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Jesus and the Money Changers (John 2:13-16)

by James F. McGrath

Some people call it the “temple tantrum.” Others refer to it as the “cleansing of the temple.” Anyone who knows anything about Jesus, whether from books, movies, or other sources, seems to know at least this one incident, in which Jesus turns over tables full of coins and chases away animals. Most historians agree that an actual occurrence lies behind this story in the Gospels. But beyond that, there is a lot of disagreement. When did the event occur? And what motivated Jesus to drive money changers and sellers of animals out of the temple courts?

When did Jesus' temple action occur?

The Gospel of John places the story of Jesus' action in the temple toward the beginning of Jesus' public activity, while the other Gospels place it toward the end. This might seem like a simple case of three against one, and thus easily settled. In actuality, since Matthew and Luke follow Mark's structure, it is a case of Mark versus John. And since Mark and the other Synoptic Gospels only narrate one visit of Jesus to Jerusalem, they could not have placed the event earlier without changing that framework. Nevertheless, most historians follow Mark's placement, with the Romans taking an interest in Jesus as a result, setting in motion the events that lead to his arrest and crucifixion. Passover, with its focus on liberation from foreign oppression, had been the occasion of disturbances in the past. So even a small-scale symbolic action in the temple, as this must have been, would have attracted their attention.

What was the significance of the temple action?

Did Jesus lose his cool, as the phrase *temple tantrum* might suggest? Both the Gospel of John and the Gospel of Mark depict not a sudden rash outburst but something carefully planned. In Mark 11:11-19, Jesus visits the temple but waits until the next day to do anything. In John's version, Jesus actually takes the time to make a whip from cords (John 2:15).

If calling it a temple tantrum gives the wrong impression, does “the cleansing of the temple” get closer to the meaning of the incident? If the selling of animals occurred anywhere within the temple precincts, it would have been in the outer court called the Court of the Gentiles. Animals leave behind messy droppings, and dung was considered to defile sacred space. But some may have thought that the presence of Gentiles, viewed as inherently unclean, was no more and no less defiling than the presence of animal dung. Jesus, on the other hand, is depicted as touching and dining with the ritually unclean, and he may therefore have objected both to the implied slight toward non-Jews and to the disrespect for their space of worship that was involved in holding commercial activities in the Court of the Gentiles. The words attributed to Jesus in Mark 11 focus on the status of the temple, according to the prediction of Isa 56:7, as a “house of prayer for all peoples,” while the version in the Gospel of John focuses on the temple turning into a marketplace, possibly alluding to Zech 14:21. These can be viewed as two sides of the same coin, rather than as completely distinct concerns, for Jesus.

We should not think that the presence of noisy animals and commerce bothered Jesus just because they spoiled the worshipful atmosphere. An ancient temple was not supposed to be like a quiet cathedral. It was loud and bustling. The sale of animals was essential for the temple's main function as a place for the offering of animal sacrifices. Bringing an animal from one's home risked something happening to it on the way, and so



The temple incident depicted in the canonical Gospels is one of the more certain details from the life of Jesus, but scholars debate what the action signified.

Did you know...?

- While a few have disputed that the event occurred, many historians and scholars consider this one of the more certain details about the life of Jesus.
- The temple action occurs at the start of John's Gospel and thus at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry while the other Gospels place it toward the end of their narratives.
- Among the canonical Gospels, only John places the saying about the temple being destroyed and rebuilt on the lips of Jesus, and John alone places the saying in the context of Jesus' temple action.
- Ancient temples were primarily places for animal sacrifice, but they often served as banks and repositories for debts as well.


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many chose to sell their own animal, bring the money with them, and then purchase a replacement in Jerusalem. The money changers were there to **convert** various currencies into one standard coinage, the Tyrian shekel, that was used for the payment of the annual temple tax. Both the selling of animals for sacrifices and the payment of the temple tax were activities required by Jewish law and central to the temple's functions.

Because Jesus drove out people and animals that were essential, many scholars view his action not as a cleansing of the temple but as a symbolic act predicting its destruction. This puts Jesus in line with the actions of Israel's earlier prophets and agrees with the words that [John 2:19](#) has Jesus utter on this occasion: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Jesus seems to have envisaged that the temple would be removed to make room for whatever more perfect state of affairs would replace it in the kingdom of God.

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