

THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE : AN ANALYSIS OF THE INTENTION OF JESUS

Daniel Lucas Lukito

I. INTRODUCTION

Jesus' cleansing of the Temple is probably one of his most puzzling actions reported in the Gospels. It is difficult to determine if Jesus went to Jerusalem with the intention of purifying the Temple, or whether he decided to do so only after he got there and saw what was going on.¹ Also, it is hard to know with certainty whether there were one or two cleansings in Jesus' ministry on earth, because the Synoptic Gospels recorded this event in the last days of Jesus' ministry, whereas John put it in his early ministry in chapter two.²

This article particularly seeks to examine various interpretations that have been proposed in dealing with the questions of Jesus' intention. But before that, we want to examine several difficult problems which are primarily connected or closely related to this event. So, after briefly reviewing some of the more important possibilities concerning our main subject, we will propose a case for what seems to be the most likely hypothesis. We admit in the concluding section that there are still some unresolved problems which emerge from this topic.

II. SOME RELATED PROBLEMS

When we compare the account of the cleansing of the Temple in the Synoptic Gospels with that in John, they appear to be very different in chronology. In the former it is recorded in connection with the Triumphal Entry just before the Passover during which Jesus was crucified, whereas in John it is narrated at the beginning of the Gospel, in connection with another Passover some three years earlier. Some commentators accept the Synoptic placing as correct and

¹ See R. H. Hiers, "Purification of the Temple: Preparation for the Kingdom of God," *JBL* 90 (January 1971) 84. For Hiers, it is also unclear whether or not Jesus completely drove out the buyers and sellers, or only "began" to drive them out; whether he continued to prevent trade and traffic in the Temple for the one day, or whether he did so again the next day also.

² For an extensive comparison between the Synoptics and John, see I. Buse, "The Cleansing of the Temple in the Synoptics and in John," *ExpTim* 70 (January 1958) 22.

consider John's arrangement to be the result of theological and literary considerations.³ That is why we should not take this to mean that the Gospels are in conflict, because the cleansing in John only states explicitly what the Synoptics have implied.⁴

The Synoptic accounts agree that the Temple event occurred on the last week of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem and that it led to the arrest of Jesus by Temple authorities. The accounts also agree that Jesus drove out those "who sold" animals in the Temple courts. Matthew and Mark have the addition that the money-changers and the "seats" of those selling pigeons were dispersed. The Synoptics mention that Jesus justified his action by appealing to the combination of Isaiah 56:7 ("My house shall be called a house of prayer") and Jeremiah 7:11 ([but you have made it] "a den of robbers").

The Marcan account, however, has three significant differences compared with the others. In the first place, Mark interrupts the chronology of the Triumphal Entry and the Temple incident by reporting Jesus' curse of the fig tree. Also, Mark's version provides the fuller rendering of Isaiah: "My house shall be a house of prayer *for all the nations* [italics added]" (11:17). This record appears more concerned about the universal nature of worship, whereas Matthew and Luke focus on legitimate versus profane worship.⁵ If we accept the notion that the Outer Court is the Court of the Gentiles⁶ and that this incident took place at that spot, Mark's phrase ("for all the nations") seems more appropriate in conceptualizing the universal nature of worship.

³ See, for example, C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1963) 162; E. C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (ed. F. N. Davey; London: Faber & Faber, 1956) 198; R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (AB; 2 vols.; Garden City: Doubleday, 1966) 1:122. Based on his literary studies, Brown especially argues that there is a two-fold meaning in John; he observes that the cleansing setting in verses 13-17 may have been independent from the rebuilding (vv. 18-22).

⁴ K. A. Matthews, "John, Jesus and the Essenes: Trouble at the Temple," *Criswell Theological Review* 3/1 (1988) 121.

⁵ Probably because of its *unique* record, Mark is more preferred when scholars try to unlock the difficulty of the differences of accounts. Buse ("The Cleansing" 23) admits that "the only possibility that remains open for us is to examine the Marcan account more closely." So, it is certainly not true to say that the evidence of John is *more* historical than the Synoptics (as mentioned in G. Cornfeld, ed., *The Historical Jesus* [New York: Macmillan, 1982] 157.).

⁶ It is assumed that Jesus came into Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives through the East Gate. This would have led him directly into the larger, Outer Court first, the so-called Court of Gentiles (Cf. Hiers, "Purification" 84).

Because of the differences mentioned above, some scholars think that there are sufficient grounds to believe that there were actually two cleansings of the Temple in Jesus' ministry.⁷ However, it seems unlikely that there were two such cleansings. The details are substantially the same in all accounts, although, as mentioned above, there are several differences. Moreover, no single Gospel records, or even indicates, the existence of more than one such event. The main theme in the four Gospels is the same: the action, the justification of Jesus' own words, the questions of authority implied or discussed, and the context of a Passover setting. All of these features, in addition to details in vocabulary that John shares with the Synoptics, strongly suggest that one event is in view.⁸

III. SOME MAJOR INTERPRETATIONS

Before we analyze the intention of Jesus in cleansing the Temple, we must assume that that incident really did take place (even though it is suspected that Mark, for example, made a redactional work in 11:17).⁹ The evidence for the historicity of this event is abundant. However, as mentioned by Hiers,¹⁰ there is the opinion that that episode never actually occurred: that, for instance, Mark (or some earlier Christians) invented the story. Perhaps it was thought that Jesus *should* have acted in that way in order (1) to fulfill prophecy or (2) to indicate his opposition to the Temple cults (which the gentile church of Mark's day had necessarily abandoned), or (3) to explain his later statement that the Temple would be destroyed (13:1-2). But it is illogical to say that Mark purposefully invented that episode, because he elsewhere seemed concerned to show that Jesus was innocent of any charge of sedition or rebellion against the authorities (cf. 12:13-17; 15:5, 10, 14-15, 39).

So if this episode really happened, our primary question concerns what Jesus intended to accomplish. This is important because we cannot say that

⁷ See L. Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 190-192; D. A. Carson, "Matthew," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 441.

⁸ See Matthews, "Trouble" 118; cf. C. M. Connick, *Jesus: the Man, the Mission, and the Message* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1963) 334. Since John gives priority to thematic development over chronology in the writing of the "Book of Signs," it has been argued that John places the Temple cleansing after the Cana miracle to advance his thesis. For Morris (*John* 189-190), if we want to adopt this as one event, then a theological literary reason is the proper explanation.

⁹ J. D. Crossan, "Redaction and Citation in Mark 11:9-10 and 11:17," *BR* 17 (1972) 45-46.

¹⁰ Hiers, "Purification" 82.

Jesus just acted spontaneously¹¹ without any premeditated intentions. In light of this, we will now investigate several interpretations that have been proposed to explain Jesus' behavior at the Temple.

First, there are certain writers (from Reimarus to Brandon particularly) who have argued that Jesus' intentions were of a political-revolutionary order. S. F. Brandon,¹² for example, holds that the Temple cleansing was a revolutionary act and thus was the direct cause of Jesus' arrest. He points out that when Jesus attacked the money changers and traders he was indirectly attacking the priesthood hierarchy which sponsored those concessions, and that this hierarchy, in turn, operated by the consent of the Roman government. But Brandon does not consistently portray Jesus as a political revolutionary, and he otherwise states that Jesus' activities in the Temple were motivated by his desire to prepare Israel spiritually for the advent of the Kingdom of God.¹³

Although denying the existence of the Zealots, R. A. Horsley¹⁴ proposed that Jesus' action in the Temple was a direct attempt to take over the religious-political-economic center of society. He admits that this interpretation has been premised on and has taken its cue from the supposed existence of "the Zealots" as a long-standing religiously motivated anti-Roman revolutionary party. However, the very absence of immediate intervention by the Roman authorities indicates that Jesus' action in the Temple was considered to be a minor demonstration. If the action had involved civil disturbance -- especially if, as has been suggested, it marked an attempt by Jesus and his followers to take over the Temple -- the Romans would have intervened at once.¹⁵

¹¹ F. C. Burkitt (*Jesus Christ: An Historical Outline* [London & Glasgow: Blackie & Son, 1932] 43) states that the cleansing is almost Jesus' only spontaneous action. When he healed the lepers, it was because Jesus had met them; when he fed the multitudes, it was because they followed him.

¹² *Jesus and the Zealots* (New York: Scribners, 1968) 331-342.

¹³ *Ibid.* 342.

¹⁴ *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 297. Horsley admits that it is still not an adequate interpretation in the concrete social-historical context (p. 298).

¹⁵ F. F. Bruce, *Jesus: Lord & Savior* (The Jesus Library; ed. M. Green; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986) 83. He adds that "Even the Temple police, a body of Levites trained to keep order in the sacred precincts, do not appear to have been involved." For Horsley, this is an inadequate or non-valid objection because it can be argued in the opposite way: that the very absence of intervention by the authorities for days indicates the considerable size and seriousness of Jesus' action in the Temple (*Jesus* 297-298).

Secondly, there is the notion that Jesus' action and his interpretation of it point to the act as an attack upon the politics of holiness and as a warning of consequences.¹⁶ When he pronounced judgment against the present Temple, it was because, for him, the "Temple" had become something more or other than the Jerusalem Temple, even though he remained concerned with the latter.¹⁷ The cleansing was, of course, a provocative action and must have created something of a stir, if not an uproar; but it was clearly not intended as a takeover or occupation of the Temple area.¹⁸

Jesus knew that the money changers and sellers of sacrificial birds were there in the service of the ethos of holiness: They were servants of the sacred order of separation. So when Jesus turned their tables over, it was because he was making a strict protest against the system that had forced the regulation that the annual Temple tax was to be paid in the "holy" coinage, and not with the "pagan" or "profane" coins bearing images. More than that, because the Temple was to be "a house of prayer for the nations," i.e., for the Gentiles (in a universal scope), the Temple was not to be the private possession of a particular group, not even of the holy people.¹⁹

By that action, Jesus attempted to shatter the boundaries that had been constructed by many Jewish groups to separate the pure from the impure and the righteous from the unrighteous. Jesus was clearly attacking the concept of purification that had been elevated after Herod increased the grandeur of the Temple.²⁰ His violence against property was also an attack against the high-priestly establishment.²¹ And if we compare the biblical paradigms (e.g.,

¹⁶ M. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision. Spirit, Culture and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 175.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 140.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 175. The reason is because the Romans did not intervene.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 175. However, according to J. D. M. Derrett ("Jesus and the Animals in the Temple," in "The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin," *NTS* 26 [January 1980] 54), the priests could not be regarded as corrupt or negligent with regard to "those who sold," although their presence there was obviously due to some license granted by the trustees of the Temple.

²⁰ See J. R. Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism: New Light from Exciting Archaeological Discoveries* (ABRL, NY: Doubleday, 1988) 207.

²¹ Horsley, *Jesus* 300; cf. also H. Anderson, *Jesus (Great Lives Observed)*; ed. G. C. Stearns; Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1967) 161. Anderson has additional reasons for Jesus' attack in that it contained the motivation of protest against social unrighteousness, as well as of a prophetically inspired aversion to the element of idolatry in the images on the coins kept in the Temple.

Jeremiah's deliberate smashing of the earthen flask in the presence of the elders and senior priests [Jer 19] with the action in the Temple, Jesus' demonstration can be considered to be an escalation over and above the OT prophets.²²

However, E. P. Sanders does not agree that charges of corruption against the priesthood are to be found in the Gospels. He believes that nothing was wrong with the Temple establishment that would call for some sort of "cleansing," at least in the eyes of the first-century Palestinian Jews.²³ He reasons that buying and selling were necessary for the continuation of the Temple sacrifices; the requirement to sacrifice must always have involved the supply of sacrificial animals, their inspection, and the changing of money. In short, no sacrifices could continue without the changing of money and the selling of birds.²⁴

But it seems right to say that Sanders has too hastily dismissed the possibility of abuse within the Temple system.²⁵ From one perspective, to assume that Jewish religion in the time of Jesus was predominantly hypocritical and corrupt might surely be a gross exaggeration; however, from another perspective, the very existence of the prophetic writings of the OT bears eloquent testimony to the occasional and serious failings of Judaism. So Jesus' actions in the Temple may very well have been inspired by the words of the classical prophets, and there is a likelihood that he was actually criticizing the religious establishment along the lines of the classical prophets. But we simply do not have enough evidence to affirm this opinion.

Thirdly, some writers (e.g. B. F. Meyer²⁶ and also Sanders²⁷) believe that Jesus' action in the Temple was a symbolic act for the immanent building of an eschatological Temple. It was a prophetic symbol (combined with riddles²⁸) which anticipated the replacement of the present Temple with a renewed one.

What is meant by "symbolic act" is that Jesus *consciously* knew that he was heading for the Temple and for a public demonstration. He was aware that

²² Horsley, *Jesus* 300.

²³ *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 61-69.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 62-64.

²⁵ See C. A. Evans, "Jesus' Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?" *CBQ* 51 (April 1989) 257.

²⁶ *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979) 170.

²⁷ Sanders, *Jesus* 70-75.

²⁸ Meyer (*Aims* 168, 184-185) mentions that Jesus used riddles to solicit the effort to understand him. He was acutely aware of being a riddle to "the wise and intelligent" (Matt 11:25), to "those outside" (Mark 4:11), and even to his own disciples (Mark 7:17-23).

such actions as driving "seller and buyers" (Mark 11:15) out of the court, overturning the tables of the money changers and the stalls of the pigeon-sellers would lead the Temple clergy and the scribes to "seek a way to destroy him (Mark 11:18). In other words, everything about the entry into the city and the Temple and the ensuing expulsion of the Temple concessions was calculated. It is most unlikely that this provocative act of cleansing was born of a sudden impulse. The Temple was the goal of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, and his behavior was planned.²⁹

Sanders's perspective is that Jesus intended his prophetic demonstration to symbolize the destruction of the Temple. So even the incident of the turning over of one table points toward destruction.³⁰ According to Sanders, Jesus was not acting to purify the Temple, either of dishonest trading or of trading in contrast to "pure" worship. Nor was he opposed to the Temple sacrifices which God commanded Israel. Rather, his intention was to indicate that the end was at hand and that the Temple would be destroyed, so that the new and perfect Temple might arise.³¹ We can see that the reason why Sanders rejects the idea that Jesus' action was intended as "purifying" or "cleansing" the Temple is because he believes it to be a later interpretation of the Gospels' writers that has been uncritically accepted by a majority of interpreters.³²

However, it appears that Sanders's interpretation which is based upon the inauthenticity of Mark 11:17 is weak, for he seems to have supported his argument simply from the fact of Jesus' action in turning over the tables.³³ He ignores the fact that Jesus did in fact turn over the tables of the money changers and sellers because they were used for profits from the pilgrim worshippers in the Temple. Now, if this argument is acceptable, the authenticity of Mark 11:17 is basically not a problem at all. And if Jesus was actually acting out the symbolic

²⁹ Ibid. 170. On another page, he repeats that Jesus' action was "planned for prime time and maximum exposure; it was a 'demonstration' calculated to interrupt business as usual and bring the imminence of God's reign abruptly, forcefully, to the attention of all. As proclamation, demand, and warning, it said what Jesus had always said."

³⁰ Sanders, *Jesus* 237.

³¹ Ibid. 75; see also the same opinion in S. Kim, "Jesus - the Son of God, the Stone, the Son of Man, and the Servant: the Role of Zechariah in the Self-Identification of Jesus," in *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament* (ed. G. F. Hawthorne with O. Betz; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 134-135. In the words of Meyer, what Sanders means above can be called a restoration theology for the perfect restoration of Israel (*Aims* 198).

³² Ibid. 68.

³³ Ibid. 70-71, 89.

destruction of the Temple because it was being abused, Sanders's premise (i. e., Jesus looked forward to a new Temple in a new age) would fall apart.³⁴

Finally, there are opinions that, by cleansing the Temple, Jesus intended to demonstrate his messianic rule and identity. In expressing his authority by deed as well as word, he was indirectly making the messianic claim to his contemporaries. The cleansing of the Temple itself can be viewed as a deliberate symbolic act by which Jesus set forth an aspect of his messianic office; that is, purging contemporary Judaism of its commercialism and materialism.³⁵

Since the cleansing took place in the court of Gentiles,³⁶ some scholars³⁷ claim that it reflects Jesus' concern for the Gentile world and that this presages the call of the Gentiles and the extension of Christianity to all mankind. This might be so, especially if we relate it to the fact that Mark mentions the term "for all nations" (11:17). However, judging from the Gospels' testimonies and the context of this incident, it is unlikely that Jesus had that in mind as his major intention. His major concern was to show himself as the real Messiah who fulfilled the OT prophecies concerning himself.

The very setting of the scene of this incident is messianic. The disciples rejoice because Jesus is the one who comes in the name of the Lord (Luke 19:38; cf. Zech 9:9), and Jesus weeps because Jerusalem does not recognize the time of its visitation (Luke 19:41-44; Zech 12: 10-14). All of these scenes lead to the conclusion that he was acting as the Messiah who was fulfilling the OT passages (especially of Zech 9-14; Isa 56:7; Jer 7:11).

³⁴ See the critiques of Evans ("Jesus' Action" 248-249), and also of S. McKnight's review (on Sanders's *Jesus and Judaism*) in *Trinity Journal* 6 NS/2 (1985) 223.

³⁵ See Connick, *Jesus* 336.

³⁶ Horsley (*Jesus* 297) denies the existence of this. He states that "the court of Gentiles' is the modern, not the ancient, name of the outer court where the incident supposedly took place."

³⁷ See F. F. Bruce, *Jesus* 83; R. T. France, *The Evidence for Jesus* (The Jesus Library; ed. M. Green; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986) 149; Burkitt, *Jesus Christ* 44. According to Bruce, the outer court of the Temple was known as the 'court of Gentiles' because it was opened to Gentile visitors, who were forbidden on pain of death to penetrate into the inner courts. God-fearing Gentiles who wished to worship the God of Abraham in the Temple had to do it in the outer court. So if it was cluttered up with market stalls and the like, there was less room for the Gentiles to worship God. In this way, it is impossible that the promise that "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" in Isaiah 56:7 be fulfilled if the Gentiles could not worship properly.

It is incorrect to suggest, since there is no clear evidence, that the Messiah was to destroy the Temple.³⁸ According to Evans, there are no texts that predict the appearance of a messianic figure who first destroys (or predicts the destruction of) the Temple and then rebuilds it. Moreover, Targum Isaiah 53:3 ("he shall build the sanctuary") -- which is likely a post-70 CE tradition -- only reflects the idea that the Messiah would rebuild the Temple, and says nothing about his first destroying it.³⁹

But why then did Jesus not present himself clearly as the Messiah? Our answer is that he did declare the messianic aspect of his ministry in an implicit presentation of credentials. The event itself implies that Jesus understood his messiahship as do the Synoptic texts which present his pre-paschal career as actually but proleptically messianic. When he made the allusion to Zechariah, "You shall not make my Father's house a house of trade," he was actually drawing the people's attention to his messianic identity (cf. e.g., Zech 9:9 [with Matt 21:5] which presents the Messiah as "lowly and riding on an ass"). Also, the original context of the prophecy and Jesus' use of "My Father's house" rather than the common OT expression "house of God" reinforced the claims of Jesus.⁴⁰

More than that, Jesus demonstrated his messianic identity by his acts of driving out the animals and turning over the tables. These could be considered to be the acts of countermanding the policies of the high-priestly office. We can see in the Synoptics' context that the authorities understood Jesus' actions because they challenged his authority as a *result* of his messianic claim.⁴¹ Now if

³⁸ According to J. M. Dawsey ("Confrontation in the Temple: Luke 19:45 - 20:47," *Perspective in Religious Studies* 11 [February 1984] 157). Jesus, like Jeremiah, also followed the accusation that the Temple had become a den of robbers with a threat that God would destroy the Temple (Luke 21:5-6; Jer 7:12-15); cf. also S. Kim, "Jesus" 139; and W. W. Watty, "Jesus and the Temple - Cleansing or Cursing?" *ExpTim* 93 (August 1982) 238-239.

³⁹ Evans, "Jesus' Action" 250, 250 n. 47.

⁴⁰ Matthews, "Trouble" 124-125.

⁴¹ J. D. M. Derrett writes an interesting note concerning the coming of the Messiah. Many Jewish scholars, he states, offered the following answer to the question of when the Messiah would come: when everything is topsyturvy, when nothing is in its place, when the house of the community (the house of study or our prayer) is used as a brothel The Messiah would come when the Jewish homeland had been ruled by foreigners. According to Derrett, there is ample proof that Jesus himself and his disciples accepted the same idea, of the chaos and the sufferings associated with the Messiah, as a true sign of the Time ("The Zeal of the House and the Cleansing of the Temple," *The Downside Review* 95 [September 31, 1977] 92).

V. Eppstein⁴² is correct in saying that Caiaphas had only recently established the bazaar, Jesus' action could have been understood by the house of Ananias as an attack on the high priesthood. This would explain the urgency that the priests felt to rid themselves of Jesus.

IV. SOME UNRESOLVED PROBLEMS

Although Eppstein's proposal seems to be convincing enough, we just cannot be sure whether or not Jesus' action in the Temple was intended as an attack on the high priesthood system. We agree with the opinion that Jesus' intention was to *implicitly* present himself as the true Messiah.⁴³ There are many pieces of evidence for this view. But we simply cannot affirm convincingly that he also had the intention of implicitly attacking the high priestly establishment.

Another crucial problem concerns the destruction of the Temple: Did Jesus (or the Gospels' writers⁴⁴) have in mind the imminent destruction of the Jerusalem Temple? The Synoptics seem to affirm that it was the physical Temple in Jerusalem that was referred to (e.g., Matt 24:1-2; Mark 13:1-2; Luke 21:5-6). But the Fourth Gospel explains that "the Temple he had spoken of was his body" (2:21).

Finally, we cannot be sure whether Jesus intended to clear the place (i.e., the court of Gentiles) for the Gentile visitors to worship God properly, or whether

⁴² "The Historicity of the Gospel Account of the Cleansing of the Temple," ZNW 55 (January-February 1964) 42-58. Eppstein analyzed that in AD 30 the Sanhedrin, because of a disagreement with the high priest Caiaphas, moved from the Temple to the Mount of Olives where they were welcomed by the Bene Hanan who sold the sacred offerings for the altar. It is not unreasonable to infer that in order to spite the Bene Hanan, Caiaphas now permitted the vendors of doves and other sacred offerings to set up shop in the Temple court. Moreover, there is no evidence that prior to AD 30 selling was allowed in the Temple area. The stalls of those who trafficked in sacrificial objects must have been only recently opened, perhaps that very morning, because Jesus who had spent a full week on the Mount of Olives had evidently heard nothing of them and did not immediately react with violence (cf. Evans, "Jesus' Action" 265; Matthews, "Trouble" 124).

⁴³ For an example of this implicit factor, see John 2:19 when Jesus said: "Destroy this Temple, and I will raise it again in three days." The Jews misunderstood him. John later had to explain that "The Temple he had spoken of was his body" (v. 21).

⁴⁴ R. A. Culpepper notes (from the perspective of Mark) that "Jesus looks around and leaves without a recorded word, but it is clear to Mark that the evening of the Temple has come (11:11). On the morrow it will be condemned and within a generation it will be destroyed" ("Mark 11:15-19," *Int* 34 [February 1980] 177). The problem here is: Did Jesus signal the destruction of the Temple *when* he cleansed it?

the words in Mark 11:17 ("for all nations") indicate Jesus' intention here. So in view of these considerations, it is probably better to conclude tentatively that the messianic self-disclosure is the major and more accurate interpretation of the intention of Jesus in the Temple.

Henry Efferie

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the main issues debated between Jesus and the Jews was the question of the Sabbath. We have purposefully chosen Matthew 12:1-8 as our text because of the richness of the argumentation given by Jesus. It shows Jesus' attitude and views concerning the observance of the Sabbath, and at the same time also reveals the depth of His understanding of Judaism. In the Old Testament, God gave the Sabbath to the Israelites to be a Feast, not a burden. According to R.T. France, "the Sabbath was supposed to be a sign of God's special covenant relationship with God, a gift from God to make Israel more holy, and a promise of the joys of the world to come."¹ But in the period between 400 B.C. and the first century A.D., the Sabbath came to be more fully than in the Old Testament period, the distinctive mark of God's people. This development occurred largely as a result of the Jews' attempt to preserve the distinctive identity of their faith. As the Sabbath became the central description of Judaism, there was a need to define exactly how it should be observed. In this article, I will first give some background of how the Jews observed the Sabbath in Jesus' time, then I will explore Jesus' argument concerning the Sabbath based on Matthew 12:1-8, and finally I will give a conclusion about how the Sabbath should be observed, based on Jesus' argument.

II. THE OBSERVANCE OF THE SABBATH IN JESUS' TIME

When Jesus began His ministry, the Old Covenant was still in effect and all of its requirements were binding on Jews. Jesus observed every demand and met every condition of Scripture, because He came to fulfill, not to destroy (Matt. 5:17). But for several hundred years, the various schools of rabbis had added regulation after regulation, going far beyond the teaching of Scripture and, in many instances, actually contradicting it (Matt. 15:6-9). These additions were

¹ *Jesus: New Testament Characters Study* (Grand Rapids: Revival, 1985), 412.