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THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW:
THE TEMPLE CLEANSING IN 21:12-17

by

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A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology-Seminary of
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Dr. Charles Bobertz
Director

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW:
THE TEMPLE CLEANSING IN 21:12-17

Description: In this paper, the cleansing of the Temple is described as a story of both judgment and challenge. Matthew illustrates Jesus to his post-Temple community as the Jewish continuation of Moses and the Law, the fiery prophet critiquing the economic system set up by the chief priests and scribes, and God himself who brings judgment to his people. The story challenged Matthew's community and challenges the modern reader to end oppression, attend to the marginalized, and accept Jesus as the new Temple – the continuation of Judaism. This story can be seen in terms of liturgy and Baptism in the Church, and confronts our comfortable modern Christology and our commitment (or lack of commitment) to social justice. Jesus' cleansing of the Temple is a dramatic, eschatological event, one that was exceptionally important to Matthew's story and one that is especially important to our own understanding of Christ and his Church.

This paper may be duplicated



March 25, 2011

The Gospel of Matthew:

The Temple Cleansing in 21:12-17

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem culminates with the cleansing of the Temple; we have reached the beginning of the end of the drama of the life of Jesus. Jesus' gentle kingship¹ has been proclaimed with his entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey and a colt (21:1-11), but his first actions in Jerusalem might seem anything but gentle. Matthew makes it clear that Jesus' coming will be transformative and dramatic to everyone, especially the Jews. "The whole city was shaken (*eseisthē*)," points ahead to the aftermath of the death of Jesus, when "the earth quaked (*eseisthē*" 27:51).² Matthew treats the cleansing of the temple with significant importance, but there seems to be no consensus as to why he does so. Reasons vary from criticism of the economic system, to the fulfillment of and link to Old Testament Scripture, to the separation from Pharisaic Judaism, and everything in between. In this paper I will discuss the text and parallels to the other gospels (particularly Mark), as well as my own interpretation of what Jesus' actions in the Temple court mean to Matthew, his community living in the era after the destruction of the Temple, and us living in the 21st century.

The action begins right after the city was "shaken" and the crowds have proclaimed Jesus the prophet. Matthew has changed the order of events in Mark's Gospel. Instead of the cleansing occurring the second time Jesus enters Jerusalem,³ Matthew describes the incident as the very first action Jesus takes. The Temple is the

¹ Smith, Robert H. 1989. *Matthew*. Augsburg commentary on the New Testament. Minneapolis, Minn: Augsburg Pub. House, 26.

² Reid, Barbara E. 2005. *The Gospel according to Matthew*. The new Collegeville Bible commentary, v. 1. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 104.

³ In Mark, Jesus comes from Bethany, and he is only an observer when approaching the Temple for the first time.

goal of pilgrimage and the most important and holy place for the Jews, as well as Jesus' first stop. **Jesus entered the Temple area and drove out all those engaged in selling and buying there.**⁴ The Temple area (*hieron*) being described refers to the whole Temple enclosure, not the holy of holies (*naos*). It is here where the buying and selling of sacrificial victims and money changing took place necessary for cultic practice.⁵ Carter suggests that the term **drove out**, being frequently used by Matthew to denote exorcisms and in Chronicles to denote Hezekiah's reform of the Temple, is being used to show the religious elite's connection to the cosmic framework of evil.⁶ The verb **drove out** also denotes judgment in Matthew (8:12, 22:13, 25:30). **He overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves.** Now that he has driven out those buying and selling, he turns to the tables of the money changes and the seats of the dove vendors. Money changers converted Greek, Roman, and Parthian coins into shekels of Tyre, which were the acceptable payment for temple taxes since they had the highest purity of silver.⁷ St. Jerome suggests that the exchanges were done at high rates, and that the aim was to extract money from the poor without dealing with loans or interest.⁸ Doves, the only animals specifically named by Matthew in this instance, were sacrifices for (1) the poor who could not afford larger animals like sheep, (2) women who needed a purification sacrifice after childbirth, and (3) lepers who were

⁴ All passages in bold type are from the Catholic Study Bible: Senior, Donald. 1990. *The Catholic Study Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁵ Harrington, Daniel J. 1991. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Sacra pagina series, 1. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 294.

⁶ Carter, Warren. 2000. *Matthew and the margins: a sociopolitical and religious reading*. The Bible & liberation series. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books.

⁷ Reid, 106.

⁸ Jerome, and Thomas P. Scheck. 2008. *Commentary on Matthew*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 236. Jerome describes the exploitation of the pilgrims who had not brought something to sacrifice or the correct coinage, and accuses the priests of actively seeking to plunder the people.

in need of cleansing sacrifices⁹ (Lev 12:6-8, 14:22, 15:14,29). It was easy enough to buy animals outside of the Temple, but because animals offered in sacrifice must be without blemish, inspectors could (and often would) reject animals bought outside and direct the worshipper to the Temple stalls and booths.¹⁰ This of course wouldn't be a problem if the animals inside the Temple cost the same as those outside – but inside the Temple a pair of doves could cost as much as fifteen times the price charged for them outside.¹¹ Matthew also omits Mark's note that Jesus also did not allow anyone to carry any vessel through the Temple courts. **And he said to them, "It is written: 'My house shall be a house of prayer,' but you are making it a den of thieves."** Now Jesus interprets his action from Scripture. The citation is a mix of Isaiah 56:7, which speaks of the messianic ideal of the Temple being a perfect place of prayer for all people, and Jeremiah 7:11, which is a warning to the people of Judah who continued to trust in the efficacy of Temple worship while their deeds toward one another were rampantly unjust.¹² Matthew makes three significant changes to Mark's text here. First, Mark stresses that Jesus didn't just speak, he "taught," which Matthew may have found redundant and removed; second, Jesus *states* that "it is written," which replaces Mark's rhetorical question ("Is it not written?"); and third, Matthew removes Mark's (originally Isaiah's) "for all peoples."

The blind and the lame approached him in the temple area, and he cured them.

Jesus has dealt with those he wished to rebuke and now turns to the blind and the lame, who apparently either weren't driven out of the Temple court or now enter it to approach

⁹ Carter, 419.

¹⁰ Barclay, William. 2001. *The Gospel of Matthew*. The new daily study Bible. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 286.

¹¹ Barclay, 286. Barclay also points out that this exploitation isn't new. Rabbi ben Gamaliel was remembered because 'he had caused doves to be sold for silver coins instead of gold.' Clearly he had also attacked this abuse. Even though there may have been some honest traders, abuse very easily and readily crept in.

¹² Reid, 106.

Jesus. According to Samuel 5:8 “the blind and the lame shall not come into the house (of the Lord).” The blind, lame, and physically affected were not supposed to be in the Temple at all; there is an assumed link between sin and disease, and their presence is considered incompatible with holiness (Lev 21:16-24). This episode of healing after Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple is unique to Matthew and perhaps intended to be the fulfillment of the messianic promise of Isaiah 35:5-6.¹³ **When the chief priests and the scribes saw the wondrous things he was doing, and the children crying out in the temple area, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they were indignant and said to him, “Do you hear what they are saying?”** Some scholars have found difficulty with this passage, since the presence of a crowd of children was unlikely in the Temple court. Connections to a similar story in Luke often equate these children to the disciples¹⁴ (as in, a Rabbi’s “children”), but I would argue that such an explanation is probably unnecessary. The crying out of the children continues the theme of the marginalized, who, like the blind and the lame, experience God’s presence in Jesus (1:23, 18:20) but still face the anger of the elite.¹⁵ In addition, the children crying out will subsequently be presented as the fulfillment of Psalm 8:3. As “Son of David,” Jesus has now done what is expected of him according to the *Psalms of Solomon* 17:30,¹⁶ “And he will purge Jerusalem and make it holy as it was even from the beginning.” Whatever Jesus’ (or Mark’s) reasons for his actions are, the disruption of commercial activity in the Temple court during Passover celebrations probably won him no friends among the elites in Jerusalem – the cleansing could conceivably be the action that eventually leads to his

¹³ Reid, 106.

¹⁴ Barclay, 290.

¹⁵ Carter, 420. Carter also discusses how the chief priests and scribes’ opposition to Jesus’ healings and praise from the children renders the members of the powerful ruling elite ridiculous.

¹⁶ Harrington, 295.

arrest and crucifixion. Matthew is placing the chief priests and scribes not only in opposition to Jesus' attacks on the Temple court and their system, but also in opposition to the mercy, healing, and praise that Jesus produces.¹⁷ **Jesus said to them, "Yes; and have you never read the text, 'Out of the mouths of infants and nurslings you have brought forth praise'?"** Jesus rebukes the priests and scribes with the question, **"Have you never read the text?"** He then quotes Psalm 8, which celebrates God's majestic creation and regard for human beings. Here, the citation affirms the inclusion of the marginal children, indicating God's approval of the children's praise and identifying God as the source of their declaration that Jesus is Son of David.¹⁸ St. Jerome points out how this defeats the priests and scribes by dodging the two responses that they expect and want to hear, which are: "These children are doing a good thing when they offer testimony for me," and "They are in error; they are children; you ought to ignore them on account of their age."¹⁹

And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany, and there he spent the night.

Matthew then returns to Mark's narrative, ending with Jesus leaving for Bethany, a village about two miles east of Jerusalem which becomes Jesus' base of operations during Passover time.²⁰ Jerusalem was impossibly crowded during the Passover, and often bands of pilgrims would camp on the hills or in the villages nearby.²¹ Matthew omits Mark's statement that it was getting late (but does say he **spent the night**), as well as the mention of the presence of the twelve apostles accompanying Jesus, which ensures that Jesus remains the central focus of the incident.

¹⁷ Smith, 247.

¹⁸ Carter, 421.

¹⁹ Jerome, 238.

²⁰ Harrington, 294.

²¹ Smith, 247.

In order to unpack what Matthew is doing with the text, I'll first need to shortly explain Matthew and his community. Matthew's primary concern with the Jews is highlighted specifically in this pericope when he chooses to omit Mark's "for all peoples," which he probably saw as the inclusion of gentiles. Many scholars conclude that Matthew and his community were in direct confrontation with Pharisaic Judaism, and that they had experienced a decisive rift from the Pharisees. I, however, believe (along with perhaps the other half of scholars and theologians) that Matthew and his community had not yet made a definitive break with Judaism, and that Jesus is presented as respecting the authority of the scribes and the Pharisees even if their example is not to be followed. In a way, Jesus' tension with the Pharisees is very much along the lines of an intra-familial conflict.²² Matthew is communicating that the Law remains important to "lawless" Christians, but also that good deeds are an important and authentic sign of discipleship. This Gospel is also being used to show that Jesus is the new Temple. Readers of Matthew are living after the destruction of the Temple, and Matthew is asserting that Jesus is the fulfillment of Judaism. Jesus and his teachings are to be the path that Judaism will follow, not Pharisaic Judaism. This leads me to the three themes, three statements about who Christ is, that I believe Matthew is following.

First, Jesus is the fulfillment of Scripture and Jewish Law. Matthew often cites the Old Testament and makes an obvious effort to inform the reader about it and other Jewish texts.²³ The use of Jewish rhetoric and themes is frequent, and they are applied without explanation. In this pericope alone, Jesus directly quotes Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Psalms. Matthew makes knowledge of the law in Leviticus (also may allude to 2 Sam

²² Senior, Donald. 1997. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Interpreting Biblical texts. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 76.

²³ Harrington, 1.

5:8) necessary to understand the scene with the blind and lame, uses the term “Son of David,” has Jesus fulfilling the messianic promise of Isaiah 35:5-6, and follows Jewish themes of inclusion and mercy found in Micah 4:6-7 and Ezekiel 34:15-16. As we’ve seen in the transfiguration scene a few chapters earlier, Jesus meets both Moses and Elijah on the mountain. In the cleansing of the Temple, Jesus is paving the way to the new Jewish Law (which, for Matthew, is not the replacement of the old Jewish Law, but the fulfillment of it), and becomes the new Moses for Matthew’s community. Jesus “out-teaches” the high priests and the scribes, and understands and interprets the Scripture better than the current Jewish leaders.

Second, Jesus is the ultimate prophet, concerned with the well being of the poor and speaking out against economic exploitation. It is no mistake that the verse directly before Jesus enters the Temple area to overturn the money tables is, “**And the crowds replied, ‘This is Jesus the prophet, from Nazareth in Galilee’**” (21:11). In verses 12-13 particularly, Jesus is the “fiery prophet” bent on rectifying abuse;²⁴ he will not stand for people being exploited for profit. Here, Matthew puts Jesus on a mission. When Jesus goes to Jerusalem in Matthew’s account, the cleansing of the Temple is the *first thing* he does and it is the sole purpose for Jesus’ first day in the city. This action is deliberate and has been planned for the most dramatic time it could possibly take place – Passover time. Matthew is specifically enhancing Mark’s account²⁵ to better make the

²⁴ Reid, 106.

²⁵ Matthew moves the first part of Mark’s story of the fig tree to directly before the second half, which is after the cleansing. He also omits Mark’s content in verse 11, where Jesus only goes to the Temple and looks around, assessing the situation. Instead of Jesus looking around the first time and cleansing the Temple on the second day, Matthew just makes the first day all about the cleansing and the beginning of the second day about the fig tree. Conceivably, he could have moved the second half of the fig tree story to the place directly after the first half, and let it occur the morning before the cleansing, which leads to my humble guess that Matthew wanted to show that Jesus’ first priority in Jerusalem was the cleansing of the Temple.

point that Jesus cares, to the point of passionate anger, about how truly wrong it is to abuse the poor. Overman reads Jesus' cleansing of the Temple in Matthew generally following a theme of sectarian hostility toward Jewish leadership, and so the Matthean community therefore sees the Temple corruption and its cleansing as the precursor to its eventual destruction.²⁶²⁷ Jesus is definitely playing the part of the prophet, critiquing the workings of Temple and the attitude of the high priests and scribes. But this picture of Jesus isn't just about sectarian criticism of the Temple leadership, reforming the Temple, or stopping the exploitation of pilgrims and the poor, which is where many biblical scholars leave it.

Third, and most importantly, the cleansing of the Temple is a scene of *judgment*. This scene is not merely about reform to the Temple, but it is about the end of time, the eschaton, when all of humanity is judged, chaos is driven out, and new Creation thrives. This scene runs parallel to the explanation of Jesus' parable of the weeds among wheat, where all sinners will be collected and cast out and **“all the righteous then shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.”** Here, those buying and selling are the sinners being driven out, and the blind and the lame, who are righteous, are brought into the temple and healed. It is the great reversal that Matthew is illustrating – in the coming time of judgment, the last become first and the first become last (20:16). The healing in this scene is unlike other healing scenes because the healing itself has taken on new meaning, as the encounter with God for the righteous at the end of the world. This healing happens in the Temple, in Jerusalem, and directly after the expulsion of sinners.

²⁶ Overman, J. Andrew. 1990. *Matthew's gospel and formative Judaism: the social world of the Matthean community*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

²⁷ Overman, J. Andrew. 1996. *Church and community in crisis: the Gospel according to Matthew*. The New Testament in context. Valley Forge, Pa: Trinity Press International.

The blind and the lame who aren't supposed to be in the Temple are healed precisely because they are meant to be a representation of the wheat after all of the weeds have been gathered and cast away. The eschatological scene here is highlighted by Jesus' previous entrance into Jerusalem from the East, by way of the Mount of Olives.²⁸

Matthew has pointed to Zechariah 14:4, where on the "day of the Lord" (understood as the eschaton) important events are to take place there: "**On that day his [the Lord's] feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives which lies before Jerusalem in the east.**"

Since this is the day that Jesus has stood upon the Mount of Olives, his first actions in the Temple court become a strong representation of the end of time that an apocalyptic thinker in Matthew's community would have probably picked up on. This isn't just about the destruction of the Temple; it's the end of Creation. It's not just a statement about the economic and social values of the Jews in the Temple court, but a judgment of all humankind. In this scene Jesus has become the new, fulfilled Temple that is not rife with disorder and exploitation, but is instead a place where the righteous are healed and meet God. Jesus' message here is too often limited to a simple critique of the way sacrifice is carried out. Scholars point to 12:6, "**Something greater than the Temple is here,**" and 9:13 (or 12:7), "**I desire mercy and not sacrifice,**" and miss the fact that Jesus isn't merely making a critique of the physical, created world, but is himself *living* the eschaton. So not only is Matthew depicting Jesus as the lawgiver and the prophet, but as God himself who judges all of Creation. He is the ultimate fulfillment of the new, complete Judaism.

What does this passage say to us today? I think that the cleansing of the Temple can be understood both liturgically and sacramentally, as well as give us insight into the

²⁸ Harrington, 295.

areas of Christology and social justice. Jesus' healing of the blind and lame has liturgy written all over it. If indeed for Matthew, liturgy creates a place where there is no physical or moral chaos,²⁹ then liturgy can be found in Christ's healings at the Temple after the driving out of chaos.³⁰ Even if Matthew and his community didn't see the healings in the Temple as liturgical, there is still something to be said here about the establishment of what might be seen as Christian liturgy today. The practice of re-living the death, resurrection, and second coming of Christ is mirrored in this story – the chaos in the Temple, the casting out of that chaos, and the healing and establishment of Christ as the new Temple. Sacramentally, I think this scene speaks to us of Baptism. The title we give this story, the *cleansing* of the Temple rings of Baptismal overtones (artificial yes, but something to think about). The scene lacks water, but does provide the framework for how Baptism works: out of chaos and evil (which is the water) comes healing, forgiveness, and an encounter with God. The Temple is cleansed of evil, and the result is freedom from sin.

This episode presents some problems to our understanding of Christology. Are Jesus' actions in the cleansing violent or destructive? In John's gospel, Jesus even goes as far as using a whip to drive out the moneychangers and animal sellers. How does this picture of Jesus fit into our more comfortable, modern conception of God? These are indeed difficult questions that deserve our attention, but I think it's important to point out that the coming of Jesus is anything but comfortable. This scene is judgment, the end of the current age of Creation and the ushering in of the new created order. The coming of

²⁹ Levenson, Jon Douglas. 1988. *Creation and the persistence of evil: the Jewish drama of divine omnipotence*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

³⁰ I again call attention to the term **drove out**, being frequently used by Matthew to denote exorcisms and in Chronicles to denote Hezekiah's reform of the Temple, which is used to show the religious elite's connection to the *cosmic framework of evil*.

Christ to the Temple isn't really just about Jesus overturning tables, opposing the chief priests and scribes, keeping the Temple a house of prayer, or violence (if indeed what occurred could be called violence). It's the driving out of chaos in the form of oppression to begin the eschaton and usher in the new order. I wouldn't consider this as violence to creation as much as it might be violence to chaos/anti-creation. But regardless of our conclusions in that respect, one important thing we should definitely get out of this story is a better understanding of Jesus' humanity. Anger and passion are human emotions; Jesus is not just the Word of God, a divine being, but he is also fully human with a complete spectrum of human feelings. These feelings are illustrated by Matthew in a way that suggests Jesus' humanity to his readers – which is incredibly important to our understanding of soteriology.

In the cleansing there's also plenty to be said about modern social justice. The marginalized are given a special place in this story. Children, the blind, and the lame are all allowed into the Temple area, where they praise Jesus and are healed. These are the people who are treated poorly by society, and Jesus makes them the focus of the restoration of the Temple as a house of prayer. Today we are called to resist oppression and attend to the hungry, the naked, the imprisoned, and the marginalized in all forms. This is the Christian message, as well as one of Matthew's primary concerns.

In conclusion, the cleansing of the Temple is a story of both judgment and challenge. Matthew illustrates Jesus to his post-Temple community as the Jewish continuation of Moses and the Law, the fiery prophet critiquing the economic system set up by the chief priests and scribes, and God himself who brings judgment to his people. The story challenged Matthew's community and challenges the modern reader to end

oppression, attend to the marginalized, and accept Jesus as the new Temple – the continuation of Judaism. This story can be seen in terms of liturgy and Baptism in the Church, and confronts our comfortable modern Christology and our commitment to social justice. Jesus' cleansing of the Temple is a dramatic, eschatological event, one that was exceptionally important to Matthew's story and one that is especially important to our own understanding of Christ and his Church.

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