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JOHN 2:13-25 - The First Passover -- Cleansing the Temple

The Gospel of John offers some unique perspectives that the other Gospel writers do not include. The information that John gives helps to clarify and to correct some impressions that we would have if the only information we had was from the first three Gospels. This passage includes two examples of this. First, a reading of the other Gospels leaves us with the impression that Jesus' ministry may have only been one year in duration. John tells us that there were four Passovers (2:13; 5:1 [literally, "the feast", which many commentators see as a reference to Passover, the most significant feast]; 6:4; 11:55). By this, we know that Jesus' ministry was over three years in duration. The second example of John's unique contribution is that he alone mentions this cleansing of the temple that occurred at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The others mention a similar episode that happened at the end of His life, on the eve of the final Passover week. Some think that John was merely describing the same event, but a careful examination of the other Gospels reveals that there were different motivations and issues involved. Many scholars believe that John, who was obviously aware of the other Gospel accounts, was once again adding what he felt to be a significant part of the story that had not previously been told. (Compare this with Mk 11:15-18. What is different between the two incidents?)

NOTES:

Vs. 13 -- *Passover of the Jews* -- The feast of Passover was instituted by God in Exodus 11 - 13. It was to commemorate the deliverance of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. God had already confronted Pharaoh and the Egyptian people with nine plagues, each designed to reveal the powerlessness of the Egyptian pantheon of gods before Yahweh of Israel. Pharaoh continued to stubbornly resist the warnings of God through Moses and Aaron, God's appointed spokesmen. In this final plague, which would secure their release, Yahweh intended to slay all the first-born of mankind and animals in the land of Egypt, because the Egyptian king refused to release God's "first-born", Israel (Ex. 4:21-23; 11:4-7). The people of Egypt thought that the Pharaoh himself was divine. Thus, this plague, which would take Pharaoh's first-born son as well, would establish once and for all the powerlessness of the king of Egypt before Yahweh, the God of Israel. After warning the Egyptians, Moses was instructed to make preparations which would not only bring about their protection from this plague, but would also prepare them to leave in haste when the Egyptian king finally gave in before Yahweh. Part of the preparations included slaying an unblemished lamb and sprinkling or daubing its blood on the two door posts and over the top of the doorway to their houses. As Yahweh passed through the land at midnight, He would see the blood on the doorway and would "pass over" that house (hence, the name "Passover"). All inside would be safe from the plague. However, any first-born found out in the street, or in a house without this marking of blood would not be passed over. They would die from the plague. "And Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians; and there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was no home where there was not someone dead. Then he called for Moses and Aaron at night and said, 'Rise up, get out from among my people, both you and the sons of Israel; and go, worship Yahweh..., and go, and bless me also' (Ex. 12:31,32). This was the birthday of the nation Israel, and was to be commemorated throughout their generations (Ex. 12:42). *Jesus went up to Jerusalem* -- It was required by Old Testament law that all Jewish males were to up to Jerusalem for three religious feasts each year: the Passover (Unleavened Bread); Pentecost (Harvest); and the Feast of Booths (Ingathering). Cf. Ex. 23:14-17.

Vs. 14 -- *those who were selling oxen, sheep and doves* -- Originally this practice undoubtedly began as a service to those traveling from a distance, that they might be able to purchase acceptable animals to offer as sacrifices in their worship at the temple. Human greed and corruption had entered in over the years so that the price of these animals had become highly inflated. Furthermore, a greedy and corrupt priesthood often rejected animals brought to the temple from other sources to force worshipers to purchase the temple animals. The fact that these booths had made their way into the temple courts is an indication of the partnership of the priesthood in this regard. Beyond simple convenience, those allowed to market their animals in the temple enjoyed a

virtual monopoly, which led not only to price gouging, but also to selling imperfect animals at these exorbitant prices. *moneychangers* -- The Law required every man in Israel to pay a yearly "temple tax", for the upkeep of the temple (cf. Ex. 30:11-16; Matt. 17:24-27). This amounted to one half of a shekel, or two days' wages, and was usually paid just before or at the Passover. This, and all other offerings in the temple, were supposed to be paid in shekels, due to ecclesiastical tradition and to avoid "pagan currency". The moneychangers were on hand to exchange foreign currency into the acceptable coinage, and to make change, if necessary, for those who desired to make other purchases in the temple. Again, this probably began as a convenience to foreigners, but had often become corrupted due to the ease of manipulating exchange rates, or of charging large fees for a service that was only available in the temple courts. The practice of tyrannical and manipulative charges is documented in secular literature of the day. In addition to the injustice the worshiper would have to endure in order to make an offering to the God of Israel was the reality of the marketplace environment of such an enterprise. This was not some Western supermarket or shopping mall, where shoppers pick out their merchandise and then pay at the check-out counter. This was modeled after the Middle-Eastern market, where there were individual vendors of goods and services, who were calling out to prospective customers, haggling over prices, sometimes arguing with dissatisfied patrons. Added to this din was the bleating of sheep and goats, the lowing of cattle, and the calling of the birds that were for sale. It is not altogether clear what Jesus was particularly upset about, whether the entire affair, or just the noise and bustle which was invading the temple courts, and which would have made worship more difficult. In any case, Jesus felt that there was a need to take drastic action.

Vs. 15 -- *He made a scourge of cords* -- Literally, He made or fashioned a whip of ropes. The word for ropes is the same as is used in Acts 27:32 for the ropes that held the skiff to the ship. These were not just light cords, nor was the whip only a prop. It was a real whip, capable of inflicting pain and commanding respect. The fact that Jesus stood there and took the time to make it indicates that His action was not just explosively impulsive. It may have seemed drastic, but it was definitely deliberate and calculated. *He drove out all ...He poured out the coins ...and overturned the tables....* There can be no question that this was a scene of violence. How else could Jesus have cleared the temple court so quickly? We must remember, too, that Jesus was a carpenter by trade, which in those days meant the heavy work of constructing houses from stones and large beams, and using hand planes, saws, hammers, and chisels (there were no power tools!). A man who worked a job like this must have been a well-muscled, physically intimidating individual (in spite of the impressions that some traditional art works may tend to give us about Jesus' appearance), especially when wielding a whip, yelling, and moving quickly and unpredictably. No one attempted to resist Him, physically at least. Marcus Dods, in The Expositor's Greek Testament, describes well what it must have been like: "It was a scene of violence: the traders trying to protect their property, cattle rushing hither and thither, men shouting and cursing, the moneychangers trying to hold their tables as Jesus went from one to another upsetting them. It was indeed so violent a scene that the disciples felt somewhat scandalized until they remembered, then and there, not afterwards, that it was written: 'Zeal for Thy house will consume Me'" (Psalms 69:9).

Vs. 16 -- *Stop making my Father's house a house of merchandise* -- This is the cause Jesus is addressing by His action. Note that this is different from the reason for cleansing the temple in Mark 11:15-18.

Vs. 18 -- *What sign do you show us* -- The Jewish leaders wanted an explanation for Jesus' action, an outward, miraculous sign to indicate by what authority He did this. They couldn't bring themselves to just own up to the truth of His objection. It is interesting, however, that they did not arrest Him when He did not answer them as they had indicated. This probably shows that they recognized that His objection was just, though they were more than a little peeved at His action. They must have realized that the practice was wrong, and that any charges brought against Jesus would not have stuck, and in fact may have caused them more embarrassment.

Vss. 19-22 -- *Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up* -- As was often the case with the religious leaders, Jesus did not give them the kind of answer they expected. He spoke in a parable to them, but in actuality His resurrection would truly be the best sign to demonstrate His authority. *forty-six years* -- The temple improvements initiated by Herod the Great began in the 18th year of his reign (ca. 20 B.C.). This provides a fixed chronological point for the beginning of Jesus' ministry -- about 26 A.D.

Vss. 23-25 -- Though many claimed to believe in Jesus, upon witnessing the miracles He was doing (mentioned, but not recounted by John), He knew better than to trust in the fickleness of human popularity.