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The Cleansing of the Temple in the Fourth Gospel as a call to action for social justice

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THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL AS A CALL TO
ACTION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

By

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
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TO ACTION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

SUBMITTED TO DR. SCOTT SHAUF
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
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BY
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Chapter 1

Prolegomena

It is readily apparent that the Gospel of John takes a radically different approach to the importance of Jesus' ministry than the Synoptic Gospels. Instead of a chronological summary of the birth, life, and death of Jesus, John focuses on presenting Jesus as not just the Son of God, but God incarnate. To be sure, there are elements of John that are shared among the Synoptics, but the differences are greater than the similarities. As a theological text, John purposes to show that by dwelling among his creation, God shows sinful humanity how to live in a fallen world as God had originally intended prior to the advent of sin. Not only should believers recognize and respect the presence of God, they should also recognize how all of humanity is created in God's image and should be treated and valued equally based solely on their acceptance and uniqueness as beings created by God instead of their rankings within society based on standards designed by fallen humanity.

At first glance, it may appear that John was not a promoter of social justice within his gospel as there are no explicit references made within the text. If the text is read carefully, though, with a full understanding of the social conditions at the time, as well as the emphasis that John places on love for one another, the author's emphasis upon social justice comes into clear focus beginning with the Temple incident. John uses this story as the second of two contrasting parts. The first of these stories is the wedding at Cana, which provides a sign of abundance and grace. The second is reminiscent of the acts of

Israel's prophets who question the authority of the religious leaders.¹ Having left the wedding at Cana, Jesus is no longer surrounded by his family and friends. Instead, he is now catapulted into the public arena of Jerusalem and the Temple.² As these two stories contrast, they identify the two primary areas of Jesus' ministry and personality. Not only is he able to provide for those in need, he is also able to stand up to the authorities and challenge the status quo.

The Synoptic Gospels present Jesus as being mindful of the issue of social justice with many examples, which leads readers to the erroneous assumption that John is simply not concerned with such matters. For this reason, John's Gospel is often overlooked as a source for understanding this complex issue. On the contrary, although not explicitly stated, John places the issue front-and-center at the beginning of his Gospel, by linking it directly to the cleansing of the Temple. Much has already been said about the placement of this event at the beginning of Jesus' ministry by John as opposed to the end of his ministry by the Synoptics, but it must not be dismissed. While this thesis is not focusing directly on this element of debate, it will rely heavily on John's placement of the event as the vehicle for promoting social justice. This thesis will instead argue that by placing the Temple event at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, John was attempting to shed light on the issue of social *in*justice because the historical and social issues that had been present in Jesus' day were still relevant to the situation of the Johannine community.

¹ Gail R. O'Day and Susan E. Hulen, *John* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 37.

² Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, Neil M. Alexander, ed., vol. 9, *Luke, John* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 541.

As they are currently arranged as books within the canon of the New Testament, the Synoptic Gospels have already presented the subject of social injustice and oppression. Likewise, the Old Testament prophets had already proclaimed that salvation included “deliverance from oppression and injustice.”³ Jesus’ initial Sermon on the Mount had been addressed to the poor and the marginalized, promising blessings upon the poor, the meek, those who are persecuted, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Despite being the latest of the four Gospels and possibly having access to the Synoptic Gospels or their antecedent traditions as potential sources, there appear to be no explicit references in John’s Gospel denouncing social abuses. Surely this was not an oversight on the part of John, especially since it was a topic that had been addressed by so many of the former prophets as well as the writers of the Synoptic Gospels; bearing that in mind, although chronologically the Synoptics were not written in the order in which they are currently presented, they were already available as sources. On the contrary, John incorporates the issue of social injustice throughout his Gospel, revealing his thoughts on the issue in his account of the signs of Jesus and in the command in 13:34 stating that “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another” (NRSV).

Scholarly Approaches to the Temple Cleansing of the Fourth Gospel

When considering John 2:13-22, many scholars tend to focus on the symbolism of Jesus’ reply to the Jews’ request for a sign, “Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” In his commentary of John 2:13-22, Charles Talbert focuses on the

³ Glen H. Stassen, and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2003), 28.

overturning of the money-changer tables as representing rejection of the daily whole offering.⁴ V. Wayne Barton emphasizes that Jesus was rejecting the legal system and implicitly offering something better. Furthermore, “the evils of the animal sellers and money changers in the Temple were an abuse and not therefore representative of the best in the Jewish legal system.”⁵ While dwelling upon the actions of Jesus within the Temple longer than these other commentators, Thomas L. Brodie places focus on Jesus’ critique of the world of abusive commerce.⁶ Although these are all legitimate issues that need to be addressed and dealt with, each of the commentators fails to address the systemic abuse that prevented the poor and the Gentiles from being able to worship at such an important time as the Passover. In doing so, the significance of vv. 14-16, particularly the symbolism of overturning the money-changer’s tables and telling those who were selling doves to “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!” (NRSV) become overshadowed. The primary element within this passage is revealed, but not elaborated on, by F. F. Bruce, who states that “if the court of the Gentiles were taken up for trading it could not be used for worship.”⁷ The worship space taken up for trading was taken away from those who could not complain about being marginalized: the poor and the Gentiles who, although allowed to worship within the Temple, were still considered outsiders.

⁴ Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 96.

⁵ V. Wayne Barton, *The Gospel of John: A Study Manual* (Ann Arbor, MI: Baker Book House, 1960), 28.

⁶ Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel According to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 180.

⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel and Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 75.

Embedded within the three verses of 14-16, however, is a wealth of insight into the extent to which social injustice had become the norm. To be sure, the emphasis of Jesus' replacement of the Temple is extremely important, but it should not be allowed to eclipse the importance of other elements within the Temple cleansing event. This element of social injustice and Jesus' upsetting of the status quo may in fact be the entire purpose behind John's placement of the Temple cleansing at the beginning of his Gospel. Only the rich could afford cattle or even sheep to provide as sacrifices. Thus, the doves were reserved for the poor per the command in Lev. 5:7. Gerald Borchert explains that,

The pigeons or doves, the sin offering of the poor, is mentioned in the Temple cleansing of Mark (11:15) and Matthew (21:12) as well as here, but the presence of the more expensive animals is noted only here. The usual sin offering was a lamb or goat, whereas the oxen are mentioned specifically in connection with the burnt offerings of Numbers 7.⁸

This should be viewed as a political statement being made by Jesus, in which he recognizes not only the oppressive conditions, but also the negative impact that business transactions within the Temple were having on the Gentile worshippers.

There are two primary areas that scholars often focus on when discussing the cleansing of the Temple in John 2:13-22. One area is the cleansing of the Temple proper, which focuses on the removal of merchants and traders from the Temple because their presence was defiling the Temple and turning it into a "den of thieves." The other area of focus is on the misunderstanding of Jesus when he comments that the Temple will be raised in three days. Missing in the discussion of the passage, however, is any discussion of merchant activities taking place in the Court of the Gentiles, thereby further marginalizing the poor and the outsiders from participating in true worship. Adding to

⁸ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1-11* (New American Commentary 25A; Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers), 163.

this problem was the fact that these moneychangers and animal traders were taking up valuable space within the Temple complex that could have been better utilized for purposes of worship.

Purpose for Writing

The purpose of this thesis is to argue that John's placement of the Temple cleansing at the beginning of his gospel is not only to emphasize the shift from a corporate Temple to a personal relationship with God, but also to upset the status quo regarding people's relationships among each other. This cannot be understood, however, from a simple surface reading of the text. Therefore, this thesis will take into consideration many other elements from within early Jewish culture, such as honor and shame, reliance upon the Temple as the source for religious zeal, and how oppression from the Romans may have influenced the hierarchical system of relationships among ancient Palestine.

It was clear that the Gentile worshippers were being marginalized, as the space provided for them to worship was being used to house animals, stalls, feed supplies, and other essentials necessary for maintaining animals worthy of Temple sacrifices. Leon Morris explains that instead of being able to pray or meditate in peace, the Gentiles "found themselves in the middle of a noisy bazaar. A place that should have stood as a symbol for the freedom of access of all nations in prayer to God, had become a place associated with sordid pecuniary interests."⁹ It should be noted here that there are disagreements among scholars regarding the location of the animal traders. While many

⁹ L. Morris, *The Gospel According to John: The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 172.

claim that the trading took place within the Temple, as this is where Jesus found “people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables” (2:14 NRSV), Craig Keener identifies E. P. Sanders as claiming that “most trade took place in shops along a street adjoining the temple, rather than in the sacred precincts themselves.”¹⁰ Keener, however, claims that “most likely, the shops outside the temple precincts served the tourist industry, whereas the outer court included authorized dealers at festival times. Thus, very few scholars doubt that birds and moneychangers were in the outer court of the temple, where they would save pilgrims considerable time in procuring and offering sacrifices.”¹¹ Therefore, this thesis is based on the assumption that the trading and money-changing took place within the Temple precincts. As such, “exactly where man should have a chance to serve only his Maker and to become human, money-making sanctioned by religion proves the ‘real’ god and claims man’s loyalty.”¹² For Jesus, this was unacceptable.

In response to these areas of focus, Raymond E. Brown reminds readers that “in the fourth gospel, the author frequently intends the reader to see several layers of meaning in the same narrative or in the same metaphor.”¹³ Confirming the depth of meaning found in this text, Paul Duke cautions that the Gospel of John is “so simple and cordial on the surface, and yet so awesome in its depth that the student of John will not be

¹⁰ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2003), 1:520.

¹¹ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1:521.

¹² Frederick Herzog, *Liberation Theology: Liberation in the Light of the Fourth Gospel* (New York, NY: The Seabury Press, 1972), 58.

¹³ Raymond, E. Brown, *The Gospel and Epistles of John: A Concise Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: The Order of St. Benedict, Inc., 1988), 18.

true to the book he is studying if, at the end, the Gospel does not remain strange, restless, and unfamiliar.”¹⁴ Thus, it is within this awesome depth that we can consider the Temple cleansing as more than just what meets the eye. Throughout his Gospel, John employs these varieties of meaning and complexities of language. Doing so provides the impetus for recognizing John’s placement of the Temple cleansing at the beginning of his Gospel in order to emphasize the need for social justice.

Placement of the Temple Episode

One of the first problems that readers encounter is the placement of John’s Temple cleansing episode at the beginning of his Gospel instead of at the end, as all of the other Gospel writers do, assuming, of course, that readers know the other Gospels. This requires readers to determine whether there were two Temple cleansings or if John had somehow gotten the wrong information and simply erred in his placing the event at the beginning instead of the end of Jesus’ ministry. Either decision will have a theological impact. If there were two cleansings, it raises the question of how the other three Gospel writers could have omitted something so important. If John erred in his placement, it threatens to undermine the credibility of all he has to say. If the reader simply follows the text, however, especially following the three previous accounts by the Synoptics, it appears that there very well could have been two cleansings, with John reporting the first one, and the Synoptic writers reporting the last. Even the early church fathers such as Augustine found this to be the case.¹⁵ This, however, does not constitute a

¹⁴ Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press), 7.

¹⁵ Joel, C. Elowsky, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: John 1-10, Vol. 4a* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 101. Augustine is quoted as saying, “this makes it evident

definitive answer, as others argue that there is only one cleansing of the Temple in each Gospel.¹⁶ For the purpose of this study, however, it is unlikely that there could have been any more than one Temple cleansing.

During the time of the Passover, Jerusalem, and more importantly the Temple, would have been overcrowded with people coming to worship and celebrate. Teeming with people, the impact of Jesus' actions would have been well-noticed by people within the Court of the Gentiles, as well as the religious leaders and the Roman guards who were tasked with keeping order and preventing insurrections or rebellious uprisings. This is especially important in the debate regarding whether Jesus' actions occurred more than once, or even at the beginning or end of his ministry. This is even more important when considering the social impact of Jesus' actions within the Temple.

In order to make an informed decision regarding this, one must consider the bigger picture and look outside the immediate pericope. According to Craig Koester, "Jesus' action in the Jerusalem Temple is the companion piece to the miracle at Cana,"¹⁷ that opens Chapter 2 and begins John's account of Jesus' three-year ministry. "After a sign of abundance and grace, Jesus now performs a sign reminiscent of the acts of Israel's prophets, in which the authority of the dominant religious authorities are questioned."¹⁸

that this act was performed by the Lord not on a single occasion but twice over; but that only the first instance is put on record by John, and the last by the other three."

¹⁶ Borchert, *John 1-11*, 160. Borchert explains, "Arguments abound in which one either posits an error on the part of John or the Synoptic's or one argues for two cleansings of the temple. The suggestion of error involves a questionable presupposition and really does not solve much. But the familiar argument of two cleansings is a historiographic monstrosity that has no basis in the texts of the Gospels."

¹⁷ Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 86.

¹⁸ Gail R. O'Day and Susan E. Hylen, *John* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 37.

For John, these two events frame the entire purpose for Jesus' ministry and establish the foundation as well. This may be difficult to see, initially, but a careful reading of the text reveals that, "the Cana scene's faint references to Jesus' death and resurrection ('On the third day'; 'my hour'; 'revealed his glory') are echoed in clearer references to Jesus' death and resurrection 'in three days.'"¹⁹ Thus, "the Temple scene which follows it gives intimations of limitation, tension, and death."²⁰

This becomes an important issue in relation to the Temple cleansing by establishing the relationship between Jesus' Cana miracle and his cleansing of the Temple. John's placement, therefore, is not to provide a chronological account of the events of Jesus' life and ministry, but to emphasize the elements of Jesus' life and ministry that expose His divinity and His divine purpose. Jose Miranda explains that

John could have begun his Gospel as the Synoptics did, with a description of "the Word's" activity after it became flesh (John 1:14). If he chooses to begin instead with a prologue comprising an entire thesis on "the Word" that "was in the beginning," it is because he has something decisive to tell us, something that cannot be conveyed simply by narrating the life and death of the Word made flesh.²¹

Instead of having to write his Gospel as a newspaper reporter, "his purpose was not to report but to proclaim and persuade."²² Therefore, John took the liberty of placing the

¹⁹ Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel According to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 177.

²⁰ Brodie, *The Gospel According to John*, 177.

²¹ Jose Miranda, *Being and the Messiah: The Message of St. John* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977), 112.

²² Borchert, *John 1-11*, 161. Borchert goes on to explain that John "was a great inspired artist and theologian who organized his episodes from the life of Jesus in such a way as to bring people to faith in Jesus as the Son of God. What is more, the evangelist viewed the story of Jesus in its entirety from a post-resurrection perspective."

account at the point in which its effectiveness would be greatest, not where it would best fit chronologically.

The form of the story is in two parts. George Beasley-Murray, among others, points out that the passage is, “like a diptych (a double altarpiece on two leaves hinged together): where we have (1) the action of Jesus, vv. 14-15; words of Jesus, v. 16; “remembering” of disciples, v. 17; (2) action of the Jews, v. 18; words of Jesus, v. 19; misunderstanding of the Jews and comment of Evangelist, vv. 20-21; “remembering” of disciples, v. 22.”²³ Both of the sections end with Jesus’ disciples remembering, which is an indication of John’s post-resurrection view of the events. This does not mean that John’s readers should give up on history simply because the post-resurrection view is not in accordance with the diachronic view of the preceding Synoptics. Instead, it allows his readers to recognize the writing as testimony.²⁴

Another theological issue of great significance involves the actual driving out of the moneychangers and the impact that it had on the Temple activities. More specifically, Jesus drove out the money-changers and those selling cattle and sheep, but told those who were selling doves to “Take these things out of here!” It would be easy to simply read over this and give it no further thought. Yet there is great theological significance on Jesus’ telling those with doves to take them out, instead of driving them out with the cattle and sheep. The doves would have been kept in cages to prevent them from flying away, but why is this significant? In Jesus’ anger, it would seem justified if

²³ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Word Biblical Commentary 36; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 38.

²⁴ Borchert, *John 1-11*, 162.

he had knocked over the cages, perhaps even setting the birds free in the process. The answer lies in Jesus' concern for the poor and oppressed.

Due to the exposure Jesus would have received from any actions within the Temple that may have drawn the attention of the Roman guards who were overseeing the crowds at the Passover celebration, it is unlikely that Jesus would have been given the opportunity for multiple cleansings. Likewise, it is also doubtful that actions significant enough to have any impact that would influence significant change to a broken system would have resulted in anything other than the arrest and execution of Jesus. Despite having this knowledge, John still determines to place the Temple cleansing at the beginning of his Gospel. If John foreknew that the cultural conditions present at the time would not have allowed the possibility of a three year personal ministry by Jesus, then it stands to reason that John had other reasons for leading off with the Temple cleansing. This thesis will contend that his purpose was to emphasize the significance of the act instead of the results. In cleansing the Temple, Jesus was highlighting the devastating impact that the Temple and local government was having on the peasantry, who made up the majority of the population. In addition to infringing upon the worship rights of the poor and the Gentiles by taking up valuable worship space within the Court of the Gentiles, the taxes being imposed were adding additional stress to an already beleaguered populace.

The chapters that follow will provide the necessary information with which to make this case. Chapter 2 will examine the social aspects of the culture in which Jesus was ministering, paying particular attention to the political climate, how oppressed peoples may have viewed the actions of Jesus, how the elements of honor and shame

were viewed and understood, and then closing with attitudes toward Gentiles and themes of social justice. It is critical to understand the context in which Jesus ministered in order to understand the complexities that surround the placement of John's Temple cleansing and the likelihood of more than one cleansing. Although the majority of this thesis will focus on the cultural climate surrounding Jesus' actions, it is important to understand that "our primary object in studying this Gospel must remain the intention of John, not the intention of Jesus."²⁵ It is not my intention to cast doubt on whether Jesus could have cleansed the Temple in the way depicted, but to argue that it could not have been done more than once, which suggests that John may have intended to communicate something else to the community to whom he was writing.

In order to understand this, chapters 3 and 4 will look at the Temple complex, and how the structures in place advocated exploitation of the peasantry via abuses of power by those who were in charge. Adding to the oppression that the peasantry was already forced to endure was the burden of the annual Temple tax. Was this the deciding factor that prompted Jesus' outrage? We will consider this as we look at the actual Temple episode. No discussion of the Temple events, however, would be complete without taking into consideration the oppressive forces of occupying Rome, and how they would have responded to actions that could have been deemed uprisings against their authority.

After dealing with all the background information that is necessary to understand before making a decision, chapter 5 will focus on the actions of Jesus and the placement of the story within the fourth Gospel as a "call to action" against the social abuses that, while prevalent during the first century, have barely subsided among believers since. By

²⁵ David K. Rensberger, "The Gospel of John and Liberation," in *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 164.

looking further into the actions of Jesus within the Gospel of John, we will gain a greater understanding of how Jesus promoted social justice throughout his ministry and how contemporary believers can adopt his model to promote the kingdom of God as realized eschatology instead of one dependent upon the Second Advent.

Chapter 2

Jesus as Social Advocate

Before beginning a journey such as this, one must recognize the significance of the recipients of the six signs²⁶ that John focuses on throughout his gospel. As Stephen Harris points out, there are others who recognize more than six signs,²⁷ but for the purpose of this thesis, this argument is inconsequential. Rather than perform signs for those who were in positions of authority, Jesus performed his signs to those who were on the fringes of society. Logically, this would appear to make little sense. A top-down approach in which the Jewish leaders were convinced first, thus allowing the multitudes to recognize the legitimate authority of Jesus, would seem to be more effective. Instead, Jesus chose the opposite by revealing himself to the poor and marginalized, apparently leaving the Jewish authorities to learn from the least of those within society. What does this say about Jesus? What does this say about the author of the Gospel? In order to find answers to these questions, one must consider elements of the historical Jesus as identified in the other Gospels and the cultural milieu in which John was writing.

The Historical Jesus

Finding the historical Jesus has become a controversial topic among scholars due in part to the limited amount of credible information that is available. In his essay, “The Gospels and the ‘Historical Jesus,’” Stephen Fowl identifies two extremes of the

²⁶ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters: Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 324.

²⁷ Stephen L. Harris, *The New Testament: A Student’s Introduction* (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2002), 221.

spectrum. On one end is the view that Jesus' mission was "to present a 'brokerless' kingdom of God which was essentially a form of extremely inclusive and egalitarian Judaism in contrast to more exclusive versions. The archetypal practice of Jesus was his open commensality in which all are called and welcomed to the common table..., subverting the broken patronage system in Palestine, offering a shared egalitarianism of spiritual and material resources."²⁸ On the opposite end is the view that Jesus was "a prophet announcing the onset of the kingdom of God, which anticipated God's decisive intervention to restore the fortunes of Israel."²⁹ While it is outside of the scope of this thesis to enter the debate surrounding the quest for the historical Jesus, it is important to consider the actions of Jesus, as well as his potential intentions, since they impact how the author of the Gospel may have interpreted them in light of the cultural setting. Regardless of the position one takes, each extreme encompasses elements that suggest Jesus' actions in the Temple were motivated by a need for social justice.

Cultural Issues Affecting First-Century Jerusalem

Controlled by Rome during the Second-Temple period, ancient Palestine was ruled politically via the patron-client model which "allowed aristocrats of the new republic to exercise power as patrons through their clients. A client, who was a Roman with less power and status than his patron, was expected to show honor to his patron, and to support him in any political action the patron took in return for legal protection and

²⁸ Stephen E. Fowl, "The Gospels and 'the Historical Jesus,'" in *The Gospels*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 86.

²⁹ Fowl, "The Gospels and 'the Historical Jesus,'" in Barton, 87.

financial assistance.”³⁰ Although this model would eventually lead to the destruction of the Roman Empire, early on it also provided the means for rapid expansion of the Empire. By allowing conquered peoples to be incorporated into their society and hold positions of political power as clients, the Romans made captivity more palatable for their captives.

Under the patron-client model, Jerusalem was considered a semi-independent client state. Having been recognized as a Temple state by the Persians, Ptolemies, and Seleucids, the Romans continued this recognition after their own takeover. Therefore, even though Palestine was occupied by Rome, they were essentially allowed to govern themselves. “Even when the Romans replaced the line of Herod with a Roman prefect, the Jewish high priesthood had charge of most of Judea’s internal affairs.”³¹ As long as taxes were collected and there were no uprisings, Rome did not get involved in the governance of local cities and regions within the province. Thus, the priesthood was free to govern however they saw fit.

The Jewish Sanhedrin in Jerusalem functioned as a kind of senate of the province. Its members were drawn from leading families in the usual provincial pattern. The presiding officer was the high priest, who was the most important political person in Judea after the Roman governor. Because of this, the Roman governor controlled the appointment of the high priest. The Romans also kept custody of the high priestly garments, releasing them to the Jews for religious festivals only four times a year.³²

Eventually, however, this arrangement invited greed and corruption which fueled civil unrest and prompted uprisings, such as the Jewish revolt of A.D. 66-73, in which first-

³⁰ James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1999), 17.

³¹ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 117.

³² Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 128.

century revolutionaries accused the priesthood of selling out to the Romans.³³ This also led to social abuses as privileged people took advantage of the less fortunate. In order to protect their status, resistance to change prevented significant changes. While greed and corruption may have added fuel to a simmering fire, disagreements among Jews regarding the interpretation of the Law provided greater volatility.

As early as the Maccabean Revolt, Josephus records three different sects of Jews which held differing opinions about human affairs. These three sects were the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes.³⁴ In his book *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Raymond Brown explains that while the Sadducees “became increasingly identified with the ruling Hellenized aristocracy, supposedly having little in common with the people,”³⁵ the Essenes took to the other extreme, becoming extremely pious, ultimately abandoning the Temple and forming their own community in Qumran. “Disdaining the Temple now presided over by those who in their judgment were wicked priests, the Qumranians formed the new covenant seeking to become perfect by an extraordinarily strict practice of the Law, and awaiting an imminent messianic coming by which God would destroy all iniquity and punish their enemies.”³⁶ The third of these groups, the Pharisees, “approached the written Law of Moses as marked by a theory of a second, oral Law; their interpretations were less severe than those of the Essenes and more innovative than those

³³ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 115.

³⁴ Josephus *Antiquities* 13.5.9.

³⁵ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 76.

³⁶ Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 77.

of the Sadducees who remained conservatively restricted to the written Law.”³⁷ Thus, the inability to find common ground among the various divisions may have created an atmosphere of political distrust that prevented finding common ground in any situation. Therefore, the high priest was likely viewed as politically corrupt by any individual that aligned with a different group. Further compounding the appearance of corruption was an unwillingness to make significant changes that would alter a system which supported the prominent. By failing to do so, those in power marginalized the peasantry in society by making decisions that continually ignored the plight of the poor, leaving the impression that they had sold out to their Roman clients, essentially disintegrating the patron-client model of governance that had worked so well for Rome in other regions.

The Kingdom of God

As already suggested, discussion of the kingdom of God takes distinctively different approaches. One focuses on an earthly kingdom in which values such as egalitarianism and inclusivity, as taught by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, are embodied by believers on earth awaiting the parousia while an alternative view anticipated God’s decisive intervention to restore the fortunes of Israel. The former view is taken and explained by John Dominic Crossan as “Jesus’ program of empowerment for a peasantry becoming steadily more hard-pressed, in that first-century homeland, through insistent taxation, attendant indebtedness, and eventual land expropriation, all within increasing commercialization in the booming colonial economy of a Roman empire under

³⁷ Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 77.

Augustan peace and a Lower Galilee under Herodian urbanization.”³⁸ Yet another approach centers on an eternal kingdom in which believers are liberated from their earthly oppressions and spend eternity as co-rulers with Jesus.

The difficulty surrounding understanding of the kingdom’s location, whether on earth or in Heaven, is illustrated in the Gospel of Luke. Brown points out some of the issues that lead to this confusion.

Palpable images like gate and table and expulsion from the kingdom are employed in 13:24, 28, 29; and in 9:27 there are those standing here who will not taste death until they have seen the kingdom of God. Yet in 17:20-21 Jesus contends that the coming of the kingdom is not a matter of observation so that one can say, “Here or there it is.” In 11:2 the disciples are taught to pray for the kingdom to come. In 10:9 disciples are told to proclaim to the towns they visit: “The kingdom of God has come near;” in 11:20 Jesus says that if it is by the finger of God that he drives out demons, “The kingdom of God has reached you;” and in 11:21 he says “The kingdom of God is in/among you.” In 21:31-32 upon seeing the signs of the last times, one can say “The kingdom of God is near;” and all this will happen before this generation passes away.³⁹

Therefore, it is difficult to determine where Luke stands on the issue. On one hand, it appears that the kingdom of God would be realized in Jesus’ generation as it was already among them. Being a part of it was a foregone conclusion in which believers could place their trust. Yet on the other, it would not be a visible thing in which believers could point to and proclaim.

In contrast, John appears to take a stronger stance towards a realized eschatology in which the kingdom of God has made itself known on earth. In his commentary on the Gospel of John, Brown makes the claim that “In many ways John is the best example in

³⁸ John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 211.

³⁹ Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 275.

the New Testament of realized eschatology.”⁴⁰ Although there are others who disagree, Brown explains that “For the Synoptics, ‘eternal life’ is something that one receives at the final judgment or in a future age..., but for John it is a present possibility for men: ‘The man who hears my words and has faith in Him who sent me *possesses* eternal life.... He has passed from death to life.”⁴¹

It is within this realized eschatology, and the understanding that the kingdom of God is a present reality, that believers found themselves to play an integral role in kingdom activities, ultimately laying the foundations for Christian ethics. “Because Christ placed his mission and his teachings within the context of the kingdom of God, we must do likewise, and because Christ embodied his teaching in the way he treated people, we must do the same.”⁴² While there is no hard and fast way of reaching a definite conclusion on which of these were more prominent with regards to Jesus’ actions in the Temple as described by John, the context within his Gospel seems to lean more heavily toward Jesus promoting equality and egalitarianism. Thus, it is the development of this Christian ethic in John’s gospel, set in the context of a realized eschatology that frames the Temple episode, possibly prompting its placement at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry instead of the end.

⁴⁰ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), cxvii.

⁴¹ Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, cxviii.

⁴² Glen H. Stassen, and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2003), 97.

The Political Climate

Although, in Judea, the Sanhedrin and the high priest were allowed to observe and enforce the laws of Moses, the Roman appointed governor of the province became involved in cases involving public order.⁴³ This is identified primarily in the multiple confrontations that Jesus has with “the Jews” (2:8-20; 5:10-18; 7:15-24, 32-36; 8:3-9; 9:13-34; 11:45-53). This does not, however, mean that the Romans were only concerned with maintaining order within the provinces, nor were they simple peacekeepers who only became involved when someone’s life or property were in danger. The peace provided by Rome to inhabitants of the Empire was “maintained by horrific political repression”⁴⁴ and benefitted almost exclusively the rich members of society. For those who were not Roman citizens, life itself was fraught with danger and fear. Richard Horsley explains that “In the decades before Jesus was born, Roman armies marched through the area, burning villages, enslaving the able-bodied, and killing the infirm.”⁴⁵ Whatever was needed for the benefit of the Empire was at their disposal. Instead of providing peace, the *Pax Romana* provided the majority of the population with chaos. Horsley goes on to explain that “more critical recent investigations of the principal policies and practices of Roman imperialism suggest that what was a ‘new world order’ for those of power and privilege was experienced as a disruptive, disorienting, or even devastating new world *disorder* for many of the subject peoples.”⁴⁶ Thus, the political

⁴³ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 155.

⁴⁴ Obery M. Hendricks, Jr., *The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of Jesus’ Teachings and How They Have Been Corrupted* (New York, NY: Three Leaves Press, 2006), 50.

⁴⁵ Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 15.

⁴⁶ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 21.

climate was neither favorable for outright hostilities against the government, nor against the priesthood in which those in power may have close ties with the Roman authorities.

Hidden Transcripts

As repetition adds emphasis to any point being made, there seems to be a point that John is attempting to emphasize, albeit in a subtle way, perhaps himself attempting to avoid upsetting the status quo. To be sure, there are cultural complexities that show up in any author's work which provides readers a glimpse into the world of the author. In this case, upsetting the status quo could lead to persecution or challenge one's standing within society. James C. Scott refers to these subtle inclusions as "hidden transcripts" that represent a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant."⁴⁷

Referred to as "hidden transcripts," because they are hidden from the ears of those in power, these conversations often serve to empower those who are subordinated and provide opportunity for expression in ways that often mock those in power. Scott contends that, although everyone utilizes these hidden transcripts in their speech patterns, they are particularly useful for those oppressed and dominated by others. Using examples such as slavery, oppression by the Catholic Church on its members, serfdom, caste distinctions, and governmental oppression upon its subjects, Scott explains from a political perspective how hidden transcripts serve a vital role in coping with injustices and individuals' inability to rise above their oppressors. On the subject of hidden transcripts among the peasants of Palestine, Horsley comments that "the importance of

⁴⁷ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), xii.

the hidden transcript cultivated by the peasantry in their village communities behind the backs of their landlords or rulers was in keeping anger and resentment alive and focused among the subordinate. That provided the soil from which everyday forms of hidden resistance and occasional movements of protest and resistance sprang.”⁴⁸ While the watchful eyes of the Temple authorities may have seen some type of disruption taking place within the Court of the Gentiles, perhaps even dismissing it as unimportant, the oppressed peasantry who had suffered so much abuse at the hands of those in charge would have recognized Jesus’ actions as direct defiance against Temple abuses. Moreover, they would have recognized, and welcomed the sight of, someone making a public statement in their defense.

Hidden transcripts, however, are not the only cultural issues at play within the Temple episode. Although a large portion of readers may struggle to read acts of defiance and mockery in the cleansing of the Temple, there is a greater, less familiar concept that must be understood in order to fully understand the implications of Jesus’ actions. This is the concept of honor and shame.

Honor and Shame

In twenty-first century America, citizens are generally considered equal without prejudice toward their race, gender, or social standing. Women are allowed to vote and are often very active in the political and social world. Many women are also active in the workplace and often serve as single parents raising successful families without the aid of any male figures within their lives. The poor, despite their social standing, are afforded the same general rights as the wealthy and while discrimination still exists toward this

⁴⁸ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 54.

group and the minority races, they are also afforded the same rights as the wealthy. Men are also considered equal despite differences in working classes and income levels.

Although there are always some exceptions, Americans are generally free to make their own decisions with regards to their livelihood without fear of retribution from dominant classes or ruling parties. Men can interact with other men, women can speak to whomever they wish, even in public, and slavery is no longer an issue. Yet these are all liberties that we take for granted when reading the pages of Scripture. We tend to see nothing wrong with Jesus speaking with the Pharisees. We see no problem with the Samaritan woman holding a conversation with Jesus at the well and we are sometimes unsure what to do with, if not completely embarrassed by, Jesus' interaction with the Syrophenician woman. Some of us may not even be alarmed by the young son's attitude toward his father in the story of the prodigal son. Yet if we read these accounts without some measure of alarm, or at least intrigue, we have then missed a significant aspect of the story. These things did not happen during this time period without scorn. They were culturally unacceptable because they cut across the grain of acceptable social interactions.

Since we are not accustomed to the significance of honor and shame, it is necessary to provide some background on the concepts. Bruce Malina explains, "Honor is the value of a person in his or her own eyes (that is, one's claim to worth) plus that person's value in the eyes of his or her social group. Honor is a claim to worth along with the social acknowledgment of worth."⁴⁹ Thus, it is two-fold. Not only do we have to claim our own self-worth, it has to be matched by others. Despite whatever worth we ascribe to ourselves, if our social group does not place value on us in return, we are not

⁴⁹ Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1981), 27.

seen as honorable. Therefore, our standing within our social group is quite significant. Typically, a modern father is seen as an honorable man provided he raises his children well and his children respect him by doing as he says. If, however, his children do not follow his rules, they *dishonor* him. Others see the children's disrespect and view the father as having a lack of honor because he is not able to fulfill the role of father in a manner that is socially acceptable. Not only does the father seek the respect of his children, he also seeks the acknowledgment from others within his social group. When others recognize that his actions are in line with acceptable social ideals he receives recognition for being a good father. In return, he receives honor. In addition to being viewed as an honorable man, he is also treated as an honorable man. Thus, in order to be truly honorable, he must be granted honor by his peers.

“*Acquired honor* is the socially recognized claim to worth that a person acquired by excelling over others in the social interaction that we shall call challenge and response.”⁵⁰ We might consider challenge and response as a public sparring match of wits between individuals. “Trash-talking” is one such form that we may label it in the twenty-first century, but during the first century the results were much more significant for both parties involved. Additionally, it was not limited to verbal jabs.

In challenge and response, a message would be sent by means of a culturally recognized action to a receiving individual. This message could be in the form of words, gifts, an invitation, an event, etc. The challenge was always public and always elicited a response. Even non-action was interpreted as a response.

The challenge is a claim to enter the social space of another. This claim may be positive or negative. A positive reason for entering the social

⁵⁰ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 29.

space of another would be to gain some share in that space or to gain a cooperative, mutually beneficial foothold. A negative reason would be to dislodge another from his social space, either temporarily or permanently. [In the second step], the receiver looks upon the action from the viewpoint of its potential to dishonor his self-esteem, his self-worth. He has to judge whether and how the challenge falls within the socially acknowledged range of such action, from a simple questioning of self-esteem to an outright attack on self-esteem to a total denial of self-esteem. The third step in the interaction would be the reaction to the message, involving the receiver's behavior that enables the public to pass a verdict: a grant of honor taken from the receiver of a challenge and awarded to the successful challenger, or a loss of honor by the challenger in favor of the successful recipient of the challenge. Any reaction on the part of the receiver of a challenge comprises his response.⁵¹

Thus, the results of these interactions held great significance for the challenger since he was making himself vulnerable to a loss of honor in the event the recipient of the challenge was successful. Likewise, the recipient had to carefully consider the context of the challenge, how his response would be viewed and the social significance of his response. While this is often referred to as a "game," modern readers must be very careful. The term "belies the serious nature of the stakes at risk. Where one stood in the assembly, whom one's children married, where one conducted business, sat at banquets, indeed one's 'place' in society were at risk in honor contests."⁵² The significance of the results played out publicly and determined not only where one stood amongst their peers, but also where their family stood.

Within the Temple cleansing episode, Jesus' actions would have been a serious affront to, not only the merchants and traders whom he cast out, but also to the authorities. By overturning the tables of the money-changers and tradesmen, Jesus

⁵¹ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 32.

⁵² E. Randolph Richards, "An Honor/Shame Argument for Two Temple Clearings," in *Trinity Journal* ns 29, no. 1 (Spring 2008), 31.

publicly shamed those who were essentially providing a much needed service for the Temple and for the visitors who had traveled to the Temple for Passover. Depending on the extent to which Jesus “cleared” the Temple, the effects of his actions would have been felt throughout the hierarchy of the Temple. Since outside of one’s own family or circle of friends, all social interactions were perceived as challenges to one’s honor. Loss of honor, regardless of the circumstances, was catastrophic to one’s standing within society, even if outside of one’s own control.

The opposite of honor, however, is shame. “For a male ‘to lose honor’ is ‘to be shamed.’”⁵³ This is a loss of reputation in the eyes of one’s peers, exposing one’s weakness or foolishness. Like honor, it too can be ascribed or achieved. “A magistrate may ascribe shame by declaring one guilty and so worthy of public flogging, yet it may be achieved by one’s folly or by cowardice and failure to respond to a challenge.”⁵⁴ Since honor was a limited commodity, a loss of honor resulted in an increase in shame. This could come from a variety of sources, many of which the modern reader would not recognize or attribute as shameful. “Loss of wealth, loss of position, loss of beauty, and loss of reputation each create a loss of honor. To be poor, demoted, disfigured or mocked, was, by definition, to be shamed.”⁵⁵ Therefore, how the authorities and merchants responded could have a dramatic impact on their acquired honor.

⁵³ Joseph Plevnik, “Honor/Shame,” in *Handbook of Biblical Social Values*, ed. John J. Pilch & Bruce J. Malina (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 107.

⁵⁴ Jerome H. Neyrey, “Despising the Shame of the Cross: Honor and Shame in the Johannine Passion Narrative,” *Semeia*, no. 68 (1994): 118.

⁵⁵ Timothy S. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998), 23.

Modern readers, by contrast, have been conditioned to have sympathy for most of these situations. While it is recognized that some are personally responsible for losing their money, jobs, or reputations, there are a great many who are simply victims of circumstances beyond their control. Thus, we tend to sympathize with them and lift them up. Even those who may have the ability to defend themselves, but choose not to, are viewed as heroic for taking the “high road” or “turning the other cheek.” This was not the case in first century honor/shame societies. Any loss of honor was the sole responsibility of the individual. Loss of honor was due to weakness or inferiority on the part of the individual. A truly honorable man would not allow such negative circumstances to befall him.

One of the more significant aspects of the honor/shame model is that of challenge and response. According to Malina, “challenge-response within the context of honor is a sort of interaction in at least three phases: (1) the challenge in terms of some action (word, deed, both) on the part of the challenger; (2) the perception of the message by both the individual to whom it is directed and the public at large; and (3) the reaction of the receiving individual and the evaluation of the reaction on the part of the public.”⁵⁶ This third step involves a verdict from the public. The public will either side with the challenger or with the receiver of the challenge resulting in their taking honor from the challenger and placing it on the receiver of the challenge or vice versa. Either case results in a loss of honor from one and bestowal of that honor upon the other. It is the public audience that determines the winner, thus any increase or decrease in one’s honor is determined by the public. In *Honor, Shame, and Social Status Revisited*, Zeba Crook

⁵⁶ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 30.

dissents from Malina's view, and presents evidence that not only did challenge and riposte interactions take place between individuals from differing social classes, but also between individuals of different gender. Crook refers to this public audience as the "public court of reputation or PCR."⁵⁷ Thus, the PCR is the power player in challenge and riposte interactions. According to Malina, however, only equals can play the game.

Only an equal—who must be recognized as such—can impugn a person's honor or affront another. The reason for this is that the rules of the honor contest require that challengers stand on equal social terms. Thus an inferior on the ladder of social standing, power, and sexual status does not have enough honor to resent the affront of a superior. On the other side, a superior's honor is simply not committed, not engaged, by an inferior's affront, although the superior has the power to punish impudence. Thus a man can physically affront his children or wife, a high-class person can strike a low class person, free men can buffet slaves, the occupying Roman army can make sport of most low-class citizens. These interactions do not imply an honor contest in themselves.⁵⁸

Yet it is in this definition of equal standing that Crook, and others, find reason to disagree, arguing that the pages of Scripture are filled with examples of Jesus being challenged by the religious elite. Taking into account the Synoptic's portrayal of Jesus, and his multiple interactions with the religious authorities, it appears that these interactions, which were attempts to trap Jesus only to result in shaming the authorities, are clear examples of instances in which the powerful were actively engaging a lower class person as an attempt to discredit, and ultimately dishonor, Jesus. Therefore, there is no reason to believe that the actions of Jesus in the Temple would not have resulted in an increase in his own honor, especially the ascribed honor from those whom he was

⁵⁷ Zeba Crook, "Honor, Shame, and Social Status Revisited," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 3, (Fall 2009): 593.

⁵⁸ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 36.

speaking on behalf of, but a decrease of honor among the religious authorities and the merchants who were continuing to oppress the already marginalized.

As a member of the lower class, Jesus' actions against the merchant class would not have been ignored by the public because any increase in the honor of Jesus would have resulted in the decrease of honor for the merchants and traders. Additionally, it would have also affected the honor of the Temple authorities since they were providing a much needed service for the Temple and those who had traveled there for the Passover celebration. The effects of his actions would not only have been felt by the merchants and traders whom he drove out, but they would also have been felt throughout the Temple hierarchy. Remember that all social interactions were perceived as challenges to one's own honor and any loss of honor, regardless of the circumstances, was catastrophic to one's standing within society, even if the loss of honor was outside of their own control. This loss of honor resulted in an increase in shame and loss of reputation, which was the sole responsibility of the individual.

Had Jesus' actions been an affront to the merchants, traders, and other authorities, they would have been shamed and, thus, forced to respond in order to prevent any loss of honor. With the Temple courts teeming with people, due to the Passover celebration, the public court of reputation would have been quick to pass judgment on the event, ascribing honor to one and shame to the other. Since the event is reported to have taken place in the area of the Temple that was probably the most crowded, and populated with a majority of people who were on the same social level as Jesus, the public court of reputation would most likely have sided with Jesus. This would have resulted in an increase in the ascribed honor of Jesus from those whom he was speaking on behalf. In

turn, this would have resulted in a decrease of honor among the religious authorities and the merchants who were continuing to oppress the already marginalized. The resulting shame imposed upon the authorities and merchants in such a crowded arena would have drawn the attention of many others who were more than ready to pass judgment upon those who were deemed responsible for the bleak living conditions the poor were experiencing. Even if the actions of Jesus were not significant enough to gain the attention of the Roman authorities keeping watch over the Temple activities, it is doubtful that the public shaming of the merchants, traders, and Temple authorities, however small, would have resulted in anything other than attempts to eliminate Jesus, thereby preventing further opportunities for Jesus to humiliate those responsible for maintaining the status quo.

Attitudes toward Gentiles

Acceptance of Gentile worshippers at the Temple goes back to the days of Solomon. In 1 Kings 5, King Hiram of Tyre provided Solomon with all the cedar and cypress logs he required to build the first Temple, as well as long-term friendship between the two kings. The significance of this friendship and generosity is very important and should not be overlooked. “The House for God’s Name would be made of materials donated by a neighboring nation, thereby symbolizing that acclaim.”⁵⁹ In 1 Kings 8:41-43, at the dedication of the Temple, Solomon offered a prayer on behalf of the Gentiles.

⁵⁹ Joshua Berman, *The Temple: Its Symbolism and Meaning Then and Now* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1995), 71.

Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name—for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built (NRSV).

This event laid the foundation for acceptance of Gentiles within the Temple, providing space for them to worship God. This recognition was carried over into the construction of Herod's Temple as the Court of the Gentiles.

Despite, however, the peaceful relations portrayed by Solomon, attitudes toward Gentiles were complex. According to J. Julius Scott, “Rabbinic literature generally displays deeply hostile feelings against non-Jews.”⁶⁰ Experiences within the inter-testamental period, including intense persecution and oppression, led to this shift in attitude, but it must be recognized that this does not mean that there was a uniform attitude toward all Gentiles. Instead, it should be viewed as more of a stereotypical attitude driven by Jewish suspicions of Gentile idolatry, low ethical and moral standards associated with Gentiles and ceremonial uncleanness among Gentiles, all of which provided reasons for Jews to remain separated. “Respect and honor were usually given those in positions of great power, although feelings of hostility and desire for retribution were evident, especially toward rulers who persecuted or caused hardships for the Jews.”⁶¹

⁶⁰ J. Julius Scott Jr., *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1995), 335.

⁶¹ Scott, *Jewish Backgrounds*, 336.

The Temple itself was the main space for public meetings of all kinds but capacity crowds depicted in the pages of Scripture during the Passover festivals were rare. According to Martin Goodman, “On ordinary weekdays, the courts must have felt quite empty, since the daily communal ritual all took place in a restricted area around the court of the priests where the animals were sacrificed, burned and (in some cases) eaten, and the libations were poured.”⁶² The Court of the Gentiles, that space set aside for worshippers of God who were not Jewish, made up the majority of the Temple space, “forming the lowest or outer enclosure of the Sanctuary.”⁶³ It was also where the animals and money-changers were located. Although quite mundane and peaceful on ordinary occasions, the capacities created by the Passover festivals would have created an extremely noisy, potentially smelly space within which to worship.

Although providing space for Gentile worship, the boundaries associated with ritual cleanliness and low ethical standards associated with Gentiles opened the door for the Jewish to promote their own versions, perhaps inadvertently, of oppression and marginalization. Craig Keener explains that “the merchants did not prevent Gentiles from praying, but the Temple’s structure expressed an ideology of separation.”⁶⁴ An inscription discovered at an archaeological site in 1871 states that “No man of another nation to enter within the fence and enclosure round the Temple. And whoever is caught will have himself to blame that his death ensues.”⁶⁵ Adding to the separation was the fact

⁶² Martin Goodman, “The Temple in First Century CE Judaism,” in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel*, ed. John Day (New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2007), 460.

⁶³ Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services as They Were at the Time of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1960), 45.

⁶⁴ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1:524.

that the moneychangers and animal traders were taking up valuable space within the Temple complex that could have been better utilized for purposes of worship. It was clear that the Gentile worshippers were being marginalized, as their worship space was being used to house animals, stalls, feed supplies, and other essentials necessary for maintaining animals worthy of Temple sacrifices. Leon Morris explains that instead of being able to pray or meditate in peace, the Gentiles were unable to worship due to the noises and distractions that surrounded them within the Court of the Gentiles. Instead of a place for meditative reflection and worship, theirs had become a marketplace that was interested more in making money than being a place of prayer. While this marginalization and taking advantage of the Gentiles may have been acceptable among the Jews as a way to distance themselves, it was clearly not acceptable to Jesus. Nor was it acceptable to John in light of his new commandment in 13:34. As Christopher Rowland points out in his essay, “The Temple in the New Testament,” “the ‘cleansing’ of the Temple may... have been less a protest against the Temple than a summons to reform.”⁶⁶ The reform that Rowland is referring to is that of social reform and the recognition of equality among, not just the Gentiles and Jews, but all those seeking to worship the One True God. Behavior such as was taking place in the Court of the Gentiles was contrary to the display of love spoken of in 13:1, “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (NRSV).

⁶⁵ W. Dittenberger, “Orientis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae, 598,” in *The New Testament Background: Writings from Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire that Illuminate Christian Origins*, ed. C. K. Barrett (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1987), 53.

⁶⁶ Christopher Rowland, “The Temple in the New Testament,” in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel*, ed. John Day (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2007), 470.

Themes of Social Justice

The theme of social justice, as well as Jesus' compassion for those who are marginalized can be found throughout the Gospel of John. Jesus' encounter with an adulterous woman in John 7:53-8:11⁶⁷ "exemplifies how justice and compassion are interrelated and ultimately liberating,"⁶⁸ while his healing of the lame man in 5:2-9 highlights his willingness to consider the needs of the poor and the marginalized when others would simply ignore them. Raymond Brown places these episodes squarely in the context of the sole commandment found in 13:34-35 "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (NRSV).⁶⁹ In such episodes, Rudolf Bultmann points out that "in Jesus God is present, pouring out his fullness on man in his perplexity."⁷⁰ F. F. Bruce comments that in this passage "the standard of the love which the disciples are to have one for another is the love which their Lord has lavished on them."⁷¹ This love is to be displayed through Jesus' disciples, and ultimately all believers are disciples of Jesus. Love is not displayed by taking advantage of others. Instead, it is shown through providing equal space for all and in the case of the Temple, equal space for worship. Even though there may be

⁶⁷ David K. Rensberger, "The Gospel of John" in *The Harper Collins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, ed. Harold W. Attridge (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 2006), 1830. "On the basis of the best manuscripts and other ancient evidence, scholars generally agree that this story was not originally part of the Gospel of John. It may, however, be based on early oral traditions about Jesus."

⁶⁸ Carol J. Dempsey, *Justice: A Biblical Perspective* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2008), 93.

⁶⁹ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 375.

⁷⁰ Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1971), 129.

⁷¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), 294.

disagreements among believers, and even though there may be reasons for distrust, everyone deserves to be treated fairly. The act of loving one another transcends these barriers and provides opportunities for renewal of relationships and unity among believers.

Raymond Brown makes the point that there is something very interesting about the idea of love being a commandment.

In the OT the Ten Commandments have a setting in the covenant between God and Israel at Sinai; traditionally they were stipulations that Israel had to observe if it was to be God's chosen people. In speaking of love as the new commandment for those whom Jesus had chosen as his own and as a mark by which they could be distinguished from others, the evangelist shows implicitly that he is thinking of this Last Supper scene in covenant terms.⁷²

Therefore, in order to be observed as Jesus' own, love for one another must be a primary characteristic. Tying this thought to the Temple cleansing episode, it becomes easier to see how the idea of social justice begins to take shape.

Replacement of Jewish institutions that have become corrupt begins in the Temple. Although never acceptable, behaviors that had become commonplace among the Jews, such as marginalization of the poor and the Gentiles by using their worship space as a marketplace, must be reformed. Love would take the place of legalisms. As the ways of the old Temple were destroyed and replaced by a new ethic, the destruction of the old Temple can be viewed as a transition from law-focused Judaism to a realized eschatology. Instead of the commandments that were the traditional identifiers of God's people, love for one another would become the characteristic that identified people as

⁷² Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970), 612.

followers of Jesus. By removing the money changers and animals from the Temple, Jesus initiated this transition.

By understanding the distinctive cultural issues that were in effect during the first and second century, it becomes obvious that there were many factors involved in the Temple cleansing incident that may be taken for granted by modern day readers. By recognizing that the views of the historical Jesus each end with motivations for social justice, as well as how the kingdom of God movement served as a catalyst for the development of a Christian ethic, it becomes easier to recognize the need for a definitive statement on social justice. As the problems associated with a broken patron-client system and the negative attitude toward Gentiles are added, it becomes obvious that there is indeed a problem with the cultural model that the religious leadership was promoting. Broken beyond repair, the only alternative was to start over. Due to the oppressive nature of the Romans and the unwillingness of the Jewish leaders to upset the status quo, the only way to initiate this new model of equality and social justice was to make a very public statement that, while potentially veiled as a hidden transcript, would have been easily recognized by the majority populace.

Since John places this event at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, it stands to reason that it was not significant enough to draw the attention of the guards. While perhaps prompting the Jewish religious authorities to begin distrusting Jesus, according to John, it was not enough to prevent him from ministering for another three years. Therefore, John must have been motivated to lead off his Gospel with this story by some other reason. Since love is a component that shows up throughout the Gospel, it is appropriate to lead off with a story that promotes equality and harmony among all people regardless of

wealth, status, or nationality. Doing so sets the stage for the actions of Jesus that follow throughout the remainder of the Gospel, while also establishing the notion that marginalization is to be replaced by equality and love which is an essential element of Jesus' fullness which he was pouring out on humankind.

Chapter 3

Worship and Sacrifice

In addition to understanding the cultural complexities, the Temple complex and its impact upon Jewish society must also be properly understood. The Temple is not the same as a church or synagogue. The Temple was held in much higher regard. “Although the God of Israel was viewed as transcendent, and God’s presence was hardly restricted to a designated place or places, the need for the assurance of a divine availability led the Israelites... to establish locales in which access to the transcendent deity could be secured.”⁷³ The Jerusalem Temple, therefore, was representative of the place where God resided and where all activity related to God was performed. “The structure was of magnificent construction and like the tabernacle, it comprised the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. Despite not housing the Ark of the Covenant, it remained the focal point of the Israelite religion.”⁷⁴ As a replacement of the Solomonic Temple, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians, the Herodian Temple was created to be “grander in size and decoration than those of the nations with which the Israelite empire was interacting.”⁷⁵ Due to the enormity of the new Temple, construction was still taking place over 50 years after construction began. Therefore, the idea of Jesus destroying the Temple, and subsequently rebuilding it in three days, was incomprehensible to the people of Jerusalem, prompting John’s explanation in v. 21 that Jesus was speaking of his body.

⁷³ Carol Meyers, “Jerusalem Temple,” *AYBD* 6:359.

⁷⁴ Scott, *Jewish Backgrounds*, 52.

⁷⁵ Meyers, “Jerusalem Temple,” *AYBD* 6:365.

The Temple Complex

Contrasted with, but certainly not limited to, modern interpretations of church, the Temple was not a “purely religious institution.”⁷⁶ Although first and foremost the Temple represented the dwelling place of God and the center of worship, the Temple complex also served as the center for all activities civic, government, and economic. “As a state institution, the Temple thus represented the intersection of the ideological values and religious beliefs of the nation with the social, political, and economic aspects of its organization.”⁷⁷ While not problematic in and of themselves, the Jewish leaders had allowed other activities to carry over into the worship activities of the Temple. According to Obery M. Hendricks, Jr., “Despite its veneer of holiness and religiosity, beneath its proclamations of justice and concern, the Temple did not treat the people and their needs as holy.”⁷⁸ Instead of a place of worship that also participated in government activities, the Temple had become a place of government that also participated in religious activities. In doing so, “its activities and the priests who administered them had become inextricably intertwined with systematic appropriation of the goods and resources of the ‘least of these’ while hiding behind what Jeremiah calls ‘these deceptive words: “This is the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord”” (Jer. 7:4 NRSV).⁷⁹ In order to understand how this relates to the treatment of the poor within Jerusalem, we must now consider how the corruptions within the Temple translated into

⁷⁶ Obery M. Hendricks Jr., *The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of Jesus’ Teachings and How They Have Been Corrupted* (New York, NY: Three Leaves Press, 2006), 114.

⁷⁷ Meyers, “Jerusalem Temple,” *AYBD* 6:361.

⁷⁸ Hendricks, *Politics of Jesus*, 115.

⁷⁹ Hendricks, *Politics of Jesus*, 115.

hostility toward Jesus, despite the selflessness that he displayed and promoted, as well as how the corruptions may have influenced the way in which the Jewish elite viewed the general populace.

Abuses of Power and the Exploitation of the Peasantry

Long before the Romans gained control over the region, occupation of Judea by other nations had taken its toll, and wreaked havoc, upon the social structure of the Jewish people. According to Richard Horsley, principal literary sources for the second-Temple period, such as Ezra and Nehemiah, indicate that “not only was the society fractured by vertical divisions of rival factions in the ruling aristocracy closely related to parallel conflicts between and among rival imperial regimes, but horizontal divisions were visible as well, both between the aristocracy and the people, and between the priestly families who controlled the Temple and other priestly groups who also served in the Temple-state.”⁸⁰ These divisions became most evident as a result of early Hellenization and the commercial activity that came with it. Utilizing the writings of early wisdom teachers such as Ben Sira, Martin Hengel points out that “Ben Sira frequently mentions merchants and their pursuit of profits, and these passages again reflect the new period which began in Judea under Greek rule, when the money economy, the opportunity to invest one’s means in profitable enterprises, and lively absorbing commercial traffic had begun to develop.”⁸¹

⁸⁰ Richard A. Horsley, *Scribes, Visionaries, and the Politics of Second Temple Judea* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 53.

⁸¹ Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period* (Philadelphia: PA Fortress Press, 1974), 1:23.

Accordingly, Horsley points out that “despite being a wisdom teacher, Ben Sira portrays a partisan view regarding his place within society against his socio-political superiors and his social-cultural inferiors.”⁸² The critical comments Ben Sira makes about abuses of power reveal serious implications for the cultural view of those who work with their hands.

How can one become wise who handles the plow, ...
 who drives oxen... and whose talk is about bulls?
 He sets his heart on plowing furrows,
 and he is careful about fodder for the heifers.
 So too is every artisan and master artisan,
 who labors by night as well as by day;
 those who cut the signets of seals....
 So it is with the smith, sitting by the anvil;...
 he struggles with the heat of the furnace....
 So it is with the potter,... turning the wheel with his feet....
 He molds the clay with his arm,...
 And he takes care in firing the kiln.
 All these rely on their hands,...
 Without them no city can be inhabited,
 and wherever they live, they will not go hungry.
 Yet they are not sought out for the council of the people,
 nor do they attain eminence in the public assembly.
 They do not sit in the judge’s seat,
 nor do they understand the decisions of courts;
 they cannot expound discipline or judgment,
 and they are not found among the rulers.
 But they maintain the fabric of the world,
 and their concern is for the exercise of their trade.
 How different the one who devotes himself
 to the study of the law of the Most High!
 He seeks out the wisdom of all the ancients....
 He serves among the great
 and appears before the rulers;
 he travels in foreign lands
 and learns what is good and evil in the human heart.⁸³

⁸² Horsley, *Scribes, Visionaries, and the Politics of Second Temple Judea*, 55.

⁸³ Sirach 38:25-35, 39:1, 4 (New Revised Standard Version).

Despite portraying artisans, craftsmen, and farmers as valuable to society and able to provide for themselves, as well as others, Ben Sira also portrays them as unable to understand issues related to governance or serve in decision making roles within society. As such, they are inferior to those who do.

Despite their self-sufficiency, however, the peasantry is still very much dependent upon the rulers.

By virtue of their power, military and other, the rulers are able to demand rent/tithes/tribute from the peasant producers whom they rule. The rulers use part of what they appropriate from the peasantry (1) to support a staff of military and legal clerical ‘retainers’ through whom the society is ‘governed,’ (2) to organize or support traders who obtain the luxury and other goods the rulers desire, (3) to pay or support artisans who make the various products required by the rulers and their retainers and supporters in the cities.⁸⁴

As such, a dependency is formed among the lower classes of merchants, retainers and peasants with the ruling class, resulting in the ruling class laying claim to the majority share of productivity within a given society.

Guided by the proprietary theory of the state, which theorized that “the state is a piece of property which its owner may use, within broad and somewhat ill-defined limits, for his personal advantage,”⁸⁵ the agrarian rulers monopolized the resources available to them, most often at the expense of the lower classes. Accordingly, “agrarian rulers saw nothing improper or immoral in the use of what we, not they, would call ‘public office’ for private gain. It was simply a legitimate use of what they commonly regarded, and

⁸⁴ Horsley, *Scribes, Visionaries, and the Politics of Second Temple Judea*, 60.

⁸⁵ Gerhard E. Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1978), 214.

often called, their ‘patrimony.’”⁸⁶ While this model helps to explain the societal relations between the ruling classes and the artisan and peasant classes of first century Judea, it does not, however, circumvent the Torah which promoted care for the poor. Likewise, although Ben Sira indicates that scribes may have been ambivalent about their position between their superiors and their inferiors, he also “sees the scribe as responsible for protecting those vulnerable to exploitation (4:1-10).”⁸⁷ By the time of Jesus, however, it appears that this responsibility may have lost out in favor of cultural elitism, as “the great majority of the political elite sought to use the energies of the peasantry to the full, while depriving them of all but the basic necessities of life.”⁸⁸ This exploitation of the peasantry transcended the political sphere, ultimately making its way into the priesthood, as seen in Jesus’ claim, noted by all three Synoptic writers, that the Temple had become a “den of robbers.”

It must be noted, however, that there are some who argue that there are no charges of corruption against the priesthood that can be found in the Gospels.⁸⁹ While this may indeed be true, there are indications from the Old Testament, as well as second Temple writings and literature that post-dates Jesus’ crucifixion, which suggest corruption within the high priesthood. In the Babylonian Talmud, *Pesachim 57a* mentions 4 cries against the Temple, with the first stating, “Depart hence, ye children of Eli,’ for they defiled the Temple of the Lord.” According to Craig Evans, “the allusion is to the evil sons of Eli, priest of Shiloh, who profited from the sacrifices, engaged in harlotry, and from those

⁸⁶ Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 214.

⁸⁷ Horsley, *Scribes, Visionaries, and the Politics of Second Temple Judea*, 57.

⁸⁸ Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 270.

⁸⁹ E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), 66.

who resisted they took it by force.”⁹⁰ In another example within the Qumran commentary on Habakkuk,” the High Priest is customarily referred to as the ‘Wicked Priest’ (1QpHab 1:13; 8:9; 9:9; 11:4), and in a few places he is accused of robbing the people, including the poor (1QpHab 8:12; 9:5; 10:1; 12:10), of amassing wealth (1QpHab 8:8-12; 9:4-5 [‘priests of Jerusalem’], and of defiling the ‘Sanctuary of God’ (1QpHab 12:8-9).”⁹¹

To be sure that claims of Temple corruption are legitimate, and not influenced by particular agendas or anachronistic references to the writings of the prophets, these sources of information that come from rabbinic evidence are often considered very reliable, although not as much as second-Temple references. One such example, taken from m. Keritot 1:7, suggests that the price of a sacrificial pigeon had been overly inflated.

If a woman has had five ambiguous cases of vaginal bleeding or miscarriages, she brings one [purification] sacrifice, may eat from sacrificial meat, and has no further liability. If she has had five certain cases of miscarriage or vaginal bleeding, she brings one sacrifice, may eat from the sacrificial meat, but is liable for the rest [i.e., four more offerings]. There was a case in which the cost of pigeons [used for these sacrifices] stood at a gold dinar. Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel said, “By this Temple! I will not sleep tonight until their price is [reduced to] a silver dinar.” He entered the court and instructed: “A woman who has five certain miscarriages or five certain cases of vaginal bleeding shall bring one sacrifice, eat from the sacrificial meat, and have no further liability.” That very day the price of pigeons fell to a fourth of [a silver dinar].⁹²

In another example, the priesthood is accused of having succumbed to other defilements that were originally prohibited.

⁹⁰ Craig A. Evans, “Jesus’ Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?” in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51, (1989): 258.

⁹¹ Evans, “Jesus’ Actions in the Temple,” 260.

⁹² Mishnat Hashavua’: Keritot 1:7.

There were but eighteen priests ministering in the first Temple, but they were skillful servants, and the Temple service was kept up for four hundred and ten years. Not so was it, unfortunately, in the second Temple, where over eighty priests officiated. With a few honourable exceptions, they were unworthy to serve on the altar of God. Some bought their position with money, and there were others amongst them who did not disdain to use witchcraft.⁹³

These are but a few of the examples that are available that suggest corruption within the priesthood. As Jonathan Klawans points out, however, the rabbinic sources are not the only sources that identify troubling times within the Temple. “With regard to the sinful priests mentioned in rabbinic literature, we can find similar accounts of a greedy, gluttonous priesthood in book 20 of Josephus’ *Antiquities*.”⁹⁴ In this example, Josephus tells of a feud between Jesus b. Gamaliel and Ananias, in which Ananias was able to retain the priesthood by flaunting his wealth and attracting supporters through bribery, even though Gamaliel had already gained the High Priesthood.⁹⁵ In his account of the Jewish war, Josephus specifically mentions Ananias as one whose house was burned by rebel forces,⁹⁶ presumably over corrupt practices.

To be sure, there are those who would consider the sources of some of these examples to be biased because Josephus was friends with some of the chief priests, as well as possibly motivated by seeking approval from his Roman benefactors by shifting blame toward the Jews. Others could argue that the sources are not accurately dated to the time of Jesus, and therefore do not adequately represent the social and cultural conditions

⁹³ Leviticus Rabba 21.

⁹⁴ Jonathan Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2006), 227.

⁹⁵ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20.9.4.

⁹⁶ Josephus, *War of the Jews*, 2.17.6.

of the time. Instead, they reflect conditions that had deteriorated prior to the destruction of the Temple. Keener points out, however, that “because the Romans used public religious offices in Rome, including priesthoods, as political tools, it is not surprising that they exercised political discretion in choosing high priests in Jerusalem, an activity which undoubtedly tainted the high priest in the eyes of purists.”⁹⁷ Despite the validity of some of these arguments, however, the examples still provide clear evidence of some type of distrust associated with the priesthood. The most likely basis for such distrust is corruption. As explained by Craig Evans, “Despite the uncertainties, the evidence of corruption in the high priesthood is sufficiently attested in diverse sources and is at times corroborated, at least in part, so that we cannot escape the conclusion that the high priesthood of Jesus’ time was in all likelihood corrupt (or at least was assumed to be so) and that Jesus’ action in the Temple is direct evidence of this.”⁹⁸

Thus, corruption within the priesthood appears to have been a genuine concern during the time of Jesus. Therefore, with the likelihood of priestly corruptions comes the subsequent oppression and marginalization of those who were among the lower levels of society, revealing the need for Temple reform. The actions of the Temple priests, however, including their lack of service in protecting the poor in society, were not the only issues that were taking place that must be considered in order to make sense of Jesus’ actions. Priestly abuses alone are not necessarily enough to prompt Jesus into making a scene in full view of the Roman authorities keeping watchful eye on the events taking place within the Jerusalem Temple.

⁹⁷ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1:525.

⁹⁸ Evans, “Jesus’ Actions in the Temple,” 263.

Objections to the Temple Tax

There are many who believe that Jesus' overturning of the money-changers' tables points to his objection to the annual half-shekel tax that was imposed on all Jews. Thus, his actions were symbolic of the need to overturn this requirement. Klawans explains that "we do know that the Temple tax was the subject of disputes in ancient Judaism. According to rabbinic sources, the sages and Sadducees disputed over whether or not the tax revenues should defray the costs of the daily offering."⁹⁹ Additionally, there is evidence in the Dead Sea texts that indicate opposition to this tax. Therefore, although possibly being enough to prompt Jesus' response toward the moneychangers and traders in the Temple, such widespread opposition would hardly render Jesus' actions as "radical." Likewise, the need for money-changers does not appear to be a relevant issue since the only acceptable currency was the silver coinage of Tyre.

Due to Temple requirements, Roman coinage, among others, was not allowed to be used because they often had images of Roman, or other governmental leaders, which would violate the commandment against idols or graven images. Since they were not allowed to be used for the Temple tax, moneychangers were necessary to ensure the correct currency exchange was being conducted. Many scholars claim that the moneychangers themselves "had a monopoly and often charged exorbitant rates. They have been estimated to have made an annual profit of about £stg. 9,000 a year, while the Temple tax brought the Temple authorities about £stg. 75,000 a year."¹⁰⁰ Craig Keener,

⁹⁹ Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple*, 231.

¹⁰⁰ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 170.

however, explains that “Despite other professions in lists of unscrupulous means of profit, moneychangers provoked little complaint, and were often persons of high moral reputation and prominence.”¹⁰¹ Those who claim that the moneychangers had a monopoly, or added a surcharge, which none of the Gospels speak of, fail to explain the purpose of Jesus’ expulsion of the pigeon sellers in John’s gospel, compared with the Synoptics who identify Jesus as turning over their tables as well. Therefore, although including them among items that must be purged from the Temple, it appears that Jesus had some reason for sparing the pigeon sellers from the worst of his anger.

The inclusion of animal traders in the Temple precincts has already been established, as has the necessity of their presence in order to prevent travelers from having to bring their own. Therefore, it appears that Jesus was not concerned with commercialism in general. The issue for Jesus, though, was the placement of the animals within the Court of the Gentiles. Instead, it stands to reason that there must have been some other reason behind Jesus’ actions that would have caused them to be viewed as radical. Likewise, there must have been some other reason for John to depart from the Synoptics portrayal of the event as the culmination of actions that prompted his destruction by the religious elite. The only reason remaining is Jesus’ concern for the poor.

The common denominator between the Synoptic version of Jesus’ actions within the Temple cleansing and John’s version is the expulsion of the moneychangers and the dove sellers, both of which would have significant impact on the poor pilgrims attempting to worship in the Temple. As previously mentioned in the introduction, Jesus drove out the moneychangers and those selling cattle and sheep, but told those who were

¹⁰¹ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1:523.

selling doves to “Take these things out of here!” The significance of this should not be overlooked because it seems that Jesus would have been justified in knocking over their cages, or even setting the birds free, allowing them to fly away.

Since only the rich could afford cattle or even sheep to provide as sacrifices, the doves were inexpensive and reserved for the poor as their offering. By showing kindness to the doves, instead of knocking them over, Jesus was metaphorically showing pity on the poor whom they represented. Had he set the birds free, Jesus would have been depriving the poor of a much-needed resource necessary for Passover, effectively increasing their burden by forcing them to purchase more expensive animals for their offering. As a political statement being made by Jesus, this could be seen as Jesus recognizing, and drawing attention to, the oppressive conditions that were being imposed upon the poor and the negative impact that business transactions within the Temple were having on the Gentile worshippers.

“The money changers would have their impact on the impoverished because only the poor would feel pinched by the small surcharge assessed at the Temple. The dove sellers have their impact on the destitute because the birds are the cheapest of the animal sacrifices, and presumably it’s the poor who are buying doves, as opposed to more expensive animals such as lambs or goats.”¹⁰² Since the presence of money changers and animal sellers was unobjectionable from the standpoint of being necessary, there remains the possibility that Jesus stood opposed to all “aspects of the Temple system that required exacting money or goods from the poor.”¹⁰³ Examples abound within the Synoptic

¹⁰² Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple*, 237.

¹⁰³ Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple*, 237.

Gospel texts of Jesus looking out for the poor. Those who followed Jesus were to choose between serving God or Mammon (Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13). In some cases they were expected to give up their homes and property (Matt. 19:27; Mark 10:28), and possibly even their cloaks (Matt. 5:40; Luke 6:29), while the wealthy should give what they had to those in need (Matt. 19:16-22; Mark 10:17-22; Luke 18:18-23). This did not mean that the poor were off the hook from contributing, however, since alms was expected of everyone (Matt. 5:42; Luke 6:30). Additionally, there is evidence of praise for those who contribute what they have at great cost, such as the description of the “widow’s mite” passage of Mark 12:41-44 and Luke 21:1-4.¹⁰⁴

Klawans takes the motivation that prompted Jesus’ actions in the Temple even further by suggesting that the “Temple should pose no financial burden to the poor at all.”¹⁰⁵ Basing his argument on the story found at the end of Matthew’s gospel, where Peter finds a coin in the fish’s mouth which would allow Peter to pay the tax, Klawans makes the point that while Jesus and Peter would indeed pay the tax that was required, it would not cost them anything. Thus, “the poor should not have to pay what they could not easily afford.”¹⁰⁶ The Temple tax should be exacted upon those who could afford to make the payment simply because they had the money to do so, while those who did not should be exempt from the burden. While not condemning the Temple tax itself, the system should have provided for the poor instead of creating yet another burden for the poor to have to deal with. Unfortunately, since the upkeep of the Temple was designed to

¹⁰⁴ Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple*, 237.

¹⁰⁵ Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple*, 239.

¹⁰⁶ Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple*, 239.

be shared by all, there was no exemption for the poor. Yet the burden placed on the poor was more substantial than that which was placed on those who could readily afford the payment. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to argue the merits of the Temple tax, it is important to realize that the tax placed a heavier burden on the poor, which prompted Jesus to respond in their defense.

When combined with the marginalization of the Gentile worshippers, by infringing upon their worship space with the presence of animal traders and money changers, Jesus' concern for the poor and marginalized begins to come into focus, thereby illuminating his reason for creating a scene within the Temple complex. The only issue remaining, however, is the extent to which Jesus' actions constituted a scene, especially in the Gospel of John, which would allow him to continue his ministry and subsequently return to the Temple for Passover celebrations two more times, in contrast with the Synoptic portrayals of the Temple incident being the catalyst for Jesus' crucifixion.

Clearing the Temple

So to what extent did Jesus "clear" the Temple? Robert Gillies explains that, "Even if he had really gone frenzied his actions would have been relatively minor in comparison to the large number of people present. As is often the case these days, a fight, or rumpus of some sort, is often ringed-off as people create a human boundary of non-involvement around the stramash."¹⁰⁷ Thus, it becomes evident, then, that Jesus' actions

¹⁰⁷ Robert Gillies, "11th March: 3rd Sunday in Lent: Jeremiah 7:1-7(11); John 2:13-22," *The Expository Times* 123 (2005): 235.

were not aimed at emptying the Temple of all moneychangers and sacrificial animal traders.

Although it is clearly reported that Jesus lashed out in anger against those who were selling animals and exchanging currencies, readers must not jump to hasty conclusions that this passage spotlights violent tendencies on the part of Jesus. Allen Dwight Callahan, for example, claims that the passage constitutes “early scribal attempts to mitigate the violence of the incident, suggesting that Jesus used ‘something like a whip’ and used it only on the animals. These readings are early Christian spin control on a report that Jesus, armed and dangerous, assaulted worshippers and livestock alike in the Temple.”¹⁰⁸ On the contrary, F. F. Bruce provides a more realistic and probable explanation by claiming that, “Whatever the degree of force that was used, the action took on nothing of the riotous character that would have attracted swift and sharp intervention from the Roman garrison in the Antonia Fortress which overlooked the Temple area.”¹⁰⁹ While sure to get the attention of the Temple leaders, Jesus’ actions were not intended to interrupt the worship of thousands of faithful pilgrims. Instead, they were to draw attention to the abusive practices that were taking place within the Temple at the expense of the poor and marginalized. Andreas J. Köstenberger concludes, “Jesus’ agenda was not mere reform but nothing less than revolution.”¹¹⁰ The revolution

¹⁰⁸ Allen Dwight Callahan, “The Gospel of John,” in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (ed. Brian K. Blount; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 186-212.

¹⁰⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, 75.

¹¹⁰ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters: Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 195.

spoken of here is not that which takes up arms against the ruling authority, but one that completely changes the prevailing mindset of what is acceptable within society.

John's portrayal of the cleansing of the Temple by Jesus was not a physical clearing of the Temple complex. Covering nearly thirty-five acres in size,¹¹¹ the Temple was much too big for one man to have made any more of an impact on the crowded pilgrimage site than a mild disturbance within a remote corner of the crowd. Had the disturbance escalated to anything more, then the Roman guards would have been swift in intervening, and put a stop to any signs of an uprising. Likewise, if Jesus' actions were unable to affect the practices of the entire Temple complex, it stands to reason that there must be another purpose. This purpose was to draw attention to the abusive practices that were allowing the religious leaders to profit and become wealthy at the expense of the poor. Likewise, the Gentiles were being marginalized by having to worship amidst the noise and commotion associated with these commercial practices. This lack of equality was the problem that Jesus addressed. Unlike the other three Gospel writers, it is clear that John was not interested in the historical portrayal of Jesus and his ministry. Instead, his testimony highlighted the significance of Jesus' actions in order to portray the high Christology of Jesus and his desire for equality among humanity. John uses this story, along with the wedding at Cana, as foundational evidence that Jesus was not only of divine nature, but also highly concerned with the plight of the poor and the oppressed.

¹¹¹ Scott, *Jewish Backgrounds*, 51.

Chapter 4

External Oppression

Just as we must move beyond our social location in order to understand the cultural conditions of ancient Palestine, we must do the same to understand ancient Rome. As the primary world power during the Second Temple Period, Rome dominated all aspects of social life. Oppression went well beyond simple occupation of territories. Instead, Roman influence affected all areas of Jewish life. This chapter will consider the *Pax Romana* and show how the Romans kept the peace through fear, thereby preventing uprisings and maintaining the status quo.

Although the supreme governance fell under the authority of the Romans, conditions were even less favorable there for victims of abuse to appeal to when they felt mistreated by local authorities. Furthermore, since Roman authorities took little interest in local governance, unless one was a citizen of Rome there was little interest among the Romans of the subject peasantry. The peace that was provided by Rome was a peace maintained through political repression, and it benefitted almost exclusively the rich members of society. While there may be a sense of relative peace and tranquility within the pages of Scripture, especially among the Gospels, it must not be overlooked that the people of Israel were subjects of Rome. Those who had endured the oppression of the Romans probably kept fresh in their minds the memories either experienced or passed down to them of Roman armies marching through the area, burning villages, enslaving the able-bodied, and killing the infirm.

The Brutality of Rome

From the perspective of Rome, the *Pax Romana* was “a splendid thing.... All the lands that border the Mediterranean Sea and many regions lying beyond it were enjoying under one government the benefits of peace, law and order, and prosperity.”¹¹² For the subjects of Rome, however, this peace, law and order, and prosperity came at a heavy cost. The conditions of life in Palestine were determined by the Romans, and peace was maintained through fear and brutality. “To terrorize the people into submission they destroyed villages, slaughtered or enslaved some of the people, and crucified leaders of resistance.”¹¹³ Compared with some other societies, as well as modern views of death and violence, ancient Rome did not seem at all disturbed by images of violence, destruction, or even death. Instead, Rome seemed to revel in all forms of violence and death, remaining “extraordinary (among other societies) for the scale and the method of its violence, and for applauding skill, artistry, and diligence in the punishment and destruction of creatures.”¹¹⁴ For the most part, these brutal tactics were designed to prevent uprisings against the Empire. Those who did so were swiftly punished and put on display as deterrence should anyone else believe they stood a chance against mighty Rome. The extent to which this brutality is exacted can be seen in the account of Cassius Dio about the suppression of conspiracy by Sejanus, a powerful commander of the Praetorian Guard, as described by Donald Kyle in his book *Spectacles of Death in*

¹¹² G. A. Williamson, *The World of Josephus: The Life, Times and Works of the First Century Historian* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1964), 34.

¹¹³ Richard A. Horsley, “Jesus and Empire,” in *In the Shadow of Empire*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 78.

¹¹⁴ Donald G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1998), 1.

Ancient Rome. In addition to the details associated with his condemnation, it is also important to see just how quickly the populace could turn against Sejanus.

For the man whom at dawn they had escorted to the senate-hall as a superior being, they were now dragging to prison as if no better than the worst... The populace also assailed him, shouting many reproaches at him for the lives he had taken... They hurled down, beat down and dragged down all his images, as though they were thereby treating the man himself with contumely, and he thus became a spectator of what he was destined to suffer. {When the Senate condemned him}... he was executed and his body cast down the Stairway, where the rabble abused it for three whole days and afterward threw it into the river. His children also were put to death by decree, the girl... having first been outraged by the public executioner on the principle that it was unlawful for a virgin to be put to death in the prison. His wife Apicata was not condemned, to be sure, but on learning that her children were dead, and after seeing their bodies on the Stairway... she committed suicide.¹¹⁵

Tacitus continues to extol the rage of Tiberius against Sejanus and those who had consorted with him.

To remove any doubt that the vastness of his wealth had proved the man's ruin, Tiberius kept his gold-mines for himself, though they were forfeited to the State. Executions were now a stimulus to his fury, and he ordered the death of all who were lying in prison under accusation of complicity with Sejanus. There lay, singly or in heaps, the unnumbered dead, of every age and sex, the illustrious with the obscure. Kinsfolk and friends were not allowed to be near them, to weep over them, or even to gaze on them too long. Spies were set round them, who noted the sorrow of each mourner and followed the rotting corpses, till they were dragged to the Tiber, where, floating or driven on the bank, no one dared to burn or to touch them. The force of terror had utterly extinguished the sense of human fellowship, and, with the growth of cruelty, pity was thrust aside.¹¹⁶

These examples show how the reign of terror by Tiberius impacted those who were subjects, but also are indicative of how Rome ruled the Empire. Compassion was not virtuous when it came to suppressing insurrection, and as an example for anyone who

¹¹⁵ Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 222.

¹¹⁶ Tacitus *Annals* 6.19.

may be considering rebellion, these displays of force were designed to instill fear, not just for oneself, but for the well-being of one's own family, friends, and known associates. Sejanus was a Roman citizen who had gained enough power to potentially usurp the throne, but there was even less pity shown toward those who were subjects instead of citizens.

Within the area of Palestine, under the rule of Tiberius Caesar conditions were just as tense. Governed locally by Pontius Pilate, the Jews were not exempt to the cruelty of the Romans. Although serving underneath Caesar, the local governor “wielded the power of Rome... and his exercise of imperium was very nearly absolute.”¹¹⁷ Pilate was no exception. Wielding supreme power, Pilate exercised control over his subjects with the same brutality and ruthlessness as Tiberius, while at the same time satisfying his own desires and lusts. Based on accounts by both Philo and Josephus, Harold Hoehner describes Pilate as “being one who was greedy, inflexible, cruel, and resorted to robbery and oppression.”¹¹⁸ On one of his visits to Jerusalem, after seizing funds from the Temple treasury, “the Jews besieged him with angry clamor and he, seeing the possibility of an uprising, ordered his soldiers to mingle with the crowd dressed as civilians armed with hidden clubs. When the protest became more pronounced the soldiers, on a prearranged signal, drew their clubs from under their tunics and began to beat them, killing many.”¹¹⁹ Later on, Herod Agrippa is reported as stating that “The Jews should not protest at the

¹¹⁷ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 114.

¹¹⁸ Harold W. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 173.

¹¹⁹ Hoehner, *Herod Antipas*, 174.

insolence of Roman governors and provoke them: they should patiently submit to them and humbly flatter them.”¹²⁰

Capital punishment, however, was not reserved just for insurrection. Instead, it was used as punishment for various other crimes, including murder, military desertion, rustling, and sacrilege, in addition to being the punishment inflicted upon runaway slaves. More often than not, however, punishment in the form of execution was reserved for non-citizens. “For a host of crimes Rome punished criminals of low status with aggravated or ultimate punishments, which included exposure to wild beasts, crucifixion, and burning alive. One could also be condemned to become a gladiator, or sent for life to the mines or public works.”¹²¹ These ultimate punishments evolved into death spectacles which the public was encouraged to attend. While serving as punishment for criminals, they were also used “to dispose of captives, venerate the dead, and demonstrate munificence.”¹²² Although Rome executed capital punishments in many different ways, crucifixion was frequently the method of choice for Jews and Christians. “For exemplary effect, crucifixions were held at well-travelled public roadways, offering a stark contrast to the hallowed burials of good citizens nearby.”¹²³ As such, the threat of capital punishment, which included aspects of public humiliation, served as deterrents for anyone considering upsetting the peace or breaking the law.

In the case of Jesus and his actions in the Temple, it is unlikely that any disturbance that hinted at, or gave the appearance of, inciting an uprising would have

¹²⁰ Williamson, *The World of Josephus*, 27.

¹²¹ Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 53.

¹²² Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 44.

¹²³ Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 53.

been ignored. “The stability of the empire and the maintenance of the famous *Pax Romana* depended upon the army,”¹²⁴ and little escaped the watchful eyes of those stationed in the Antonia Fortress overlooking the Temple precincts.

The Antonia Fortress

The Antonia Fortress had been constructed during the time of Hyrcanus I (135-105 B.C.) and was originally known as the Baris. It “formed a safe and convenient residence for the Hasmonean princes at the times when they were obliged to perform high priestly duties in the Temple.”¹²⁵ The fortress had originally faced outward against its northern enemies, but following a failed assassination attempt on his life by a group of Jews who had become disgruntled over his placement of trophies in the amphitheater in Jerusalem, because to them they represented idols, Herod “saw that he needed the tightest of controls in order to hold the populace in check and to discourage further efforts to assassinate him.”¹²⁶ Herod then rebuilt Antonia facing inward to watch over the Jews, where “the highest tower faced the Temple courts, and the chief activity of the garrison was to police the Court of the Gentiles, where crowds of worshippers gathered.”¹²⁷ As a further point of control over the Jews, Herod maintained custody of the high priestly garments within the Antonia fortress, only to be released to the high priest on four ceremonial occasions per year. These sacred robes “were descendants of the robes with

¹²⁴ Scott, Jr. *Jewish Backgrounds*, 91.

¹²⁵ John F. Hall, “Tower of Antonia,” *ABD* 1:274.

¹²⁶ Samuel Sandmel, *Herod: Profile of a Tyrant* (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippencott Company, 1967), 174.

¹²⁷ K. W. Clark, “Tower of Antonia,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* 1:153.

which God himself had clothed Aaron, and they were too greatly and passionately revered for the king to feel safe if they were allowed in other hands.”¹²⁸

Although “it was not common practice to station troops inside a major city, Jerusalem had been the focal point for Jewish unrest for many years.”¹²⁹ For this reason a Roman cohort, which consisted of around 600 men, was stationed within the Antonia Fortress and prepared to respond to any disturbance that resembled a potential uprising. Therefore, although John reports that Jesus lashed out in anger against those who were selling animals and exchanging currencies, it is doubtful that Jesus’ actions were significant enough to garner the attention of the Roman soldiers who were stationed in the Antonia Fortress. Moreover, the addition of the whip fashioned from cords would have drawn even more attention to Jesus. According to A. Alexis-Baker, “If Jesus had used the kind of weapon that Romans used to punish people, the Temple guards and the Roman garrison stationed nearby would have acted swiftly. Additionally, unrest during Jewish festivals was so commonplace that the Roman authorities prepared for it by sending in extra soldiers to quell any uprising that might occur.”¹³⁰ Had it attracted the attention of the authorities, it is likely that Jesus would have been arrested immediately, thereby all but eliminating any possibility of further ministry. This is obvious within the accounts of the Synoptics as this is the culminating event that prompted the officials to seek Jesus’ arrest. Yet John places this major disruption at the beginning of his account and at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry.

¹²⁸ Michael Grant, *Herod the Great* (New York, NY: American Heritage Press, 1971), 73.

¹²⁹ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 174.

¹³⁰ Andy Alexis-Baker, “Violence, Nonviolence and the Temple Incident in John 2:13-15” in *Biblical Interpretation 20* (2012): 88.

Jesus' Opposition to Oppression

What then is the statement that Jesus was making that John is so inclined to promote? Dominic Crossan suggests that, “The kingdom of God movement was Jesus' program of empowerment for a peasantry becoming more steadily hard-pressed... through insistent taxation, attendant indebtedness and eventual land expropriation, all within increasing commercialization in the booming colonial economy of a Roman empire under Augustan peace.”¹³¹ The kingdom of God movement has already been discussed in the early part of chapter 2, but it is important to remember that “It has long been a consensus among interpreters that ‘the kingdom of God’ was the dominant theme in Jesus’ mission.”¹³² What is of greater importance now, however, is the point behind the method employed to initiate this movement. Thus, in cleansing the Temple, Jesus was also making a statement against the oppressive forces of Rome, as well as the Jewish elite who had all but sold out to their own people in search of prosperity via their Roman patrons.

From a historical perspective, the Roman Empire can be seen as a spectacular marvel of determination and massive military prowess that allowed them to overcome so many other powerful nations, thereby spreading their rule over the majority of the Mediterranean world. This image provides the impression that the Roman Empire was to be admired, and even favored. To be sure, “for many in the empire, Roman civilization brought stability and wealth”¹³³ as a direct result of the new world order. But the majority

¹³¹ John Dominic Crossan, *Who killed Jesus? : Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1995), 211.

¹³² Horsley, “Jesus and Empire,” in *In the Shadow of Empire*, 87.

¹³³ John Dart, “Up Against Caesar: Jesus and Paul versus the Empire” in *Christian Century* 122 no 3 F8 (2005): 20.

of the populace never experienced this new-found prosperity because “the ugly underside of the *Pax Romana* was disorder and devastation for subject peoples.”¹³⁴ Forced to pay heavy tributes to the imperial regime, while already barely surviving as subsistence farmers within an agrarian society, the toll placed on the people was overwhelming. Fearful of the brutality displayed by the occupying Romans, their misery was compounded with the reality of indentured servanthood, loss of property, homelessness, and starving conditions in order to make payments toward a broken system that they would never truly benefit from. This is the essence of oppression. As explained by Elsa Tamez, “Oppressors are thieves and murderers, but their ultimate purpose is not to kill or impoverish the oppressed, as these are but secondary consequences. Their primary objective is to increase their wealth at whatever cost.”¹³⁵ Therefore, adding further insult for those oppressed by the Romans was witnessing their own leaders siding with the occupying Romans while at the same time neglecting, often totally ignoring, their own people whom they had responsibility to protect according to Mosaic Law. As Richard Horsley explains, “The demand for tribute to Rome and taxes to Herod in addition to tithes and offerings to the Temple and priesthood dramatically escalated the economic pressures on peasant producers, whose livelihood was perennially marginal at best.”¹³⁶ These are but some of the conditions Jesus addresses by overturning the tables of the money-changers and driving the merchants out of the Temple.

¹³⁴ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 106.

¹³⁵ Elsa Tamez, *Bible of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), 41.

¹³⁶ Horsley, “Jesus and Empire,” in *In the Shadow of Empire*, 80.

Since the activities that Jesus attacked were not considered to be corruptions, it stands to reason that there was more to his actions than meets the eye. Instead of the sacrificial system, it was the corruptions behind those acceptable Temple activities that garnered Jesus' protest. The abusive practices allowed, and even supported, by the Roman-appointed priestly aristocracy were destroying the lives and well-being of the people. This was not just Jesus' condemnation of the Temple and the priestly aristocracy. Jesus was acting out God's judgment and condemnation of the Temple and priestly aristocracy. Reminiscent of an earlier deliverance from oppressive bondage, it is perhaps ironic that Jesus' actions took place at a time in which the people were celebrating such deliverance with the Passover celebration. While passions for deliverance were high among those celebrating, Jesus condemns the abusive practices and symbolically pronounces an end to imperial domination at the same time that people are remembering God's deliverance of the children of Israel from the oppressive rule of Pharaoh.

In place of oppression, Jesus promoted a renewed kingdom open and available "to all who would accept it: a life of open healing and shared eating, of radical itinerancy and fundamental egalitarianism, of human contact without discrimination and divine contact without hierarchy. That was how God would run the world if God, not Caesar, sat on its imperial throne."¹³⁷ In the words of Leonardo Boff, "God does not side with the mighty, who have the law at their disposition and utilize it to their own advantage. God sides with those violated in their dignity and their justice."¹³⁸ The world did not have to be the way it was. There was an alternative.

¹³⁷ Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?* 211.

¹³⁸ Leonardo Boff, *When Theology Listens to the Poor* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1988), 59.

Instead of providing peace, the *Pax Romana* provided chaos for the majority of the Palestinian population. Therefore, despite the very real hostilities that the Jewish peasantry may have felt against the priesthood or those in power, the political climate was neither favorable for outright hostilities against the government, nor against the priesthood who may have close ties with the Roman authorities. The Roman guards stationed within the Antonia Fortress would not have been able to ignore anything that might resemble an uprising. Not only had the fortress been designed for the purpose of holding the populace in check, the Roman authorities would have been prepared for it by the addition of extra troops who could quell any uprising, should it occur.

Actions against those who rebelled against the Romans were exceptionally brutal, as punishment was primarily used as deterrence against uprisings. Those who were accused of rebellion were swiftly punished and usually put on public display to prevent others from believing that rebellion against Roman rule was even possible. Had Jesus' actions even hinted at rebellion, or resembled an uprising, the Roman guard would have been swift to arrest him before others could join in. It would have been even more remarkable had Jesus been able to beat the merchants, much less the animals, with a whip without portraying himself as a rebel against the occupying regime. Thus, it is unlikely that Jesus would have survived any dramatic attempt to draw attention to the problems that plagued the peasantry while under the watchful eyes of the Roman authorities.

While little can be said with certainty regarding the Johannine community, these were certainly issues that would have affected their daily lives. In his reconstruction of the Johannine community, Raymond Brown contends that the acceptance among early community members of followers of Jesus, with an anti-Temple bias, "catalyzed the

development of a high, preexistence Christology that led to debates with Jews who thought that Johannine Christians were abandoning Jewish monotheism by making a second God out of Jesus.”¹³⁹ This issue ultimately led to their being expelled from the synagogue (9:22; 16:2) and created hostilities between community members and “the Jews.” This prompted the Johannine Christians to “stress a realization of the eschatological promises in Jesus to compensate for what they had lost in Judaism.”¹⁴⁰ Realization of these eschatological promises in the present initiated the kingdom of God movement and may have prompted John’s emphasis upon the treatment of the poor in the face of oppressive conditions. This “rejection and persecution, which convinced the Johannine Christians that the world was opposed to Jesus, caused them to look on themselves as not of this world.”¹⁴¹ As devotees of Jesus, who were not of this world, promotion of the realized eschatology of the kingdom of God would have led to an emphasis of behavior that exemplified kingdom ethics, including care for the oppressed and marginalized. Likewise, the Temple bias would have emphasized corrupt practices that would be contrary to the kingdom of God. Writing to a community of believers who held close to these ideas, it is only natural that John would use the Temple scene to highlight actions that promoted social justice and kingdom ethics.

¹³⁹ Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 374.

¹⁴⁰ Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 375.

¹⁴¹ Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 375.

Chapter 5

Call to Action

Discussion of these background issues lays the groundwork for seeing the Temple cleansing for what it really is. It provides for a fuller understanding of the cultural and social conditions that may have prompted Jesus' actions within the Temple, as well as a context for understanding John's motive for placing the Temple cleansing at the beginning of his Gospel instead of the end. After realizing the rich cultural issues that affected Judaism and the Temple activities, one is then prepared to see the social implications of why the Temple needed cleansing. The reasons for Temple reform were not limited to the fact that the Temple had become a marketplace, but because it was infringing upon the worship rights, as well as the general treatment within the Temple, of those who were marginalized within society. To be marginalized means "to be excluded from the center."¹⁴² The marginalized were those who were recipients of abuse because they were outsiders among those who had authority over laws of protection. Thus, as one's eyes become open to the issues that were facing the Gentiles and the poor, it becomes clearer that there is more to Jesus' actions within the Temple than meets the eye.

Social Justice

As the premier place within society in which every person stood on equal ground before God as individuals created in His image, the Temple should have promoted social justice among all persons regardless of their social standing. Yet just the opposite was

¹⁴² Justo L. Gonzalez, *Santa Biblia: The Bible through Hispanic Eyes* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 33.

taking place. This is clear since the market transactions were allowed to take place within the court of the Gentiles. Instead of providing equal space for worship, the Temple was constructed in such a way as to promote inequality among persons based on gender and social standing. Those whose social status was lowest were relegated to the outermost areas of the Temple complex. This resulted in the poor and the Gentile converts having to share their worship space with merchants and animals, complete with all the noise and distractions that they brought with them. The space provided for these lowest members of society was, therefore, far from sacred.

At this point, however, a distinction must be drawn between equality and justice versus equality and equal distribution of goods or conditions for all. According to Kent A. Van Til, basic provisions for the poor is not a requirement of the biblical witness.¹⁴³ Citing Acts 4:32 as the commonly applied passage for equality, which says, “Not one of them claimed any of his possessions as his own; everything was held in common,” Van Til presses readers on to v. 34 which says, “There was never a needy person among them, because those who had property in land or houses would sell it, bring the proceeds of the sale, and lay them at the feet of the apostles, to be distributed to any who were in need.” In directing attention to this verse, Van Til explains that “this description shows that the motive for the redistribution was based on a desire to serve those in need, not a desire to create equality.”¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, “selling one’s goods and placing the proceeds in a communal pot so that no one in the community would be needy was but one strategy employed by the early church to fulfill the long-standing desire of God that there ‘will be

¹⁴³ Kent A. Van Til, *Less Than Two Dollars a Day: A Christian View of World Poverty and the Free Market* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 82.

¹⁴⁴ Van Til, *Less Than Two Dollars a Day*, 82.

no more poor among you' (Deut. 15:4)."¹⁴⁵ As a call to action, therefore, this chapter will investigate ways in which modern believers can utilize Jesus' actions as a catalyst for social justice.

Sadly, little has changed in the world with regard to oppression and marginalization, despite the efforts of Jesus. Those who have power continue to maintain it at the expense of the poor. The characteristics previously outlined by Tamez are still applicable descriptions of modern day oppressors and the oppressed. Sadder still is the realization that, for the most part, the church has ignored, and continues to ignore, the issue of oppression while at the same time claiming to promote the values of Jesus. There are many different types of oppression, and it seems that every country or civilization faces its own unique challenges when dealing with the problem. This has led to the development of many different theological views, known categorically as "liberation theology," that aim to alleviate conditions that promote gross inequalities among humans. Historically arising in Latin America as a "human response to the large-scale human suffering that is so manifest there . . . , it arose as a theology of the poor, for the poor, on the side of the poor, committed to the liberation of those who are literally in captivity."¹⁴⁶

Liberation Theologies

Due to the high Christology of the Fourth Gospel, few scholars look to John for purposes other than spiritual guidance and affirmation that Jesus was the Logos incarnate. For this reason, John's text is often overlooked as a resource for teaching liberation.

¹⁴⁵ Van Til, *Less Than Two Dollars a Day*, 83.

¹⁴⁶ Roger Haight, *An Alternative Vision: An Interpretation of Liberation Theology* (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 1985), 27.

David Rensberger, however, argues that it is the context in which the fourth Gospel was written, a “situation of conflict, crisis, and alienation,”¹⁴⁷ that provides the basis for understanding and viewing the Gospel of John “as the product of an oppressed community, and to draw consequences therefrom.”¹⁴⁸ Craig Keener views the Gospel of John as “a useful resource for liberation theology precisely because it originally addressed an oppressed minority community marginalized by a powerful elite.”¹⁴⁹ As such, liberation theologians are considering John’s Gospel as much more than a solely spiritual Gospel. In his book *Liberation Theology*, Frederick Herzog considers the Gospel of John as the catalyst of liberation theology “due to the fact that it is the most reasoned out of all the Gospels, carefully articulating a theology of Jesus’ identification with men who had no identity in the eyes of the established church and society of his day.”¹⁵⁰

Not only does Herzog identify elements of liberation within the Temple episode, as already mentioned, but he also points to liberation themes in the visit of Nicodemus and Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman. In the story of Nicodemus in 3:1-21, Herzog explains that while Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again, the underlying point is that Nicodemus must undergo a radical change that is difficult to understand and accept. He must see things in a radically different way. In response to Nicodemus’ visit, Jesus revamps his worldview by offering a new idea.

What it involves in our day is plain: “Believe me, no man can see the kingdom of God unless he becomes black” (v. 3). Doesn’t that sound absurd? “How can a man become black when he is white” Can he again

¹⁴⁷ Rensberger, “The Gospel of John and Liberation,” 167.

¹⁴⁸ Rensberger, “The Gospel of John and Liberation,” 167.

¹⁴⁹ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1:152.

¹⁵⁰ Herzog, *Liberation Theology*, 17.

enter his mother's body and be born different?" (v. 4). Jesus' reasoning is based on another logic: "Believe me, if a person is not born of water and Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh creates flesh, and spirit creates spirit" (vv. 5-6). Nicodemus is still reasoning on grounds of wanting to retain white superiority, private selfhood. Jesus is concerned about a different self, corporate selfhood, which man controls as little as the wind (v. 8). Here the brutal logic of retaining one's identity as the superior white self or the "private I" no longer prevails.¹⁵¹

In order to understand where we stand in relation to kingdom ethics, we must eliminate the identifiers that we have placed on humanity that end up separating humanity into groups who may be seen as more or less deserving of rights, benefits, goods and services. Herzog is not claiming that we must change our race in order to attain eternal life any more than Jesus was claiming that we must be literally reborn, as this is obviously impossible. But what must be done is to recognize that "it is not our identification, but his identification with the wretched of the earth that counts and brings great change among men."¹⁵² In the fourth Gospel, "Jesus' open way of acting confronts man with corporate selfhood and challenges men to begin anew with being human. But beginning over again is not a matter of course, because it calls for the radical change of liberation of consciousness."¹⁵³ Only when one becomes conscious of discrimination, which leads to marginalization, can necessary changes be made to reduce or eliminate the underlying causes.

In recognizing our tendencies to identify ourselves as more or less deserving we tend to become closed to the plight of the poor and those who have gone morally astray. In turn, this leads to marginalization, fortifying the walls that are erected between classes

¹⁵¹ Herzog, *Liberation Theology*, 62.

¹⁵² Herzog, *Liberation Theology*, 65.

¹⁵³ Herzog, *Liberation Theology*, 63.

and genders, essentially closing them off to those who have power to influence change. These identifiers led the Samaritan woman to becoming an outcast. Yet Jesus did not let the cultural norms of his day prevent him from ministering to her. As the ultimate liberator, Jesus was able to confront people with their true condition. As Herzog explains, Jesus “makes men face race, color, class, or any other distinction between men in their true dimension.”¹⁵⁴

In the story of the Samaritan woman, Jesus goes further against the grain of social norms by speaking with a woman of ill-repute. Unlike the meeting with Nicodemus, which took place under the cover of darkness, this meeting takes place in broad daylight, at the most public of places, the local well. As Herzog explains, this further illuminates the liberating action of Jesus.

In John 4:1-45 Jesus acts again contrary to social custom, but now in direct confrontation with another human being who had been a nonperson to the Jew. Segregation between Jews and Samaritans had lasted more than four hundred years by the time Jesus appeared. What is more, the woman was not very respectable. Finally, she was a woman. Strict rabbis did not speak to women in public, some not even to their wives. In Jesus, discrimination becomes pointless. The walls between persons come tumbling down. Here is more than women’s liberation. Here is color liberation. Even more, here is human liberation.¹⁵⁵

Instead of focusing on the external criteria that defined human beings, and provided fuel for discrimination, Jesus focused on the individual personhood. Instead of separation, Jesus found identification.

These are but a few examples from within the text of John that identifies Jesus’ concern for the poor and the marginalized. Segregation within the Temple complex was

¹⁵⁴ Herzog, *Liberation Theology*, 72.

¹⁵⁵ Herzog, *Liberation Theology*, 73.

not of God, but of man. Practices that promoted discrimination and marginalization based on class distinctions, race, gender, and wealth were to be eliminated, as they went contrary to kingdom ethics. Jesus' actions within the Temple set the public stage for true freedom among persons and established Jesus as the ultimate liberator.

Liberation theologies have provided dramatic insights into the plight of the poor and marginalized by drawing attention to social conditions and how the Biblical text portrays God in relation to the poor versus those in power. Boff points out that "The Bible never speaks of human rights. The rights spoken of in the Bible belong to the orphan, the widow, the pauper, the immigrant, and the alien."¹⁵⁶ For believers who have never experienced marginalization, due to their own social conditions that have provided insulation from the plight of the poor and downtrodden, this is a startling revelation. Often, for those who have not experienced abject poverty firsthand, despite knowledge of its existence, it is difficult to understand the severity of poverty and how prevalent it actually is. Antonio Gonzalez points out that "World Bank data for 2008 shows that over 3 billion people live on less than \$2.50 per day and that 1.4 billion of those live on less than \$1.25 per day. In other words, nearly half of the inhabitants of the planet are living at dehumanizing levels of poverty, and one-fifth of all human beings are barely surviving."¹⁵⁷ These numbers are staggering, especially for those who live in areas that are relatively unaffected by debilitating poverty. Yet, in order to fully understand God's limitless provisions, we must come to terms with the conditions that prompted Jesus' ministry and his actions in the Temple. "Oppression and liberation are the very substance

¹⁵⁶ Boff, *When Theology Listens to the Poor*, 58.

¹⁵⁷ Antonio Gonzalez, *God's Reign and the End of Empires* (Miami, FL: Convivium Press, 2012), 28.

of the entire historical context within which divine revelation unfolds, and only by reference to this central fact can we understand the meaning of faith, grace, love, peace, sin, and salvation.”¹⁵⁸

Elaborating on the realization that the oppressed had nothing to do with their condition, Jose Miguez Bonino states that “poverty is not a hazard of fortune or a fact of nature but the result of certain people’s greed and injustice.”¹⁵⁹ In her book *Bible of the Oppressed*, Tamez presents the following general characteristics of the oppressors and the oppressed. Oppressors are (1) rich and strive to increase their wealth with no regard for how they obtain what they desire; (2) they have power and mastery because they belong to the governing class or are allied with it; (3) they are idolaters because contempt for God is inherent in their strive for wealth.¹⁶⁰ These characteristics are all evident within the behavior of the Romans, but can also be seen in the Jewish elite who aligned themselves with their Roman benefactors. “The characteristics of the oppressed are exactly opposite those of the oppressor. They are poor; they have no social standing; the authorities pay no attention to them in the courts; and they have strong hope in God.”¹⁶¹

To be sure, though, poverty and oppressive conditions are not limited to developing countries alone. Despite Tamez’s claim that “there is almost complete absence of the theme of oppression in European and North American biblical

¹⁵⁸ Tamez, *Bible of the Oppressed*, 1.

¹⁵⁹ Jose Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975), 112.

¹⁶⁰ Tamez, *Bible of the Oppressed*, 32.

¹⁶¹ Tamez, *Bible of the Oppressed*, 37.

theology,”¹⁶² the people of Europe and North America have not been spared by the devastating effects of poverty. Wherever there is money to be made, there are those who exploit others in order to make it. She does, however, have a strong point regarding the lack of attention to the theme of oppression in North American biblical theology. In light of the economic inequalities that are prevalent within twenty-first century America, it seems that the church bears some responsibility for not addressing the devastating effects that this inequality is fostering. To be fair, the church is involved in many of the social aspects that plague our society, and even some “plagues” that the church has so labeled that serve only to discriminate against others. Each election season brings forth a new round of pleas from members of the local church to support various candidates on the basis of their stances against abortion, homosexuality, liquor by the drink, removal of the Ten Commandments from public buildings, the removal of prayer from schools, and even against the invasion of government into our private lives.¹⁶³ The believers behind these appeals believe they are doing the work of God, and they usually provide some Biblical basis for their views, even though some may be misguided in their interpretation of the Scripture they use for support. But what we often fail to hear is the public outcry for the poor, and rarely are the words of James appealed to: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27 NRSV). Metaphorically speaking, the widow represents those who have no voice and the orphans those who have no future. Likewise, this lack of public outcry by the church mirrors the lack of concern by the

¹⁶² Tamez, *Bible of the Oppressed*, 4.

¹⁶³ A comprehensive listing of beliefs with associated Biblical references is published in the Baptist Faith and Message at <http://www.sbc.org/bfm/default.asp>.

religious elite which prompted Jesus' actions within the Temple. The words of Jose Miranda ring true at this point when he says, "Morality's keystone and inescapable conclusion is that no end, no matter how sublime or divine or eternal, justifies causing—or indifferently allowing—an innocent person to suffer."¹⁶⁴

The Social Gospel

One of the pioneers of care for the poor and equal rights for all was Walter Rauschenbusch. During the early part of the 20th century, Rauschenbusch presented what came to be known as the "social gospel." As pastor of a church in New York's Hell's Kitchen, Rauschenbusch was exposed to the abject poverty and grim conditions that plagued members of the community. His social gospel specifically addressed social implications such as the neglect of the poor at the expense of the rich and how sin is not just a "private transaction between the sinner and God."¹⁶⁵ Additionally, he realized that the churches seemed to ignore the grim conditions and were content with the status quo, emphasizing individual repentance and conversion. Although there have been significant improvements in working conditions and steps to improve the pay and benefits of workers through laws and regulations, when one looks critically at the efforts being taken by the church, it appears that we are not far removed from Rauschenbusch's initial findings, much less the abuses that were taking place within the Temple. In that respect, it

¹⁶⁴ Miranda, *Being and the Messiah*, 29.

¹⁶⁵ Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1917), 48.

would be hard to argue that the church is really that far removed from the social conditions that plagued first century Jerusalem.

Rauschenbusch believed the kingdom of God was the essence of the Social Gospel as well as the essential doctrine of the Christian faith. Without a solid doctrine of the kingdom, theology would be reduced to schemes of redemption and systems of ethics. Instead, Rauschenbusch argued that the church's sole purpose should be to create the kingdom by working to transform society. God would judge the church by how effective it was in creating the kingdom on earth.¹⁶⁶

In the view of Rauschenbusch, Jesus remained committed to his earthly life without the trappings of religious orthodoxy that often leads to asceticism and other-worldliness. Jesus' refusal to be trapped by the religious laws provides a strong example of the social gospel, as well as initiating a call to action for believers everywhere. Whenever the established laws and customs interfered with his communion with God, Jesus was not afraid to break with tradition. If the laws concerning the Sabbath interfered with acts of mercy or caused undue suffering, Jesus broke them. Laws which had no ethical truth in them, such as those regarding clean and unclean foods, were ignored by Jesus. Additionally, Jesus separated himself and his teachings from those of the Temple. Ceremonial acts were not the proper expression of his consciousness of God. His idea of religion focused on love and those acts which expressed love, fellowship, and the breaking away from the kingdom of Evil. If God was love, there was no need to appease God's anger through the time, expense and routine of ceremony.¹⁶⁷ Yet when the

¹⁶⁶ Pamela Durso and Keith Durso, *The Story of Baptists in the United States* (Brentwood, TN: Baptist History and Heritage Society, 2006), 157.

¹⁶⁷ Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 160.

conditions were ignored, Jesus did not hesitate to draw attention to the areas that needed attention. His cleansing of the Temple reflected his belief that everyone should be treated with compassion and respect. Those who could truly not afford to make the sacrifice should be exempt.

History is full of examples of church abuse and neglect at the expense of the individual. The Temple of Jerusalem is but the earliest example. For this reason, Rauschenbusch goes to great lengths to explain that the social aspect of the church is what provides the means for salvation. He says, “Wherever an aged and proud Church sets up high claims as an indispensable institution of salvation, let it be tested by the cleanliness, education, and moral elasticity of the agricultural labourers whom it has long controlled, or of the slum dwellers who have long ago slipped out of its control.”¹⁶⁸ We can be all too quick to place saving power upon the church based on its own institutional character, its continuity, its ordination, its ministry or its doctrine. But we must resist that urge and discipline ourselves to the understanding that the saving power of the church rests solely on the presence of the kingdom of God within her.¹⁶⁹

The Command to Love

None of this, however, could take place outside the context of the commandment to love one another found in 13:34-35 and then followed up on in 15:9, 12. “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love

¹⁶⁸ Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 128.

¹⁶⁹ Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 129.

for one another;” “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love;” “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (NRSV). The standard of the love that believers are to have for one another is the love which the Lord has lavished upon them. “He had set his love on his own people who were in the world, and he loved them to the uttermost.”¹⁷⁰ As modern believers demonstrate the love of God through their efforts to alleviate suffering among those whose voice is unheard at best, but most often completely ignored, they essentially act as participants with Jesus as he cleansed the Temple. Moreover, it provides identification for proponents of the social gospel. “If the Christian fellowship is marked by such love (‘love among one another’), then it will be recognized as the fellowship of Christ’s followers; it will bear the unmistakable stamp of his love.”¹⁷¹ Unfortunately, with regards to the poor, the church has done a poor job of loving everyone. As Haight explains, “the love of God and love of neighbor are inextricably intertwined. The problem is to see the intrinsic relation of faith, hope, and love of God to love of other people.”¹⁷²

The command to love found in chapters 13 and 15 is “grounded in the love of the Revealer. . . , is new in so far as it is a phenomenon of the new world which Jesus has brought into being and the faith which has accepted the Revealer’s service can only continue to come to fruition in the attitude of service, i.e. of love.”¹⁷³ For this reason, the love that believers show for one another must reflect the love of God, which is

¹⁷⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, 294.

¹⁷¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, 294.

¹⁷² Haight, *An Alternate Vision*, 76.

¹⁷³ Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1971), 526.

demonstrated through service towards one another. Raymond Brown reminds us that “love is more than a commandment; it is a gift, and like the other gifts of the Christian dispensation it comes from the father through Jesus to those who believe in him.”¹⁷⁴

Therefore, it must be used in ways that reflect its tangible value since all things given by God are inherently good. Since love is an abstract concept, it must be displayed in ways that lend tangibility. Service towards other human beings, especially those in need provide just such tangible value.

By overturning the tables and sending the money changers away, Jesus took a stand against the oppressive conditions of his time. In doing so, he set the precedence by which future believers must also take a stand. The call-to-action that Jesus made through his actions within the Temple was not static. It was a dynamic call for all believers to rally behind the poor and the oppressed, taking a stand against the conditions that promoted exploitation and acted contrary to the love of Christ and the kingdom of God. “Because Christ placed his mission and his teachings within the context of the kingdom of God, we must do likewise, and because Christ embodied his teaching in the way he treated people, we must do the same.”¹⁷⁵

The oppression that Jesus took a stand against in the Temple is still prevalent today. Somewhere around two-thousand years since Jesus’ call to action, the church still fails to protect those who are being oppressed and marginalized at the expense of others. The status quo continues to reign by exploiting those who are unable to speak for themselves, while continuing to increase their own fortunes. The number of people living

¹⁷⁴ Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI*, 612.

¹⁷⁵ Glen H. Stassen, and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2003), 97.

in poverty continues to rise at alarming rates, but sadly, little is being done to alleviate their suffering, despite the dominance of Christianity as one of the three major monotheistic religions. This, despite the Apostle Paul's insistence that the church is the embodiment of the Temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17) and the body of believers constitutes the Temple of the living God (2 Cor. 6:14-18).

Although the situation may indeed sound depressing and hopeless, there is still room for encouragement. It does not have to remain this way. The call to action issued by Jesus in the Temple is still active today. By taking up the challenge and promoting the kingdom of God, by loving one another in the sense that Jesus loves humanity, and by seeking justice as the counterpart to love, contemporary believers can still make a dramatic impact. To do so, however, believers must take a stand against the status quo by calling the evils of inequality and injustice by name, and recognizing the power for change that is the kingdom of God. Believers, however, cannot remain passive. "The contemporary revolutionary must reject minimalist efforts that act as a mere social tranquilizer, because these efforts are merely an effect, and to correct the effects while leaving intact the cause is to perpetuate injustice."¹⁷⁶ Empowered by the example provided by Jesus' Temple actions, as well as the commandment to love one another as Jesus did, believers have the divine backing to influence political leaders to make positive changes that will help to eliminate, or at least alleviate, much of the sufferings that are taking place throughout the world. Instead of being a passive body of believers who have little influence as individuals, the time has come for members of the kingdom of God to unite around the common goal of ridding the world of the social problems that not only

¹⁷⁶ Miranda, *Being and the Messiah*, 22.

create inequalities among believers, but among all of God's creation. In doing so, believers heed the call to action and promote the kingdom of God. But more importantly, they love one another in the manner in which Jesus planned. As a result, living conditions improve for the poor and the world becomes a happier place to live. Worldly living becomes replaced with kingdom living.

Conclusion

Since it is now clear that Jesus could not have gotten away with literally cleansing the Temple in the way that John describes, we are forced to conclude that John must have been trying to promote something else with his placement of the Temple cleansing at the beginning of his ministry. What John was promoting was love for one another shown through the promotion of equality and harmony among all people regardless of wealth, status, or nationality. By placing Jesus' actions within the Temple at the beginning of his Gospel, John established the notion that marginalization is to be replaced by equality and love which is an essential element of Jesus' fullness which he was pouring out on humankind. Since divine revelation has unfolded throughout history within the context of oppression and liberation, it is only within this same context that we can understand the actions of Jesus within the Temple as elements of God's love, peace, and grace.

In the cultural climate of first-century Jerusalem, the poor were essentially left to fend for themselves and endure whatever conditions came their way. Without someone to stand up for the conditions endured by the poor and without someone to speak up on their behalf, the results were disastrous. In addition to the marginalization they already endured, including the potential for loss of property, homelessness, and starving

conditions, the peasantry was continually threatened with the possibility of indentured servanthood if they were unable to repay their debts. Corruption within the priesthood resulted in a distrust of those who were supposed to hold responsibility for the conditions of the populace. Instead, by ignoring the cultural conditions and the plight of the poor, they had essentially removed the last resource available to the poor for providing relief from oppressive conditions. Adding further insult and injury was the Temple tax itself. Instead of creating another burden for the poor, the system of taxation within the Temple should have provided for the poor. Compared to those who could readily afford to make the payment, the sacrifice expected from the poor was greater. With no one to hear the cries of the poor and the burdened, there was little else to do but to remain silent and endure whatever conditions were imposed.

By overturning the moneychanger's tables and forcing them out of the Temple, however, Jesus stood up for the oppressed and marginalized and became the voice for the voiceless and promoted a different kind of kingdom. Open to all who would accept it, Jesus promoted a renewed kingdom. In place of oppression, Jesus promoted a life of open healing and sharing. The life Jesus promoted also consisted of radical itinerancy and fundamental equality, of human contact without discrimination and divine contact without hierarchy. In the kingdom of God, there was no room for oppression and marginalization.

In the kingdom of God, love would reign supreme and believers were commanded to love one another as Jesus loved them. Just as God the Father had loved Jesus, believers were to emulate love and abide in it as demonstrated in Jesus' prayer for his disciples, "I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which

you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (17:26, NRSV). This is the message that Jesus promoted and this was the message that John was highlighting to his readers. Oppression, marginalization, and outright lack of care for other human beings was not acceptable within the kingdom. Believers should, instead, care for one another by ensuring that everyone is treated fairly and represented as human beings created in the image of God. Although this is the commandment that Jesus left the first century believers, it is just as true today as it was then. Because Christ placed his mission and his teachings within the context of the kingdom of God, we must do likewise, and because Christ embodied his teaching in the way he treated people, we must do the same. Therefore, the command to love one another is just as relevant to twenty-first century believers as it was to those of the first century. Following the pattern of Jesus, believers should focus on love and acts that express love, fellowship, and the breaking away from the kingdom of evil. Believers must engage in ministries of mercy and justice, being sensitive to the protection of every individual’s rights. Unfortunately, among the majority of believers, this is not the attitude that is reflected.

The kingdom of God is well-represented by those who have championed human rights in the name of Jesus. People such as Walter Rauschenbusch, Martin Luther King, Jr., Elsa Tamez, and Mother Teresa are but a small example of people who lived their lives, often to the very end, fighting for the poor and the oppressed, speaking for those whose voice was not loud enough to be heard among the status quo. These people stood out as a voice for the voiceless when society around them ignored their pleas for help.

Believers today must adopt the same attitude of equality that these people had if the kingdom of God is to be realized on earth. We must be bold in our approach and

unwavering in our resolve to expose the origins of injustice around us and we must be willing to speak up in the face of injustice. We must be mindful of the institutions that promote suffering among humanity and cry out against them. We must not ignore the grim conditions that plague our communities. We must be mindful of those who lack the basic necessities of life and those whose children are malnourished. Moreover, we must do more than simply recognize that these conditions exist. We must stand united against these evils. People and institutions are behind the sufferings of people and it will take people and institutions to fight the injustices that are being promoted. The methods being employed by those who are exploiting the poor in order to become wealthy must be recognized and the status quo upset. Likewise, the Christian movement must move away from the side of the strong and powerful and stand alongside the weak and the oppressed. This was represented in the actions of Jesus as he cleansed the Temple. If God always takes his stand unconditionally and passionately on the side of the lowly, then believers should take the same stand. Believers who claim to love one another in the manner which Christ reflected cannot do so without taking steps to alleviate the conditions that are allowing people to hurt, suffer, and collapse underneath the weight of oppression. Instead, believers must be willing to upset the status quo and speak up for the voiceless. This cannot be accomplished, however, through the occasional handouts to the poor, despite the short-term gain or motives behind them. While feeding the poor during seasons of Thanksgiving, as well as other handouts, are indeed noble attempts, these small-scale actions will not be enough. It will take a concerted effort among all believers to confront the sources of oppression and discrimination at their sources. Believers must recognize that their ministry takes place amidst oppressive conditions that favor the

wealthy and powerful while disregarding the poor who often live within just a few blocks of wealth and prosperity. Believers must work to bring their community and the rest of the world in line with the vision of love, liberation and justice given to them by God. Love for one another in the manner in which Jesus commanded will settle for nothing less. By placing the Temple cleansing at the beginning of his Gospel, instead of the end where it rightly should be chronologically, John was setting the stage for Jesus' ministry, which was the supreme example of love toward one another, love demonstrated by Jesus and expected of those who claim to know him.

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