

Matthew 26:57-75: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Matthew 26, verses 57-75 Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus, that they might put him to death.

But they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, This man said, I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days.

And the high priest stood up and said, Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you? But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.

Jesus said to him, You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven. Then the high priest tore his robes and said, He has uttered blasphemy.

What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your judgment? They answered, He deserves death. Then they spit in his face and struck him.

[1 : 20] And some slapped him, saying, Prophecy to us, you Christ. Who is it that struck you? Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, You also were with Jesus the Galilean.

But he denied it before them all, saying, I do not know what you mean. And when he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him. And she said to the bystanders, This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.

And again he denied it with an oath. I do not know the man. And after a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you.

Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, I do not know the man. And immediately the rooster crowed. And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, Before the rooster crows you will deny me three times.

And he went out and wept bitterly. In the concluding part of Matthew chapter 26, Jesus is seized by the mob with Judas by night and taken to Caiaphas the high priest.

[2 : 27] The setting of night highlights the urgency and the underhandedness of what is taking place. The authorities are impatient and they desire to do away with Jesus as soon as possible, as quickly as possible, rather than following a slower procedure of justice.

And the occurrence of these things at night also makes clear that the authorities are not people of the day, but people of the night, who desire the cover of darkness for their sins. Jesus' resurrection, by contrast, will be associated with the rising of the sun.

Earlier on, in the celebration of the Last Supper, they had celebrated a Passover meal in the evening, and now we are seeing the events of the Passover night. This is an inversion, or a reversal, of Passover and its meaning.

The Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, brings forward false witnesses against Christ, seeking to get the conviction that they so desperately desire. But they repeatedly try and fail, until two come forward.

And the accusations made against him focus upon Jesus' challenge to the temple. Jesus has challenged the temple on a few occasions during the final week in Jerusalem in particular. He declared that it had been made into a den of robbers, and a place of traders, a place where brigands would take refuge from justice.

[3 : 38] Jesus has declared himself earlier to be greater than the temple, in chapter 12, verse 6. And later on in the ministry of the early church, the challenge that Jesus posed to the temple is brought forward again.

In Acts chapter 6, verses 13 to 14, we see this. And they set false witnesses who said, This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law.

But we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place, and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us. In his challenge to the temple, Jesus could be seen as a prophet like Jeremiah.

You can think maybe of Jeremiah chapter 7, verses 1 following. The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you men of Judah, who enter these gates to worship the Lord.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words. This is the temple of the Lord.

[4 : 39] The temple of the Lord. The temple of the Lord. For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever.

Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, we are delivered, only to go on doing all these abominations.

Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, says the Lord. Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it, because of the evil of my people Israel.

And now, because you have done all these things, declares the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer. Therefore, I will do to the house that is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place that I give to you, and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh.

And I will cast you out of my sight, as I cast out all your kinsmen, all the offspring of Ephraim. Jesus then poses a very strong challenge to the temple. He's the one who cleanses the temple.

[6 : 04] He's the one who declares that the temple has become like a den of thieves. He alludes to Zechariah, he alludes to Jeremiah, and all these other texts that speak about the way that the temple will be cleansed, and that God will judge the temple, and will remove trade from it, and he will oppose and defeat those who have made it into a den of brigands.

The charge that is made against Jesus here is not actually found in Matthew's Gospel, although we do find something like it in the book of John, chapter 2, verses 19 following. Jesus answered them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.

The Jews then said, It has taken 46 years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days? But he was speaking about the temple of his body. The witnesses then seem to make a true statement, but with the attempt to destroy, and with a twisting of Jesus' words.

It's a false witness in the sense that it's designed as a malicious witness. Yet the result is that Jesus is convicted by true testimony. They are judging Jesus' true message, not just something that's been misrepresented.

It's not just Jesus himself who is rejected. It's his message too. Jesus is silent before his accusers at first, as a sheep before its shearers is silent.

[7 : 20] In Isaiah chapter 53, verse 7, this is the way that the servant is described. And the high priest commands him before God to tell him if he is the Christ, that's a strange thing to ask.

Is this a separate charge? No, I don't think it is. It's because the Messiah was the one to cleanse and restore the temple. And so theologically, it follows from the statement about the temple. Note the repetition of this charge when Jesus is on the cross in chapter 27, verses 39 to 42.

And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself. If you are the son of God, come down from the cross.

So also the chief priests with the scribes and the elders mocked him saying, He saved others. He cannot save himself. He is the king of Israel. Let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him.

In response to the high priest's request, Jesus affirms it. And he says that he is the son of man and that the high priest would from then on see the son of man seated at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven.

[8 : 26] Jesus here is alluding to Daniel chapter 7. Daniel chapter 7, verses 13 to 14 read, I saw in the night visions and behold, with the clouds of heaven, there came one like a son of man and he came to the ancient of days and was presented before him and to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom and all peoples, nations and languages should serve him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. In response to this, the high priest tears his clothes, something the high priest was explicitly told that he ought not to do in Leviticus chapter 21 verse 10.

The high priest and the court charge Jesus with blasphemy and declare him worthy of death. They don't have the jurisdiction to carry out the sentence though, so they must deliver him to Pilate in the morning.

Claiming to be the son of man goes beyond the status of a man. It's claiming a status that is more divine and there also seems to be cultural blasphemy here. He's opposing the temple and the religious leaders too.

So there's the greater charge, the charge that he has made himself the son of man and then there's also the lesser charge of cultural blasphemy, opposing the temple and the religious leaders.

[9 : 41] And they respond by spitting in his face, mocking him, slapping him and we could maybe think to the mockery of Samson before his death. But also of Isaiah chapter 50 verse 6 and the way that the suffering servant is described there.

I gave my back to those who strike and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard. I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting. One thing we should be noting here is that even in that great hour of darkness, the enemies of Christ are constantly and continually fulfilling prophecy.

Also, Jesus is living out his manifesto. He's turning the other cheek, not avenging himself. Peter's denial is paralleled with and contrasted with Jesus' trial.

In verse 58, Peter's presence is described. He's there at a distance and then we see him come to the forefront again in verse 69. Both Peter and Jesus are questioned.

One is faithful and the other unfaithful. The two women who claim that he was with Jesus were probably with the arresting party and we can see a gradual escalation. First, he's approached directly and personally and denies it to the entire group.

[10 : 54] He then tries to move location and there he's accused the bystanders by another servant girl and then he denies it strongly again. Then the bystanders accuse him together of association with the followers of Jesus.

Note the way that Jesus is seen as an outsider from the north. A man of Nazareth, a man of Galilee and Peter, his accent giving him away is associated with that region too.

Peter's curse that he declares at this point is either an anathema upon himself or an anathema upon Christ. Both of the very utmost seriousness and it emphasises just how terribly and seriously he's fallen.

Hearing the crowing cock brings sudden and horrified self-recognition of his earlier pride and his current sin and startles him back to his senses.

He now completely removes himself. He's been gradually moving out and now he completely removes himself and weeps bitterly. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which the justice of Christ's condemnation of the Jewish leaders a few chapters earlier is manifested in the various injustices that are involved in their condemnation of him?