

A Storytelling Commentary on John 2:13-22

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It is important to recognize that this story is not addressed to audiences that regard Jews as somebody other than themselves. The fact that the setting is described as the Passover of the Jews, and Jesus is speaking to the Jews and the Jews to him, is often heard by Christian audiences as meaning that John is describing "the Jews" as somebody other than his audience. But that is not the case. This is a normal way of address in Jewish storytelling. There are many instances in which there are stories about "the Jews" told by Jewish storytellers. In this instance, the probability that is indicated by an analysis of the whole gospel is that the audience is addressed, throughout the gospel, as Jews. So, for Christians to hear this story appropriately, it is important for them to identify themselves as Jews, being addressed by Jesus as Jews.

This is further indicated by the story and what happens. That is, the Jews do not respond to Jesus' cleansing of the Temple with shock or opposition; rather, what comes after this story is the report that many Jews believed in him because of his prophetic action. Jesus' action is the action of a prophet—of one who believes in God and is willing to express his opposition to the things that defile the things of God.

In this instance, the priests have allowed the Temple to become a primary marketplace where things were bought and sold. There were those in the first century who argued that this was necessary. The Temple was an international center. People came from all over the world and they couldn't bring cattle or doves or sheep across the travel routes of the ancient world. They had to buy them in Jerusalem. There were also many currencies, so the Temple was an international currency center. It was required, in order to make any economic sense, that the money be changed to the money that was used in the Temple. So there were moneychangers who did that business. What Jesus would have argued is that all of that can, but outside the Temple rather than inside.

This is a conflict story in which Jesus opposes the decision of the priests, who allow this to happen. It is conflict, of which there are many in the history of Israel, between the prophets and the priests. The radicality of this action is Jesus' prophetic protest against this practice. It is also important to realize that his action is non-violent. Nobody got hurt. It is a non-violent demonstration. Jesus overturns the tables of the moneychangers and drives them out of the Temple, but of course they just came right back. Jesus doesn't attack anyone. His action is a prophetic sign.

Jesus' words are angry but they are addressed to specific people: to those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my father's house a marketplace!" It is not a big prophetic denunciation. It is addressed rather to those who are doing this abuse to the sanctity of the Temple. The response of the Jews is, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" That is, what justification do you have? What sign

can you show us that this is a legitimate prophetic demonstration? Jesus' answer is, "If you destroy this Temple, in three days I will raise it up." They do not understand that he is talking about his body, and so this is another form of passion prophecy. It's a prophecy of his death. Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised his disciples remembered what he had said and they believed him because it was a prophecy of what was ahead.

The tone of Jesus' anger is fully appropriate in relation to his prophesying against this practice, but then is also willing to take the consequence, that is, that he would be killed. This story is, then, a prophecy of his passion and resurrection. It is a sign of Jesus' authority as the Son of Man and as the Messiah.