“Is the Bible Wrong About the Cleansing of the Temple?”

In John 2:13-25 is the story of when Jesus cleansed the temple. It immediately follows Jesus turning the water into wine, and immediately precedes the conversation with Nicodemus. In Matthew 21:12-16 is the same story immediately precedes the cursing of the barren fig tree. In Mark 11:15-18 the cleansing of the temple takes place immediately after the cursing of the fig tree.

Now, as I see it, there are only three possibilities.

1. The text in either Matthew and Mark or in John is in error about the time of the cleansing of the temple. And either the text in Matthew or Mark is wrong about the time of the cursing of the fig tree.
2. The gospels were not written in chronological order.
3. The same incident happened more than once (highly unlikely).

What is your take on this? Did I overlook something?

Thanks for your question! You have raised an important (and relatively common) difficulty in interpreting the gospels. Let me first say that the gospels were not necessarily written in chronological order. In fact, it is generally accepted that many of the incidents recorded in the gospels were NOT written in chronological order. As a general rule, the only exception to this is Luke’s gospel, in which he specifically states his intention “to write it out…in consecutive order” (Luke 1:3).

A good book which you may want to consult about some of these issues of gospel interpretation and harmonization is Craig Blomberg’s *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1987). Since this is not an area of personal expertise for me, I will simply give you

Blomberg's observations on possible ways in which the difficulties you have noticed might be resolved.

Concerning the cursing of the fig tree, Blomberg believes that Matthew has simply telescoped the events of two days "into one uninterrupted paragraph which seems to refer only to the second day's events." He points out that Matthew's introduction, "Now in the morning," does "not specify which day is in view, and there is no reason to exclude an interval of time between verses 19 and 20." He continues by noting, "Mark does not deny that the fig tree withered immediately, only that the disciples did not see it until the next day." He concludes by pointing out that the gospels leave out a wealth of detail (indeed, John states this explicitly in 20:30), and such omissions simply become more evident when compared with a more detailed account in another gospel.

Blomberg offers a couple of solutions to the problem of the cleansing of the temple. The first solution holds that John has simply woven this incident into his gospel thematically, rather than chronologically. In other words, there is only one cleansing and John, for thematic considerations, has simply chosen to relay this incident in a manner unrelated to its actual chronological occurrence in the life of Christ. He offers a couple of reasons in support of this view. The second solution (which commends itself to my mind) actually acknowledges two separate cleansings, one at the beginning and one near the end of Jesus' public ministry. He offers six arguments in support of this second position (172):

1. The details of the cleansing given in John's account are completely different from those given in the Synoptics (i.e. Matthew, Mark, Luke).

2. If Jesus felt strongly enough about the temple corruption to cleanse it once at the beginning of His ministry, it is not really too difficult to believe that He might do it again at the end of His ministry.

3. Since cleansing the temple was an overtly Messianic act, about which some of the Jews would have approved, it is not surprising that He could get away with doing this once at the outset of His ministry. However, when the Jews began to realize that Jesus was not really the sort of Messiah they were looking for, a second cleansing would have almost certainly sealed His fate (see Mark 11:18).

4. In the Synoptics, Jesus is accused of having said that He would destroy the temple and rebuild another in three days not made with human hands (Mark 14:58). But a similar comment by Jesus is only explicitly mentioned in John 2:19. Furthermore, since the witnesses in Mark's gospel get the statement slightly wrong, and cannot agree among themselves (Mark 14:59), it may be a confused memory of something Jesus said two or three years earlier, rather than just a few days earlier.

5. Jesus' statement in the Synoptics is more severe than that in John. Only in the Synoptics does He refer to the Gentiles need to pray at the temple, and only in the Synoptics does He refer to the Jews as "robbers."

6. In John 2:20 the Jews refer to the temple rebuilding project having begun 46 years earlier. This would mark the date of the cleansing at around AD 27 or 28. But Jesus was almost certainly not crucified until at least AD 30. And it is most unlikely that John would have simply made up such a figure. Therefore, it is quite likely that John is describing a distinct (and earlier) cleansing from the one mentioned in the Synoptics.

When I approach the gospel narratives with the attitude that they are innocent until proven guilty, keeping in mind that they have been thoroughly demonstrated to be generally reliable historical sources, the six arguments listed above strongly incline me to the view that there were in fact two temple cleansings in the life of Christ—one at the beginning

of His public ministry, the other at its conclusion. At any rate, that is my take on this particular issue.

Hope this helps!

Shalom,

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