

Matthew 21:12-13

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Jesus enters the temple and drives out the money changers and merchants. He quotes the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah in His rebuke.

The parallel gospel accounts of this event are found in Mark 11:15-18 and Luke 19:45-46. A similar, but likely different, event is found in John 2:13-25.

After *Jesus* triumphantly entered Jerusalem with shouts of Hosanna, Matthew wrote *He entered the temple and drove out all those who were buying and selling in the temple*. Much of the *buying and selling* was likely related to the festival, and Passover sacrifices. *The temple* had its own money required to be used, and buyers had to exchange for the temple currency in order to purchase items to be used in worship. The entire enterprise was exploitative—the leaders were fleecing the people rather than serving them, as will be described.

Synchronizing the multiple accounts of Jesus cleansing the temple.

All four Gospels record an account of *Jesus* overturning *tables* and clearing *the temple* of exploitive *money changers*. But they do not necessarily describe the same singular instance. They describe at least two separate occasions where *Jesus* cleansed *the temple*, and possibly a third.

The first instance was recorded by John. Matthew, Mark, and Luke do not include this event in their gospel accounts. It took place at the beginning of *Jesus*'s ministry (John 2:13-25). This *temple* cleansing occurred at least two years before *Jesus* triumphantly entered Jerusalem riding on the colt of a donkey.

We know this because John reported that this first *temple* cleansing took place “near” Passover (John 2:13). John mentioned two additional Passovers over the course of *Jesus*'s earthly ministry. The next Passover John mentioned was in John 6:4. It took place around the time that *Jesus* miraculously fed the 5,000 (Matthew 14:13-21; John 6:1-14). And the third and final Passover that John mentioned was the one that came during *Jesus*'s final week. It was this Passover that brought *Jesus* to Jerusalem. These facts indicate that *Jesus* cleared *the temple* on at least two separate occasions—early on in His earthly ministry; and now at the end of it.

All three of Matthew, Mark, and Luke's accounts of *Jesus* clearing the *temple* occur during the final week of His earthly ministry. And just as the first three gospel writers did not include the first *temple* cleansing, neither did John include this later instance. But harmonizing the chronological sequence of events surrounding *Jesus*'s *temple* cleansing recorded by Matthew, Mark, and Luke is no easy task.

This is because Matthew and Luke placed it immediately after *Jesus* enters the city, while Mark wrote that it occurred the next day after *Jesus* spent the night in Bethany and cursed the fig tree.

Matthew wrote that *Jesus* cursed the fig tree the day after *He* cleared the temple (Matthew 21:17-19).

Several solutions are possible, but the Bible does not specify which scenario actually occurred.

It is possible that *Jesus* could have cleansed *the temple* two days in a row (and three times total). If this is the case, then John recorded the first *temple* cleansing at the beginning of *Jesus*'s ministry. Matthew recorded the second *temple* cleansing on Palm Sunday. And Mark recorded the third *temple* cleansing "on the next day" (Mark 11:12). Luke was not specific as to which of the latter two *temple* cleansings he was referring. With this possibility, it was not important to the gospel writers to report that *Jesus* did this multiple times or on consecutive days upon His entrance into Jerusalem. What was important was **that** *He* did it. And for Matthew, Mark, and Luke there was special significance to the fact that *He* did it so soon after offering Himself as the Messiah in Jerusalem for the Passover.

It is also possible that *Jesus* cleansed *the temple* only twice. The first cleansing was recorded by John and the second was recorded by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It is possible that Matthew (or Mark) chose to group certain events together in a thematic sequence rather than a strict chronological one. Under this scenario, it is likely that Matthew decided to more closely associate *Jesus*'s entry as the Messiah and Passover lamb with His cleansing of *the temple*.

Mark mentions that *Jesus* attended *the temple* upon arriving in Jerusalem, but does not specify what *Jesus* did while *He* was there besides saying *He* was "looking around" (Mark 11:11).

Once again, it is plausible that *Jesus* cleared *the temple* twice on Passover week or that Matthew or one of the other Gospel writers rearranged the events according to a thematic rather than chronological sequence. But the Bible does not clearly designate which harmony best fits. For each Gospel writer it was important to include that *Jesus* cleared *the temple* at least once and let the significance of that fact speak for itself.

The Temple of *Jesus*' Time

The temple that *Jesus* entered was the central place and most holy place of worship in the Jewish faith. Within its innermost sanctuary was the Holy of Holies, the place where God's Spirit dwelt on earth in an earlier time (2 Chronicles 7:1-3), although God's spirit had departed prior to the Babylonian exile (Ezekiel 10-11). It was intended to be God's earthly dwelling place.

No place on earth was more sacred or special than the temple. It was built on the highest mountain in Jerusalem, Mount Moriah, the place where Abraham went to sacrifice his son Isaac (Genesis 22:2). Upon this mountain David's son, King Solomon built (2 Chronicles 3:1) and commemorated the temple to house God among His people (2 Chronicles 6:1-42). It was built as a more permanent replacement of the Tabernacle used since the days of the Exodus. But Solomon's *temple* was destroyed during the Babylonian invasion (2 Kings 25:8-9).

A second, more modest, *temple* was built to replace it upon the return of Jewish exiles (Ezra 1:1-3; Ezra 3:3; Ezra 6:15). During Herod the Great (Builder's) reign *the temple* underwent a

magnificent renovation and was greatly expanded. This ten-year project was completed in 10 or 11 B.C. This was *the temple* of *Jesus's* day and the one used by Jews throughout the New Testament era until 68 A.D. when *the temple* was plundered and destroyed by the Roman General Titus during the Jewish revolt. Centuries later, Muslims built a mosque—"the Dome of the Rock"—where the Jewish *temple* once stood. Today only a single side of the massive platform upon which Herod's *temple* stood remains. It is called "the wailing wall."

Herod's *temple* was a sprawling complex. It was built on top of a massive platform of stone blocks that covered a staggering thirty-five acres, or twenty percent of the walled city space of first century Jerusalem. It was surrounded by high walls, and on its north side was a Roman fortress. Its southern side had a covered porch and colonnade called "Solomon's Portico" surrounding a massive courtyard—the court of the Gentiles. ([See Map.](#))

In the center of the complex was *the temple* proper. It was like a long, tall, corridor divided by series of courts and rooms. Only Jews were allowed to enter *the temple* proper. The first area of *the temple* proper was "The Court of Women." This was the furthest that purified Jewish women were permitted to come. Next was "The Court of Israel" where purified male Jews were allowed. Third was "The Court of Priests." And finally, "the House of God," which was divided into the Holy Places and the Holy of Holies which was entered once a year by a single priest on the Day of Atonement.

[For more information about *the temple* please see TheBibleSays' "Tough Topics" article called "The Temple."](#)

The Corruption of Temple Worship

Originally *the Temple* was the domain of the tribe of Levi. God designated the Levites to be the priestly tribe of Israel. (Every priest was a Levite, but every Levite was not a priest). But over the centuries with the division of the Kingdom (930 B.C.); the Assyrian Invasion (722 B.C.); the Exile to Babylon (588 B.C.); the Greek conquest of Israel (333 B.C.); the Maccabean Interlude (167 B.C.); and now the Roman Occupation (63 B.C.) the religious party called the Sadducees had assumed control over *the Temple* and its operations. And they took advantage of their priestly authority to exploit the people they were supposed to serve.

The money changers and those who were selling doves were likely set up beneath the covered colonnade surrounding the massive court of the Gentiles. This market would have been among the first things *Jesus* saw when *He entered the temple* complex. The reason *the money changers* and dove sellers were there was to exploit faithful Jews who had come to Jerusalem to observe the Passover.

The central practice of observing the Passover was to offer a sacrifice to God. Each family was to personally sacrifice a lamb and prepare it as a meal commemorating God's deliverance (Exodus 12:2-11). According to the laws of Moses, sacrifices were to be unblemished and without defect (Leviticus 22:17-25). There is no specific mention in the Old Testament of using *doves* as a Passover sacrifice. But in other sacrifices such as sin or guilt offering, *doves* were considered to be a suitable substitute for the poor, if the one offering a sacrifice could not afford

the prescribed bull, goat, or lamb (Leviticus 5:6-7). Either that accommodation was being extended for the Passover sacrifice, or more likely, *doves* were being sold and used in additional sacrifices in guilt offerings.

Would-be worshippers need not trouble themselves with bringing their own animals or doves to the temple to sacrifice. The Sadducees would ensure that there would be plenty of “unblemished” animals available for them to buy—for a price. John reported that these animal sellers were retailing “oxen and sheep and *doves*” (John 2:14). If a worshiper brought his own animal to sacrifice, he risked having it declared to have a blemish by the Sadducees which would disqualify it from being offered. This was one way the keepers of God’s temple might have been able to exploit the faithful who came to offer sacrifice.

Another way the Temple keepers likely extorted the faithful was through money changers. The Romans had political control in Judea. Their *money* was the authoritative currency in circulation. But their Gentile coins were considered an unclean means of exchange to purchase holy offerings to God. This was an application of Leviticus 22:25 which forbid the children of Israel to “accept any such from the hand of a foreigner for offering as the food of your God.”

Even though this rule applied specifically to accepting animals, the Sadducees saw fit to allow its interpretation to include foreign currency and thus the need for *money changers*. These *money changers* greedily took the impure Roman currency in exchange for special temple coins which could then be used to buy a holy sacrifice. The rate of exchange almost certainly favored the pockets of the Sadducees and exploited the people.

The entire process was a racket. Between the marked-up *doves* being sold for sacrifice and the *money*-changing, it was expensive to worship. The focus had shifted from worship and fellowship to commercial profit. Arguably the worst part was that the priests, whose office was to mediate between God and His people, were using their position to exploit those who wished to obey God. God’s *house of prayer* had been turned into a noisy, bustling commercial market. This was a gross perversion of God’s good intent. The Levitical law brought people together for mutual fellowship and celebration, as well as to worship God, and to remember that their heritage stemmed from God’s deliverance. It was a great reminder that following God’s ways brought blessing. God’s primary command could be summarized by “love your neighbor as yourself.” The priests were doing the opposite, and perverting God’s intent to benefit Israel, and spread love, goodwill, and self-governance.

The perverted extortion of His *house* (the temple) angered *Jesus*. In Hebrew, *the temple* is called the “Beit Hamikdash” which means “the holy *house*.” Matthew wrote that *Jesus entered the temple and drove out all those who were buying and selling animals to sacrifice on the temple grounds. And He also overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves*. This matter-of-fact account for what would undoubtedly have been a startling scene underscores its abruptness and the authoritative mindset *Jesus* had when He did it.

Mark affirms that *Jesus drove out all the money changers and dove-sellers* because after doing so, *Jesus* “would not permit anyone to carry merchandise through *the temple*” (Mark 11:16). This likely would have taken a while because of the enormity of the temple grounds. But *Jesus* did

just this. The fact that the sellers of *doves* are mentioned specifically could be because *doves* were generally used as a substitute by the poor, those least able to pay (and perhaps the least able to oppose the priestly exploitation).

We sometimes imagine *Jesus* as mild and merciful. And while *He* is tenderhearted and forgiving, *He* is never timid. We must also not forget that *He* is also perfectly just, and a king. *He* is not afraid to allow the unrighteous receive the brunt of His righteous wrath. When *Jesus* returns again, He will visit God's wrath on those who have gathered to oppose Him (Revelation 19:11-21). *Jesus*'s removal of the unrighteous money changers and merchants is similar to what the Son of Man will send His angels to do later but on a much larger scale when *He* removes the unrighteous from His kingdom as *He* prophesied in the parable of the tares of the field (Matthew 13:24-30; Matthew 13:36-43).

Matthew recorded that *Jesus* said to the money changers and dove-sellers that, *It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a robbers' den.* In this observation, *Jesus* quoted two Old Testament prophets: Isaiah and Jeremiah.

“Even those I will bring to My holy mountain,
And make them joyful in My house of prayer.
Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar;
For My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples.”
(Isaiah 56:7)

“Has this house, which is called by My name become a den of robbers in your sight? Behold I Myself have seen it,” declares the Lord.”
(Jeremiah 7:11)

Jesus had the authority to cleanse the *temple* of corruption because as God's Son, it was His *temple*. It was His *house* of worship. When *Jesus* quoted Isaiah, *He* was not just quoting the prophet, *He* was literally speaking of Himself.

There is a deep irony that *Jesus*, the Passover Lamb, went to *the* holy *temple* to be inspected for purification in accordance to God's law (Exodus 12:3,5-6; Leviticus 22:18-25), and though He was found blameless by the chief priests (Luke 19:47-48), the spotless Lamb found His inspectors to be the ones in need of purifying and *the temple* to be a place in need of much cleansing.

Mark commented that “the chief priests and the scribes heard this [what *Jesus* said about how they had made His *house* a robber's den], and began seeking how to destroy Him for they were afraid of Him, for the whole crowd was astonished at His teaching” (Mark 11:18). John tells us their fear explicitly, telling us the chief priests and Pharisees declared in a counsel “If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” (John 11:48). They said this (likely a few weeks earlier), after *Jesus* raised Lazarus from the dead. Now that *Jesus* had caused a stir upon entering the city (Matthew 21:10), created a scene on *the temple* grounds, and interrupted their cash stream, their “place” was threatened all the more.

Biblical Text

21:12-13 And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves. And He said to them, “It