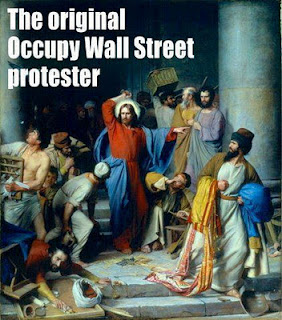
# Occupy Jerusalem

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John 2:13-22

If you have the kind of friends I have on Facebook, it’s likely that you saw this image shared there.



It shows Carl Bloch’s painting “Cleansing the Temple.” We see Jesus, with full nimbus, one hand holding a whip, and another hand extended and pointing away, in the midst of the chaos the money changers’ tables overturned and the pigeons flying away; the people either afraid, confused, or indignant. Jesus himself is very stern. Then, in big block letters imposed over the painting: “The original Occupy Wall Street protester.”

It’s one of those things you see on Facebook — you either say, “Yeah!” and feel that little rush from the humorous juxtaposition of a classically imagined Jesus as a modern Occupy protester (someone just like me — or like I imagine myself to be) and reach to press the ‘Like’ button, or perhaps you say, “No!” and are upset that someone is making a joke using our Lord (again), and look for how to unfriend them.

But I think it important that we don’t try to turn Jesus into anything, but take him as he is. This will, in the end, prove impossible, but we can do our best to observe the story we have, and try to understand him without mashing up current political concerns, classical art, or even our personal history with his story. Let’s try to look carefully at the passage.

First a note: This story is told in each of the Gospels. In John, the story happens near the beginning of Jesus’s public ministry, right after he does his first miracle. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, it happens near the end of his life. This could mean that it happened twice, and John records the first occurrence, and the other gospel writers the second occurrence. Or it could be that John is taking poetic license by placing the story here. In either case, we will want to ask, why does John tell this story here? Let’s come back to that.

So, let’s look at the passage together.

Jesus goes up to Jerusalem for the Passover and he goes to the Temple. He saw “the shops,” where “where, every day, was sold wine, salt, oil, and other requisites to sacrifices; as also oxen and sheep in the spacious Court of the Gentiles.[[1]](#footnote-1)”

Jews from all over the world were coming into Jerusalem to offer their sacrifices, and naturally, many of them would not bring the necessary animals with them, and so there was a trade in animals. Also, when a male reached his 20th year, he had to pay a half-shekel tax. And, because they came from all over the world, they wouldn’t have the local currency, so money changers were there to convert their money into the local currency. And, naturally, like restaurants and money changers at airports, they wanted to be close to the point of need. Apparently, the money changers were restricted by law to charge no more than about 8% for conversion[[2]](#footnote-2) (one silver *meah* per half shekel; a silver *meah* was worth 1/24 of a shekel)[[3]](#footnote-3).

By the way, seeing Temple Market didn’t surprise him — it’s not as if he showed up and discovered that the shops had been set up and this was news. No, before Jesus arrived, he knew exactly what was happening. The Temple Market had been going on for years, and would have been there on his previous visits to Jerusalem. I supposed he could have made his whip from cords he found at the Temple, but it seems more likely to me that he brought it along. This is not Jesus, suddenly furious at a newly discovered problem; this is Jesus, expressing an anger he has held in his heart.

But now me ask — was the problem that the animal sellers and money changers charged too much? Perhaps this was one problem; not in this version of the story, but in the other gospels, Jesus compares their marketplace to a “den of robbers,” and thus violating the commandments against theft and covetousness that we read about in the Old Testament reading. Another problem, perhaps, was the very idea of the annual temple tax — it was not something ordered by the law; but was based on the amount paid when Moses took a census in Exodus 30:12[[4]](#footnote-4). One might even point out that the tax code discriminated against women (who were not required to pay) and non-Jews or Samaritans (who were not even allowed to pay) and favored the Levitical priests (who had special rules that allowed them to pay less).

But in John’s telling, it is not about robbery. It’s not that they have made his Father’s house into a den of thieves. He wants them to stop because they have made it a marketplace. He is opposed to the very idea of a Temple Market. We don’t know if he means he is opposed to any kind of market, but the Temple, especially at Passover was neither the place nor the time to have a market. “Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” And his zeal for the Temple leads to his actions, the closest thing to real violence that Jesus ever undertakes. Now, flipping tables and snapping a whip is theatre, not violence; he is making a point, not engaging in a firefight.

Those on the ground wanted to know by what authority Jesus acted; in John’s characteristic language, they ask for a sign. And here we get to the interesting heart of the matter: Jesus says the sign, the authority, will be that he will rebuild the Temple in three days if they undertook to destroy it. They, of course, do not understand what he meant; according to the text, his followers didn’t, either. The Jewish leaders, we see, think he is talking about the Temple building.

In saying this, Jesus is planting a bomb in the minds of his followers, and maybe in some of the minds of the other listeners. Eventually, after his resurrection, the bomb would go off — Jesus meant that he himself would be raised from the dead, and this would be the sign of his authority to make rules for Temple. But even more so — Jesus, in making this declaration, was sawing that *he* was the Temple, the place where God and humanity meet.

This is profoundly important. As the church mulled it over, thought about it, processed it over the years, they came to understand this. That God no longer desired animal sacrifices. That God no longer needed a building whose upkeep required a large staff and a tax to pay for it. That God no longer wanted to distinguish between Gentiles and women and slaves and Jewish men, but that all humanity would meet in Jesus Christ.

So, why does John place the story here? Let me suggest that John is asking us to read the life of Jesus with this thought in mind — Jesus is the Temple, Jesus is the sign, Jesus is the place where God and humanity meet. Of course, there are a very important warnings to us in this story: don’t peddle the gospel for profit; be careful if you’re making a living doing God’s work; large buildings and staffs are a dangerous thing to have. But even more so, John is reminding us that Jesus is the Temple, which was sacrificially torn down, but then rebuilt, raised up again; and that everyone has access to God through him.

So, it’s not so much Occupy Wall Street — perhaps a little, but still, that’s not Jesus’s or John’s main point. But that it’s Jesus who becomes the place where we meet God.

This is a deep theological point, and sometimes it’s difficult to know how to put theology into practice. But let me suggest a few things:

* We can be deeply grateful to Jesus for his sacrifice on our behalf.
* We can be careful in how we receive financial benefits from following him.
* We can join in imitating him, attempting to reflect his image, and being a place where others can meet God.
* We can be grateful that we can gather together as God’s building, for the people of God are the new Temple of God.

1. Lightfoot, James. Quoted in Freeman, J. M., & Chadwick, H. J. (1998). *Manners & customs of the Bible* (Rev. ed.].) (451). North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Edersheim, A. (2003). *The Temple, its ministry and services as they were at the time of Jesus Christ.* (70). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Tractate Shekelim*, Chapter 1, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Talmud/shekalim1.html>, retrieved March 10, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)