? There are a number of Old Testament passages that are critical of the cultic activity such as 1 Samuel 15:22,¹⁵ Isaiah 1:11,¹⁶ 28:7,¹⁷ Micah 3:9-12,¹⁸ Hosea 4:4-6,¹⁹ 6:6²⁰, Jeremiah 7 especially verse 11.²¹ Several commentators have concluded that this verse, as well as other prophetic passages, stand behind the action of Jesus in the Temple. In the Targum for Jeremiah 7:11 for the

¹⁵ Then Samuel replied, "Does the LORD want entirely burned offerings and sacrifices as much as obedience to the LORD? Listen to this: obeying is better than sacrificing, paying attention is better than fat from rams, CEB.

¹⁶ What should I think about all your sacrifices? says the LORD. I'm fed up with entirely burned offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts. I don't want the blood of bulls, lambs, and goats. CEB .

¹⁷ What should I think about all your sacrifices? says the LORD. I'm fed up with entirely burned offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts. I don't want the blood of bulls, lambs, and goats. CEB.

¹⁸ Hear this, leaders of the house of Jacob, rulers of the house of Israel, you who reject justice and make crooked all that is straight, ¹⁰ who build Zion with bloodshed and Jerusalem with injustice! ¹¹ Her officials give justice for a bribe, and her priests teach for hire. Her prophets offer divination for silver, yet they rely on the LORD, saying, "Isn't the LORD in our midst? Evil won't come upon us!" ¹² Therefore, because of you, Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become piles of rubble, and the temple mount will become an overgrown mound. CEB.

¹⁹ Yet let no one protest, and let no one complain. Listen, priest, I am angry with your people. ⁵ You will stumble by day; and at nighttime so will your prophet, and I will destroy your mother. ⁶ My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. Since you have rejected knowledge, so I will reject you from serving me as a priest. Since you have forgotten the Instruction of your God, so also I will forget your children. CEB.

²⁰ I desire faithful love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God instead of entirely burned offerings. CEB.

²¹ Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the LORD. NRSV.

Hebrew “den of robbers” the Aramaic translates this literally as “a synagogue of the wicked,” which Hayward translates as “assembly of wicked men.”²² In Lamentations 4:13²³ there is an indication of why God allowed destruction to come to the Jerusalem and the first Temple. The evidence of the corruption of the nation and especially her religious leaders continues (Zephaniah 3:1-8²⁴). Zechariah 14:20-21²⁵ mention specifically “traders” being in the “house of the Lord of hosts.” At Malachi 3:1 there is an announcement that “the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.” This verse is significant as it follows a description of corruption in the Temple (cf. Malachi 1:6-14) indicating that it would be necessary for the Lord to come to

²² Robert Hayward, trans., *The Targum of Jeremiah*, in the Aramaic Bible, Volume 12 (Collegeville MI: The Liturgical Press, 1987), p. 70-71. Esp. Note 4.

²³ **It was because of her prophets' sins, her priests' iniquities, those who shed righteous blood in the middle of the city.** CEB.

²⁴ **3:1 Doom, obstinate one, the defiled one, the violent city. ² She listened to no voice; she accepted no discipline. She didn't trust in the LORD, nor did she draw near to her God. ³ The princes in her midst are roaring lions. Her judges are wolves of the evening; they leave nothing for the morning. ⁴ Her prophets are reckless, men of treachery. Her priests pollute that which is holy; they do violence to the Instruction. ⁵ The LORD is righteous in her midst. He does nothing unjust. Morning by morning he renders justice, but the unrighteous one knows no shame. ⁶ I will cut off nations; their towers will be destroyed; I will devastate their streets. No one will pass through. Their cities will be laid waste. There will be no person, no inhabitant left. ⁷ I said, "Surely, she will fear me; she will take instruction so that her habitation won't be cut off because of everything I did to her." However, they rose early to corrupt their deeds. ⁸ Therefore, wait for me, says the LORD, wait for the day when I rise up as a witness, when I decide to gather nations, to collect kingdoms, to pour out my indignation upon them, all the heat of my anger. In the fire of my jealousy, all the earth will be devoured.** CEB.

²⁵ **On that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, "Holy to the LORD." And the cooking pots in the house of the LORD shall be as holy as the bowls in front of the altar; ²¹ and every cooking pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the LORD of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and use them to boil the flesh of the sacrifice. And there shall no longer be traders in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day.** NRSV.

His Temple in order to purify it and in order to insure that acceptable sacrifices could be offered there (cf. 3:2-4).²⁶

There are also a number of passage that are found in Jewish writings outside the Old Testament such as *Jubilees*,²⁷ the *Testament of Levi 14:1-6*²⁸ (2nd Century B.C.), and 1 Enoch 89:73.²⁹ The remainder of the chapter in 1 Enoch and the one after that there is the recounting of the failures of the “shepherds” (the priests) whose sheep (the Israelites) are ravaged by beasts (Gentile nations). Finally, the sheep are delivered by the Lord and His Messiah, the Gentile nations are routed, and the wicked shepherds are judged. In the

²⁶ Craig A. Evans, “Jesus’ Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51:2 (1989), pp. 237-270.

²⁷ *Jubilees* 3:21 ²¹ And those who escape will not be turned back from their evils to the way of righteousness because they will lift themselves up for deceit and wealth so that one shall take everything of his neighbor; and they will pronounce the great name but not in truth or righteousness. And they will pollute the holy of holies with their pollution and with the corruption of their contamination. Charlesworth, Vol. 1.

²⁸ “And now, my children, I know from the writings of Enoch that in the end-time you will act impiously against the Lord, setting your hands to every evil deed; because of you, your brothers will be humiliated and among all the nations you shall become the occasion for scorn. ² For your father, Israel, is pure with respect to all the **impieties of the chief priests**, [who laid their hands on the Savior of the world,] ³ as heaven is pure above the earth; and you should be the lights of Israel as the sun and the moon. ⁴ For what will all the nations do if you become darkened with impiety? You will bring down a curse on our nation, because you want to destroy the light of the Law which was granted to you for the enlightenment of every man, teaching commandments which are opposed to God’s just ordinances. ⁵ **You plunder the Lord’s offerings**; from his share you steal choice parts, contemptuously eating them with whores. ⁶ *You teach the Lord’s commands out of greed for gain; married women you profane; you have intercourse with whores and adulteresses. You take gentile women for your wives and your sexual relations will become like Sodom and Gomorrah. Charlesworth, Vol. 1.

²⁹ They again began to build as before; and they raised up that tower which is called the high tower. But they started to place a table before the tower, with all the food which is upon it being polluted and impure. They again began to build as before; and they raised up that tower which is called the high tower. But they started to place a table before the tower, with all the food which is upon it being polluted and impure. Charlesworth, Vol. 1.

Psalms of Solomon, which dates from the first century B.C. there are a number of verses indicating the expectation that the Messiah will purge Jerusalem.³⁰ It certainly is the case that for a Palestinian Jew living in the day of Jesus there might reasonably be the expectation that the Messiah might purge the City of Jerusalem of corrupt officials, which would certainly include priests. This would be done as part of an act of “cleansing” Israel for the Messianic kingdom. Special attention should perhaps be taken of *Psalms of Solomon* 8:11-13, which likely describes “priestly” activity at the time of Pompey’s capture of Jerusalem and the temple: *They would plunder the sanctuary of God, as though there was no heir who redeems. ¹² They would trample the altar of the Lord because of all kinds of uncleanness, and with menstrual blood they defiled the sacrifices as if they were profane meat. ¹³ They left no sin, which they did not do more than the nations.*³¹

³⁰ *Psalms of Solomon* 17:26-27a And he shall gather a holy people whom he shall lead in righteousness, and he shall judge the tribes of the people that has been sanctified by the Lord, his God. ²⁷ And **he shall not allow injustice to lodge in their midst any longer**, nor shall there dwell with them any person who knows evil; 17:30b and he shall purify Jerusalem in holiness as it was at the beginning; 17:32 And he shall be a righteous king, taught by God, over them, and **there shall be no injustice in his days in their midst**, for all shall be holy, and their king the anointed of the Lord. 17:36 And he himself shall be pure from sin so that he may rule a great people, that **he may rebuke rulers and remove sinners** by the strength of his word. 17:42 This is the majesty of the king of Israel, which God knew, to raise him up over the house of Israel **to discipline it**. 18:5 May God **cleanse Israel** for the day of pity with blessing, for the day of election when he brings up **his anointed one**. 18:6-7 Happy are those who shall live in those days, to see the good things of the Lord, which he will perform for the coming generation. ⁷ Under the rod of discipline of the Lord’s anointed in fear of his God, in wisdom of spirit and of righteousness and strength. NET Septuagint.

³¹ NET Septuagint. Craig A. Evans, “Jesus’ Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51:2 (1989), pp. 237-270.

In the *Testament of Moses* (early first century A.D.) there is a scathing criticism of the Jerusalem

priesthood:

Consequently the word was fulfilled that they will avoid justice and approach iniquity; and they will pollute the house of their worship with the customs of the nations; and they will play the harlot after foreign gods. ⁴ For they will not follow the truth of God, but certain of them will pollute the high altar by [four to six letters are lost] the offerings which they place before the Lord. They are not (truly) priests (at all), but slaves, yea sons of slaves. ⁵ *For those who are the leaders, their teachers, in those times will become admirers of avaricious persons, accepting (polluted) offerings, and they will sell justice by accepting bribes. ⁶ Therefore, their city and the full extent of their dwelling places will be filled with crimes and iniquities. For they will have in their midst judges who will act with impiety toward the Lord and will judge just as they please. **6:1** "Then powerful kings will rise over them, and they will be called priests of the Most High God. They will perform great impiety in the Holy of Holies.

These words were directed toward the Hasmonean priests, though this work was penned around A.D. 30, the author may well have been critical of the religious establishment of his time as well making some form of connection to the priesthood current in the time of Jesus. Some argue that this text was composed at Qumran, and if this is the case it is certain that they would have been critical of the religious establishment in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus, before that time and indeed after that time.³²

³² Craig A. Evans, "Jesus' Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?" *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51:2 (1989), pp. 237-270.

The point of all this material is not whether or not the various Jewish Scriptures, or other Jewish writings demonstrate that the Messiah, or anyone else was expected to cleanse the Temple, much less destroy it, but only that such an action could have been understood without much difficulty by the people to be the actions of a messianic claimant.³³ Fitzmyer wrote, “In the light of such OT prophetic passages, Jesus’ act could readily be understood as the promised purification of the Temple.”³⁴ It certainly seems to me that there is more than ample evidence to indicate that there were major concerns over corruption and injustice associated with the Temple and with the priesthood. Certainly it is the case that God challenged the people to sacrifice, authorized the sacrifices, and authorized the priesthood, but there is every indication that corruption, greed and pursuit of power had brought all of these activities into question not only in the period of the First Temple (prior to 586 B.C.) but after the return of the exiles, in the Maccabean period (160s B.C.) and into the time of Jesus and even after the destruction of the Temple (70 A.D).

For Sanders, or anyone else to argue that there is no evidence outside of Mark 11:17 of corruption of the priesthood in Gospels ignores not only the considerable evidence to be found in the Gospels, the wider New Testament, the Old Testament, Jewish writings, Qumran writings, the writings of Josephus, but also the Rabbinic Writings

³³ Craig A. Evans, “Jesus’ Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51:2 (1989), pp. 237-270.

³⁴ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (X-XXIV)*, in the Anchor Bible, Vol. 28A (Garden City NY, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1983), p. 1266.

themselves (the Rabbis claim to be descended from the Pharisees). Jeremias has collected a considerable array of evidence that surely demonstrates the perception that there was rampant corruption in the priesthood that was often associated with the collection of great wealth and power by the priests. One of the pieces of evidence quoted is Zechariah 14:21 **and every cooking pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the LORD of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and use them to boil the flesh of the sacrifice. And there shall no longer be traders in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day.**³⁵ He lists numerous other citations from Jewish writings that speak of money-changers in the Temple, shops on the aqueduct, shops in which the Sanhedrin was housed: where the Sanhedrin was housed for more than 40 years before the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. There are rabbinic traditions which indicate that cattle were sold in the Temple area, one writer even mentions three thousand small livestock being brought to the Temple court. The high priest Ananias was called “the great procurer of money” by Josephus (Antiquities 20.205-207³⁶).³⁷

³⁵ NRSVS.

³⁶ “But Ananias had servants who were utter rascals and who, **combining operations with the most reckless men, would go to the threshing floors and take by force the tithes of the priests; nor did they refrain from beating those who refused to give.** The high priests were guilty of the same practices as his slaves, and no one could stop them. So it happened at that time that those of the priests who in olden days were maintained by the tithes now starved to death.” Josephus, trans. by Louis H. Feldman, *Jewish Antiquities*, in the Loeb Classical Library, Vol. 456 (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 111.

³⁷ Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia PA: Fortress, Press, 1975) pp. 49, 96-99, 194-198.

In 2 Maccabees 4:7-10,³⁸ 24,³⁹ there is the account of the high-priestly office being sold and items being stolen from the Temple (2 Maccabees 4:32⁴⁰). Nepotism was rampant in the Temple Hierarchy with the High Priesthood being obtained through bribery and then all of the other high offices of the Temple being given to the family of the high priest.⁴¹ The Temple was known in antiquity to be filled with vast wealth as recounted by Josephus in an account of someone who sought to rob the Temple: "...and reported to him that the treasury in Hierosolyma was full of untold sums of money, so that the amount of the funds could not be reckoned, and that they did not belong to the account of the sacrifices, but that it was possible for them to fall under the control of the king."⁴² Josephus also writes about the great wealth of the Temple in a number of places.⁴³ In the *Tosefta* there is the indication that the Jews were sent into exile,

³⁸ When Seleucus died and Antiochus, who was called Epiphanes, succeeded to the kingdom, Jason the brother of Onias obtained the high priesthood by corruption, ⁸ promising the king at an interview three hundred sixty talents of silver and from another source of revenue eighty talents. ⁹ In addition to this he promised to pay one hundred fifty more, if permission were given to establish by his authority a gymnasium and a body of youth for it and to draw up the list of the 'Antiochenes' amongst those in Hierosolyma. ¹⁰ When the king assented and he came to office, he at once shifted his compatriots over to the Greek way of life. NETS.

³⁹ ²⁴ But he, when presented to the king, extolled him with an air of authority and secured the high priesthood for himself, outbidding Jason by three hundred talents of silver. NETS.

⁴⁰ But Menelaus, thinking he had obtained a suitable opportunity, stole some of the gold vessels of the temple and gave them to Andronicus; other vessels, as it happened, he had sold to Tyre and the neighboring cities. NETS.

⁴¹ Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, p. 99, 194-198.

⁴² 2 Maccabees 3:6. NETS.

⁴³ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 14.7.1; 17.10.2; 2.14.6.

“Because they love money and hate one another.”⁴⁴ “In a reference to the priesthood of the first century, *m. Ker. 1:7K* reads, “A pair of birds in Jerusalem went up in price to a golden *denar*.”⁴⁵ This was a price that R. Simeon ben Gamaliel (ca. 10-80 A.D.) believed was twenty-five times the proper charge! There are also indications from the writings of the Qumran community of their belief in corruption of the priesthood in Jerusalem.⁴⁶

Josephus records that the attitude of the general public toward the high priestly families was not positive even though there is not direct evidence of this there are a number of indications. He recounts that when the rebel forces gained control of Jerusalem, they burned the house of Ananias the High Priest.⁴⁷ Menahem the zealot entered Jerusalem and his followers killed the High Priest.⁴⁸ This does not prove that the High Priest was corrupt, but it would certainly seem to indicate the hatred that was felt for him by at least a segment of the Jewish populace. Even after the death of Jesus the son of Annas plotted the death of James the brother of Jesus and a few others during the interim period

⁴⁴ 13:22B-D. Jacob Neusner, trans., *Tosefta*, (Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishing, 2002), pp. 5, 162.

⁴⁵ Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 838.

⁴⁶ Craig A. Evans, “Jesus’ Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51:2 (1989), pp. 237-270.

⁴⁷ Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 2.17.6.

⁴⁸ Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 2.17.9.

following the death of the Roman governor Festus, but before the arrival of Albinus, his replacement.⁴⁹ Again this perhaps does not provide absolute proof of corruption, but it certainly does suggest a certain ruthlessness.⁵⁰ In my view plotting the murder would indicate that such people would be willing to do whatever it takes to get their way, and retain their power. If that is not corruption, then I am not sure what is? As we look at all the recent church scandals, and cover ups in our modern era surely we can see that having a priesthood that is hereditary in nature leaves open even greater potential for corruption.

For Sanders, or for any other person, to remind us that the Temple, or indeed any religious institution is sanctioned by God and that there are certain things necessary for it to fulfill its functions and then using that as an excuse to not believe in corruption, greed, plotting of murder, and nepotism is inexcusable. The calling of God for His people was for them to be above reproach, to be like He is, just, righteous, merciful, and loving. The accusations that we find in the Old Testament, in Jewish writings, in Rabbinic Texts, in the Qumran texts, in Josephus and in the Apocryphal writings all provide evidence that there were quite consistently accusations of corruption brought against not only the Temple administration as a whole, but specifically against the priesthood. All of this seems to more than adequately

⁴⁹ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 20.9.1.

⁵⁰ Craig A. Evans, "Jesus' Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?" *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51:2 (1989), pp. 237-270.

prove that the assessment that we find in the Gospels is quite warranted. Attacks against the traditional understandings of Scripture have at times proven to be helpful and enlightening, but this one by Sanders appears to be totally unwarranted. It appears that he has an agenda that has clouded his ability to see clearly the evidence and to appreciate that eye witnesses are, as a rule, far more trustworthy than those that are trying to reconstruct an event two thousand years later using reason, limited literary, and archaeological sources and speculation.

The testimony, particularly of the Gospel writers, time and time again has been challenged by those who seek the historical Jesus. Surely if we are going to claim to use reason and scientific methodology a part of that is to give proper credence to the evidence presented by eyewitness accounts of the events, and the ancient sources. This seems far more reasonable, logical and acceptable than relying upon speculation of what should have been, what could have been, and what the modern mind might envision as an artificial construct created in the mind of how it was really. Surely that is what myth is. Perhaps we would be better served pursuing the meaning and content that the author intended rather than trying to psychoanalyze their motives. It is virtually impossible to do this with a person sitting in the room with an expert, how much harder for one separated by two thousand years and perhaps even more distance in culture, and world view?

What then are we to take away from all of the evidence that we have examined? To me it seems clear that Jesus opposed the corruption that had become traditional and acceptable in the Temple itself, corruption that was being sanctioned and even perhaps controlled by the priests and their minions. The Temple had become a place of earthly power rather than a place that focused upon meeting with God and petitioning Him for what is needed, rather than getting what was wanted. This is a critical point: so often what we want is not what we need and not what advances the Kingdom of God, strengthens our faith, or challenges us to truly seek relationship with our creator. Sometimes we get so caught up in the “weeds” that we lose our way and the “Cleansing of the Temple” accounts challenge us to see what God sees as important. I have heard these verses used for prohibiting the sale of anything in the church, for forbidding kitchens, bathrooms and other things from coming into the church. This to me means that in some way we are equating the church with the Temple first of all, which is not the portrayal presented by the New Testament at all. Secondly, As we explore the portrayal of the Temple and sacrifice in the New Testament, I believe it aligns very much with the intent God always had in implementing the sacrificial system and Temple worship in the first place.

Paul speaks about the people of the assembly being the Temple of God where the Spirit of God dwells. **Don't you know that you are God's temple and God's Spirit lives in you?**⁵¹ Paul even writes about the construction of this new

⁵¹ 1 Corinthians 3:16, CEB.

Temple in Ephesians 2:19-22: ¹⁹ **So now you are no longer strangers and aliens. Rather, you are fellow citizens with God's people, and you belong to God's household.** ²⁰ **As God's household, you are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.** ²¹ **The whole building is joined together in him, and it grows up into a temple that is dedicated to the Lord.** ²² **Christ is building you into a place where God lives through the Spirit.**⁵² In John's Gospel, in the context immediately following his account of Jesus cleansing the temple, the Jewish leaders asked Jesus by what authority He did these things and they asked for a miraculous sign and His answer was: **Jesus answered, "Destroy this temple and in three days I'll raise it up."** 2:20 **The Jewish leaders replied, "It took forty-six years to build this temple, and you will raise it up in three days?"** ²¹ **But the temple Jesus was talking about was his body.** ²² **After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered what he had said, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.**⁵³ As we join with the body of Christ we become a part of that Temple, that has been cleansed in the "blood of the Lamb."

So as we interpret the accounts of the "Cleansing of the Temple" what message are we to take away? First, Jesus seeks to let us know that it is not in the nature of God, or His people to be corrupt; God is a God of justice. Secondly, God

⁵² CEB.

⁵³ John 2:19-22, CEB.

does not seek outward obedience at the cost of inward faithlessness. God seeks our hearts, our true loyalty, our true trust in Him. Thirdly, I do think Jesus predicts not only the destruction of the Temple by His actions in the Temple, the Old Testament prophecies predicting what God would do if the people did not turn to Him are valid and in full force in the time of the Second Temple. I also believe they are valid and in force today if His people do not devote themselves to God in the ways that God has called His people to be devoted to Him, He will bring His judgment. We might fool each other, but God knows all the secrets that we seek to hide and ultimately these will all be revealed. Peter wrote about it in these terms: **You yourselves are being built like living stones into a spiritual temple. You are being made into a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.** ⁶ **Thus it is written in scripture, *Look! I am laying a cornerstone in Zion, chosen, valuable. The person who believes in him will never be shamed.***⁵⁴

We are called to be the genuine people of God, a living Temple where God dwells, and we are called to offer ourselves as “living sacrifices” this is our priestly service to God. At Romans 12:1-2 Paul wrote - **So, brothers and sisters, because of God’s mercies, I encourage you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God. This is your appropriate priestly service.** ² **Don’t be conformed to the patterns of this world,**

⁵⁴ 1 Peter 2:5-6, CEB.

but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God's will is—what is good and pleasing and mature.⁵⁵ I believe that the early Church understood the message of Jesus and they lived that message daily in their lives walking in discipleship to their Lord, Jesus Christ. They sought to be like Him, talk like Him, sacrifice like Him, love like Him. We are challenged to the same today.

⁵⁵ CEB.

Synopsis

The Gospel writers indicate that Jesus chased out those trading in the Temple, turning over tables and driving out their animals. Sanders wants us to disregard the indications that the Gospel writers, especially Mark gives, that these actions were taken due to corruption associated with the Temple. He goes so far as to suggest that Jesus' actions were an embarrassment to the Gospel writers. This type of speculative reasoning became all the rage in the 20th and 21st centuries, attempting to push aside the traditional view that Jesus was indeed condemning corruption and prophesying the end of the Temple and the sacrificial system.

After the presentation of a considerable amount of material, to demonstrate that there was in fact the perception of corruption associated with the Tabernacle, and the First and Second Temple, it seems untenable that anyone would question the assessment that is found in the Gospels not only that Jesus found the system as corrupt, but also that He foretold its destruction. The wording of "overturning the tables" and "ruling" would most likely have been interpreted in this manner by a First Century audience. There seems to be no basis for any other view besides the traditional view that this was the message that Jesus intended to



deliver by His actions and the message that was actually understood by the original audience and especially by the Apostles and Gospel writers themselves.

This being the case, the message for us today is to understand that though we have no physical Temple today we often seek to envision our church buildings in terms of just such a sacred space and there is immense potential for corruption still among people claiming to follow Jesus and seeking to serve God. This can easily be seen in the many church scandals that regularly make the news today. We are challenged today, as were the ancients to be people devoted to God, to trust Him, to serve Him, and to exhibit His nature to all of creation as His image-bearers. We are to be a living Temple, a Royal Priesthood, following in the footsteps of the our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We must seek to insure no corruption of injustice is to be in the midst of the people of God, that make up this living Temple. This is the calling of each one of us individually, and of all of us a corporate community.

Questions

1. When you think of a Temple what are some of the images that come to your mind?
2. How would you define what the word “corruption” means?
3. How would you define what it means to be a “bandit?”
4. What are some things that you think people do today that enrages God in the way that Jesus was enraged in Cleansing the Temple?
5. What is the purpose of a “sacrifice”?
6. Why do you think sacrifices are helpful to God’s people in building faith?
7. Why do you think people today confuse the Temple with the Church Building?
8. What are some ways that we can encourage each other to become the living Temple, where the Spirit of God dwells today?
9. How can we avoid allowing corruption to creep into our churches today?
10. Why do you think we are so distrustful of people that have power in our world today?
11. What are some ways that we can teach our children what it means to be the Temple of God?
12. What are some ways that we can avoid being confused by the many different perspectives that are offered by those that are biblical scholars?

13. What are some ways that we can “transform” and “renew” our minds in order to become the disciples of Jesus that we are called to be?

14. How important is church attendance in enabling us to become better disciples of Jesus? Why do you think this?

15. What are some ways that we can encourage each other more effectively to be better disciples of Jesus?

To Take Home

What is Important to know?

It is important to know that God is righteous and just, that His Son Jesus is righteous and just and He calls His disciples to be righteous and just. In the account of the “Cleansing of the Temple” we have explored some of the evidence that indicates the corruption that existed in the Temple system and among the priesthood. What are some ways that we today can avoid our churches being places that allow corruption?

Where is God in these words?

God is in these words calling His people to recognize what true worship is, and what it is not. It is often the case that we as humans have the tendency to focus on the mechanics of worship and forget that the more important part is our motivation and the state of our heart. We can fool others and even ourselves into believing that God is pleased with us, when in fact that is not true. What are some ways that you regularly challenge your own motives for the way you live your life for God?

What does any of this mean for how I live my life?

These verses from Scripture challenge us to look deeper than the surface appearances to that which underlies these appearances. The Temple in Jerusalem was indeed a beautiful and magnificent place, with a tremendous amount of activity and the appearance of true devotion to God, but appearances can be deceiving. Asking why something is being done for God is crucial. If we are serving God for what we can get, as in good health, wealth, and power then we are perhaps not pure and sincere in serving God. God calls His people to be more than this. How does your life reflect your genuine faith and trust in God?

What is the word of God calling us to do?

The word of God is calling us to be people that are devoted to Him in ways that run deeper than mercenary motivations, especially material ones. God calls us to trust Him, to love Him, to love others and He defines love in ways that challenge us to sacrifice our lives, our time, our resources, our money, for the sake of others. When we do this we reflect the nature, the image of God, who He is. The word of God, from the very first verses of the Bible calls us to recognize our creator and to seek to honor Him by projecting His image into the world. How do you see yourself as God’s image-bearer in the world?