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The Date of the Cleansing of the Temple in John 2 : 13-22

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The location of the account of the cleansing of the Temple differs in the Synoptic Gospels and in John. In the former it is narrated in connection with the Triumphal Entry just before the last 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. Most commentators accept the Synoptic placing as correct and consider John's arrangement to be the result of theological and literary considerations.¹ It may well be argued, however, that the location in John's Gospel has at least as much inherent probability of being correct as that of the Synoptics.²

The Markan chronology is obviously compressed and in a number of places Mark's material is grouped topically rather than being in chronological order, e.g. the conflict stories (2:1-3:1), the parable section (4:1-34) and the 'Little Apocalypse' (Chapter 13).³ A three-year ministry such as is presented in John's Gospel at least allows the needed time required by the data offered in the Synoptics,⁴ and though the festival arrangement of the Fourth Gospel may be artificial,⁵ it need not necessarily be without basis in tradition.

¹ Cf., for example, C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1963), p. 162; G. H. C. McGregor, *The Gospel of John*, Moffatt New Testament Commentary, ed. by J. Moffatt (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1949), p. 64; E. C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel*, ed. by F. N. Davey (London: Faber & Faber, 1956), p. 198; R. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament, begründet von H. A. W. Meyer (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1953), p. 86, note 2; W. Bauer, *Das Johannesevangelium*, Handbuch zum Neue Testament, ed. by H. Lietzmann (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1925), pp. 46 f.

² Cf. V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1963), pp. 461 f.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 90-105; also pp. 147 f.

⁴ Cf. J. H. Bernard, *The Gospel according to St. John*, *International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1953), Vol. I, pp. cii-cvi; cf. also Taylor, *op. cit.*, pp. 145, 147.

⁵ Cf. among others Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 10; A. Guilding, *The Fourth Gospel and Jewish Worship* (Oxford: University Press, 1960), pp. 3, 45 f.

If, as the Synoptics present it, the Temple cleansing occurred in connection with the final Passover of Jesus' life, it will have to be dated A.D. 29-30.⁶ The Johannine location, on the other hand, would require the cleansing to be dated some three years earlier, A.D. 26-27, since there are three Passovers explicitly mentioned (2:13; 6:4; 12:1) and another implied by the mention of the festival in 5:1.⁷ While it may not be possible to demonstrate conclusively that the location in John is correct, it should be noted that the reply of the Jews in John 2:20 is datable, and that the date arrived at accords remarkably with the early position of this incident in the Gospel.

The Dating of John 2:20

In v. 18 the Jews ask Jesus for a 'sign' as evidence of his authority for the drastic action he has just taken in cleansing the Temple. Jesus then, in a quite Semitic style,⁸ speaks of rebuilding the Temple in three days if it were destroyed. In v. 20 the shocked reply of the Jews is recorded and this includes a reference to the age of the Temple: 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple.' The use of the aorist *οικοδομήθη* here is surprising. Many commentators feel that the aorist requires a translation such as 'This temple has been built over a period of forty-six years . . .' and implies that the Temple had already been completed at the time the statement was made.⁹ In point of fact, however, the Temple, which was begun by Herod the Great in 20-19 B.C.¹⁰ and completed in A.D. 63, underwent a period of construction of more than eighty years and was unfinished during Jesus' lifetime. What is required in this context is some meaning for the aorist such as 'This temple has been (in the process of being) built for forty-six years (and it is not yet completed) . . .' That the aorist can have this connotation becomes clear from the closely parallel sentence in the LXX of Ezra 5:16: 'Then that Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the House of God which is in Jerusalem; and from that

⁶ For a summary of the Patristic and astronomical data by which the crucifixion is dated, cf. G. B. Caird 'Chronology of the N.T.', *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. by G. A. Buttrick, et al. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), Vol. I, p. 603.

⁷ Some commentators, however, rearrange chapters 5 and 6 and identify the festival in 5:1 with the Passover of 6:4. Cf. e.g. Bultmann, *op. cit.*, p. 179, note 3; Bernard, *op. cit.*, pp. xvi-xviii; Guilding, *op. cit.*, pp. 45 f.

⁸ Cf. Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 90; also R. H. Lightfoot, *St. John's Gospel*, ed. posthumously by C. F. Evans (Oxford: University Press, 1960), p. 113, and Bultmann, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

⁹ So for example, Bultmann, *op. cit.*, p. 90; Bauer, *op. cit.*, p. 46; Hoskyns, *op. cit.*, pp. 195 f., and especially C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (London: S.P.C.K., 1955), p. 167.

¹⁰ The 18th year of Herod. Cf. Barrett's convenient discussion, *loc. cit.* Cf. also W. F. Howard, 'Introduction and Exegesis' to *The Gospel according to St. John*, Vol. VIII of *Interpreter's Bible*, ed. by G. A. Buttrick, et al. (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1952), p. 500; Bultmann, *loc. cit.*

time until now it has been (in the process of being) built and is not yet completed' (*ᾠκοδομήθη καὶ οὐκ ἐτελέσθη*).

On the basis of this usage in Ezra then, it is possible to understand the aorist of John 2:20 as required by the context to mean that forty-six years have elapsed from the time the Temple was begun to the time when this statement was made.¹¹ This means that the statement of the Jews to Jesus was uttered in A.D. 26 or 27¹² and this date agrees remarkably well with the probable date of the Passover as noted earlier. Such an agreement is striking and unlikely to be either coincidental or a piece of deliberate calculation on the part of the writer. Rather it is most likely that the writer here produces a primitive and authentic piece of tradition¹³ which, in the words of Howard, 'is a point in favour of the place given to this incident in the Fourth Gospel'.¹⁴ This suggestion by Howard raises the question of the relationship of the dispute of Jesus with the Jews in vv. 18-20, which can be dated, to the cleansing of the Temple in vv. 13-17.

The Relation of John 2:20 to the Temple Cleansing

As the material is presented in John's Gospel there are clearly three units: (1) The Narrative of the Cleansing (vv. 13-17); (2) The Dispute (vv. 18-20); (3) The Writer's Explanatory Comment (vv. 21, 22). Bultmann maintains that vv. 13-19 belong together and represent with some modifications a Semitic written source taken over by the Evangelist.¹⁵ He notes as Semitic the way vv. 14, 18 and 19 begin, as well as certain details in the narration, such as the fact that the sellers are seated (v. 14) and that a whip is used (v. 15).¹⁶ Dodd also argues for the original unity of the narration of the cleansing (vv. 13-17) and the logion (vv. 18, 19) which the author of the Fourth Gospel preserves, but which Mark did not.¹⁷ That vv. 21, 22 are the Gospel writer's explanatory comment is clear. It is not clear, however, why v. 20 should be separated from vv. 13-19 and taken with v. 21 as Bultmann does.¹⁸ In style and form v. 20

¹¹ Cf. Bernard, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

¹² Cf. Howard, *loc. cit.*; Barrett, *loc. cit.*; Hoskyns, *op. cit.*, p. 195; Bultmann, *op. cit.*, *Ergänzungsheft*, p. 19; Bauer, *op. cit.*, pp. 45 f.

¹³ So Bernard, *loc. cit.*

¹⁴ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 85 f.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 86, note 1.

¹⁷ Dodd writes: 'To sum up: there are sound reasons for the conclusion that in his account of the cleansing of the Temple John followed an independent strain of tradition, which probably contained both the narrative and a brief controversial dialogue provoked by it, the latter probably ending with the saying, "Destroy this temple . . ." In all probability Mark had a corresponding tradition of action and dialogue, but he has separated them in the course of composition, and his variant form of the saying is incorporated in his Passion narrative.' *Op. cit.*, pp. 161 f.; cf. the detailed discussions, pp. 89-91 and 160 f.

¹⁸ Cf. *op. cit.*, p. 86, and *Ergänzungsheft*, p. 18. Dodd also seems to separate v. 20 from v. 19, but does not discuss the matter explicitly.

is more parallel to v. 18 than it is either to v. 17 or v. 21 which Bultmann correctly understands as comments of the writer.¹⁹ Further in vv. 19 and 20 'temple' refers to the actual Jerusalem temple,²⁰ whereas in v. 21 (the writer's comment) 'temple' is given a second meaning, the body of Jesus, in line with the common Johannine technique of double meanings observable in Chapters 3, 4, 6, etc.²¹

It would seem that the most probable understanding of John 2:13-22 is that vv. 13-16, 18-20 came to the writer as a unit of early tradition and that vv. 17 and 21 f. are his comments upon it. The date indicated by v. 20 is then at the same time the date of the Temple cleansing, with which it was connected in the tradition used by the author of the Gospel: that is, the cleansing of the Temple in John 2 took place in A.D. 26-27. If a choice then must be made between the Synoptic and the Johannine location, the scales are tipped in favour of the Johannine; and its connection in the Synoptics with the final week of Jesus' life is to be understood as the result of Mark's regrouping of the material. Since the cleansing was traditionally associated with the Passover, Mark naturally mentions it in connection with the only Passover he records.

The Occasion for the Cleansing

It may finally be pointed out that the cleansing of the Temple occurring in close proximity to the Passover (whether it be the first, as in John, or the last, as in the Synoptics) falls very near to, if not on, the first of the two days appointed in Ezekiel for the ritual cleansing of the Temple. According to Ezekiel 45:18 a ritual cleansing of the Temple was to be made on the first day of the first month (Nisan 1) in preparation for the Passover on Nisan 14; and according to Ezekiel 45:20 a ritual cleansing of the Temple was again to be made on the first day of the seventh month (Tishri 1).²²

The Gospel of John only remarks that the Passover 'was near', but it may very well be that Jesus chose the very day on which the Temple was being ritually cleansed as the occasion for his drastic action. In fact the suggestion to carry out his own cleansing of the Temple may have come to Jesus as the result of the lessons which he had no doubt heard read in the

¹⁹ Cf. *op. cit.*, p. 86, and *Ergänzungsheft*, p. 18. Dodd also seems to separate v. 20 from v. 19, but does not discuss the matter explicitly.

²⁰ Cf. Bernard, *op. cit.*, pp. 94 f.

²¹ Bultmann fails to observe this important distinction between the usage of v. 20 and v. 21. *Ibid.*, p. 89, notes 1 and 2. So also Bauer, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

²² Accepting the reading of the LXX here, the Masoretic text is corrupt. Cf. G. A. Cooke, *The Book of Ezekiel, International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1951), pp. 502, 507. Cf. also R. G. Finch, *The Synagogue Lectionary and the New Testament* (London: S.P.C.K., 1939), p. 68.

Synagogue on the previous Sabbath. This Sabbath was called *Hahodesh* and the lessons appointed to be read each year on this day in the earliest lectionary system of the Synagogue were Exodus 12:2-20, the *Seder* reading, and as the *Haphtarah* reading, Ezekiel 45:18-46 which gives the regulation concerning the ritual cleansing of the Temple discussed above.²³ From his earliest days Jesus had heard this portion from Ezekiel read. What would be more natural than for him to be led by this Scripture to demonstrate graphically that something more than a merely ritual cleansing of the Temple was required!

²³ Cf. Finch, *op. cit.*, pp. 21 and 33. That these lessons were in use even before the time of Jesus is shown by Finch, *ibid.*, pp. 2-9, especially p. 6, and by Guilding, *op. cit.*, chapters 2 and 3.

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