

## DID IT TAKE FORTY-SIX YEARS OR MORE TO BUILD THE TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM? RECONSIDERING JOHN 2:20

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**Abstract:** *While the standard translation of John 2:20 is endorsed by a large majority of commentaries during the last century, a few voices during the last fifty years have proposed an alternate rendering. This study examines the manifold problems that confront the standard translation of this verse. The results demonstrate that the alternate rendering is superior on syntactical, semantic, and historical grounds. Implications for the dating of Jesus's ministry are explored.*

**Key words:** *dative, aorist, ναός, ἱερόν, Josephus, biblical chronology, temple*

In nearly every English version of the Bible, John 2:19–20 reads similarly: “Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews then said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?’” (ESV). However, a trio of recent English versions offer a possible alternate rendering of the words of Jesus’s opponents. For instance, the footnotes for CSB and ESV suggest, “This temple was built forty-six years ago.” The notes to the NET Bible acknowledge that some favor this rendering, but the NET Bible ultimately rejects it.<sup>1</sup> During the last half-century, several scholars have argued for this alternate translation.<sup>2</sup> Many are probably unfamiliar with this alternative or any arguments adduced in favor of either the standard translation or the alternative. An examination of commentaries and related works from the recent decades (as well as a few older sources) reveals the issues that prompted these recent suggestions and allows an examination of these two alternatives.

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<sup>1</sup> NET Bible, note 45 to John 2:20. <https://netbible.org/John+2>.

<sup>2</sup> Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology: Principles of Time Reckoning in the Ancient World and Problems of Chronology in the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 348–49 (§595); Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 38–43; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 109–10; J. Paul Tanner, *Daniel*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), 559n220; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 560–61.

## I. EXAMINATION OF MULTIPLE PROBLEMS WITH THE STANDARD TRANSLATION

With few exceptions, every commentary in recent years defends the standard translation of John 2:20.<sup>3</sup> These works highlight four major issues that commentators identify in their interpretation and defense of the standard translation. The argument is made that the verse speaks about a temple building project begun in the days of Herod the Great and still active and ongoing in Jesus's day.

1. *The reasoning behind the question of Jesus's opponents.* Perhaps assuming it to be obvious, many commentaries make little mention of the reasoning behind the question "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" However, some do discuss it. D. A. Carson notes, "The Jews are naturally incredulous that a building under construction for forty-six years could be rebuilt in three days."<sup>4</sup> This statement reveals that Carson considers the phrases "forty-six years" and "in three days" to be exact parallels, both expressing extent of time. Thus, the logic of the statement is perceived to be this: It is impossible for Jesus to do something over three days that took others forty-six years to do. As will be demonstrated below, this assumption about the logic behind the comments of the Jews who opposed Jesus drives much of the rest of the interpretation of John 2:20 for those who follow the standard approach.

2. *The rendering of the dative case in "forty-six years."* One issue relating to the syntax of John 2:20 is the phrase τεσσαράκοντα καὶ ἕξ ἔτεσιν, "forty-six years," which is in the dative case. Wallace notes, "The dative (τεσσαράκοντα καὶ ἕξ ἔτεσιν) most naturally refers to a point in time, rather than an extent of time."<sup>5</sup> Thus, one would

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<sup>3</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 1:217; Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel according to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1993), 181; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I–XII: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AB 29 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 116; F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 76–77; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, Pillar NT Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 181–82; Ernst Haenchen, *John 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of John, Chapters 1–6*, trans. Robert W. Funk, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 184–85; James M. Hamilton Jr., "John," in *ESV Expository Commentary*, vol. 9: *John–Acts* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 65; Murray J. Harris, *John*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 67; Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), 195–96; Edward W. Klink III, *John*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 182; Colin G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC 4 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017), 107; Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel according to Saint John*, BNTC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 140; Francis Martin and William M. Wright IV, *The Gospel of John*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 66; J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 164; Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, SP 4 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 78–79; James H. Neyrey, *The Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2007), 72; Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 117; Rudolph Schnackenberg, *The Gospel according to St John* (New York: Seabury, 1980), 351–52; Mairanne Meyre Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 73; William C. Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1*, ConC (St. Louis: Concordia, 2015), 335–37.

<sup>4</sup> Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 181.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 560.

expect this dative phrase to mean “forty-six years ago,” not “for forty-six years,” which normally would be expressed using the accusative case. Use of dative to express a point in time is said to be “still quite common” in the NT.<sup>6</sup> Wallace offers this example and observation: “Matt 17:23 τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ ἐγερθήσεται [at a point in time] on the third day he will be raised. Every occurrence of ‘the third day’ with reference to Jesus’ resurrection in the Gospels is put in the dat. without an accompanying preposition. Cf. Matt 16:21; 20:19; Luke 9:22; 18:33; 24:7, 46.”<sup>7</sup>

However, during the first century there was a growing tendency in Koine Greek to employ the dative case also to refer to an extent of time.<sup>8</sup> Such usage is relatively rare in the NT. Most commentators do not discuss this dative phrase in John 2:20, and they therefore do not justify taking it as presenting extent of time rather than the much more common point in time. However, reacting to more recent proponents of the alternate rendering of John 2:20 (“for forty-six years”), Weinrich argues that understanding the dative phrase in John 2:20 as signifying extent of time is required by context: “The forty-six years is compared to Jesus’ claim that he will raise the temple ‘in three days,’ which clearly means extent of time, as the phrase with preposition shows (ἐν τρισὶν ἡμέραις).”<sup>9</sup>

Weinrich’s reasoning, however, is somewhat circular. It assumes what the logic of the statement from Jesus’s opponents is: the phrase “in three days” expresses extent of time and is exactly parallel to “forty-six years.” Thus, he reasons, the dative phrase “forty-six years” must be expressing extent of time, thereby justifying a translation that supports the supposed underlying logic of Jesus’s opponents. Under Weinrich’s proposal the words of the Jews might be presented as “This temple took forty-six years to build, and will you raise it up over a period of three days?”

Yet, the preposition ἐν + dative case object may express either point in time or extent of time.<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere Jesus’s reference to his resurrection is expressed in the dative case without the preposition ἐν and expresses a point in time (τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ, “on the third day”; see the example cited above from Wallace). Paul presents Jesus’s resurrection not as a three-day process, but as an event on the third day (ἐγήγερται τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ τρίτῃ, “he was raised on the third day,” 1 Cor 15:4). While the Scriptures uniformly count three days from Jesus’s crucifixion to his resurrection, they never depict resurrection as a process that occupies three days, but as an instantaneous event (compare Rom 6:5 with 1 Cor 15:51–52). Thus, it is more probable that the phrase in John 2:20, ἐν τρισὶν ἡμέραις, means “three days later.”<sup>11</sup>

In view of this, one could make the same type of argument that Weinrich presents, except in the opposite direction: the two phrases ought to be understood as

<sup>6</sup> BDF 170 (§200).

<sup>7</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 156.

<sup>8</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 171 (§201). See also BDF 108 (§201).

<sup>9</sup> Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1*, 336–37.

<sup>10</sup> BDF 170 (§200). For examples of point in time see Luke 3:1: Ἐν ἔτει δὲ πεντεκαίδεκάτῳ τῆς ἡγεμονίας Τιβερίου Καίσαρος, “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar,” or John 1:2: οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν, “he was with God in the beginning.”

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, the phrase ἐν τρισὶν ἡμέραις is employed in the NT only in Jesus’s resurrection metaphor of rebuilding the temple (Matt 27:40; Mark 15:29; John 2:19, 20).

parallel uses of dative for point in time: “This temple was built forty-six years ago, and will you raise it up three days later [i.e., three days after it is destroyed]?” Thus, Jesus’s Jewish opponents could be expressing incredulity at Jesus’s words by noting that the temple has endured for forty-six years, and he wishes for them to tear it down so that he can raise it up three days later.<sup>12</sup>

Proponents of the standard translation of John 2:20 might argue, however, that the skeptical Jews who responded to Jesus’s statement misunderstood what he meant when he said that he would raise the temple in three days (ἐν τρισὶν ἡμέραις, John 2:19). That is, they might possibly argue that Jesus meant “three days later,” but his respondents understood him to mean “over a period of three days.” However, note that John tells his readers that Jesus’s incredulous interlocutors misunderstood what he meant by “this temple” (τὸν ναὸν τοῦτον). They thought he meant the temple building in Jerusalem, but he meant his body (John 2:21). John does not indicate that they misunderstood what Jesus meant by “in three days” (ἐν τρισὶν ἡμέραις).

3. *The use of the aorist tense for “has taken ... to build.”* Another challenge for the standard translation of John 2:20 is the use of the aorist verb οἰκοδομήθη. The most common way to understand this verb would be as a simple past event that had ceased: “was built.”<sup>13</sup> Hoskyns notes that “the aorist stands intractably in the text, and must, presumably, be translated *was built*, i.e. completed.”<sup>14</sup> However, many commentators argue that the aorist must be understood as constative or complexive, summing up the entire forty-six-year building project.<sup>15</sup> This view, however, founders because the aorist would cover the past building project but would not imply an ongoing project as pictured by advocates of the standard translation. For a project begun in the past and ongoing into the future, one would expect an imperfect tense verb.

Brown seeks to overcome this problem by referencing the Greek text of 2 Esdras 5:17 (= Hebrew/Aramaic Ezra 5:16) as providing an example of a complexive aorist parallel to the one in John 2:20 and that signifies ongoing activity into the future:<sup>16</sup> “A perfect parallel is found in LXX of Ezra v 16: ‘... from that time until now [the Temple] has been in building [aorist; same verb] and is not yet fin-

<sup>12</sup> Köstenberger, *John*, 110.

<sup>13</sup> This consumative or effective use of the aorist verb οἰκοδομήθη at John 2:20 is advocated by Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 561. See also BDF 166 (§318).

<sup>14</sup> Hoskyns, *Fourth Gospel*, 196.

<sup>15</sup> Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 117; Harris, *John*, 67; Lincoln, *Gospel according to Saint John*, 140; Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1*, 336–37. On the constative or complexive aorist see BDF 171 (§322) and Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 557–58.

<sup>16</sup> The relationship between the Hebrew/Aramaic Ezra and the Greek books known as 1 Esdras and 2 Esdras is complicated. For tables listing the equivalent passages see the “To the Reader” sections of 1 Esdras and 2 Esdras in Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included under That Title* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 392, 405. The equivalent verse in 1 Esdras is 6:19. In a closer parallel to the Aramaic participle ܒܢܝܢ at Ezra 5:16, 1 Esdras 6:19 employs the present tense participle οἰκοδομούμενος instead of an aorist indicative as at 2 Esdras 5:17.

ished.”<sup>17</sup> However, the parallel is not as perfect as Brown claimed and does not demonstrate what he thought it demonstrated. The Greek text reads τότε Σασαβασαρ ἐκεῖνος ἦλθεν καὶ ἔδωκεν θεμελίους τοῦ οἴκου τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἐν Ἱερουσαλὴμ καὶ ἀπὸ τότε ἕως τοῦ νῦν ὠκοδομήθη καὶ οὐκ ἐτετέλεσθη. That is, “This Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the temple of God that is in Jerusalem, and from then until now it has been built, and it has not been completed.” The aorist verb is complexive/constative and sums up the previous work “from then until now.” It says nothing about the ongoing effort beyond “now” (τοῦ νῦν). The prospect of future work is implied by the following clause “and it has not been completed” (καὶ οὐκ ἐτετέλεσθη). John 2:20, however, says nothing about the temple in Jesus’s day being incomplete and in need of further work. Thus, when advocates of the standard translation seek to justify a reference in John 2:20 to a forty-six-year temple building project that would not be finished until AD 64 (see discussion below), the aorist verb at 2 Esdras 5:17 does not offer support for their view of ongoing temple construction.

4. *The distinction or lack of distinction between the temple building (ναός) and the wider temple complex (ἱερόν).* Another feature of John 2:20 that is problematic for the standard translation is the distinction in Greek between the temple building (ναός) and the wider temple complex (ἱερόν).<sup>18</sup> Josephus clearly indicates that the temple building was completed one year and five or six months after the initiation of the project. Josephus describes it this way:

When the sanctuary [τοῦ δὲ ναοῦ] had been built by the priests in a year and five months, all the people were filled with joy. After they first brought thank-offerings to God for the swiftness [of the renovation] and afterward for the king’s enthusiasm, they feted and applauded the restoration. And the king sacrificed three hundred oxen [sic] to God, and others [sacrificed animals] according to their means, the number of which it is impossible to tell. For the capability of telling it according to the truth eludes us. For that appointed day—in connection with the work on the sanctuary—and the day of the king’s accession to the throne, which they celebrated customarily, fell on the same date. So because of both occasions a most notable feast was held. (*Ant.* 15.421–23 [15.11.6])<sup>19</sup>

However, the standard translation of John 2:20 requires that the building project continued for at least forty-six years after 20 BC. Commentators generally ignore or dismiss the distinction between ναός and ἱερόν, since the passages in Josephus that indicate construction at a time later than that of Herod—*Ant.* 20.191 [20.8.11] and

<sup>17</sup> Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 117. Brown is quoted approvingly by Lincoln, *Gospel according to Saint John*, 140; Weinrich, *John* 1:1–7:1, 337.

<sup>18</sup> This distinction is recognized in all the standard Greek lexica. See LSJ 1160; BDAG 533; EDNT 2.175, 457. See also Bruce, *Gospel of John*, 76.

<sup>19</sup> Jan Willem Van Henten, *Judean Antiquities* 15, ed. Steve Mason, Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary 7B (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 321–24. Ven Henten gives the time for the construction of the temple building as “one year and five months,” but other manuscripts read “one year and six months” (321n3042).

*Ant.* 20.219 [20.9.7]—mention only construction of a wall around the temple courtyard. For instance, Harris states, “*Ναός* could refer to the sanctuary alone or to the whole temple complex that was completed in AD 63,” although he presents no accompanying evidence attesting to a wider meaning for *ναός* that would include the entire temple complex.<sup>20</sup> Michaels opines, “A distinction is sometimes made to the ‘sanctuary’ as the central shrine, or holy place within the larger ‘temple’ precincts. But the reaction of his hearers (v. 20) suggests no such differentiation.”<sup>21</sup>

It is not obvious (at least to the present writer) that Jesus’s interlocutors would have understood *ναός* to be essentially synonymous with the temple complex (*ἱερόν*). Perhaps commentators are thinking of Josephus’s mention of later work on the temple courtyard wall from about AD 62 to AD 64 (*Ant.* 20.191 [20.8.11]). They could be assuming that Jesus’s opponents cannot be speaking of the temple building alone, since the temple building was completed in Herod’s day (*Ant.* 15.421 [15.11.6]). That, however, is an unproven assumption laid over the text. There is nothing in the context of John 2:20 that suggests that the Jews who reacted to Jesus were speaking of anything other than what he was referencing—a temple as the dwelling place of God, not a temple complex. Moreover, a brief survey of the occurrences of both *ναός* and *ἱερόν* demonstrates that these two nouns are not used interchangeably in the NT.

a. *Ναός and ἱερόν in the Johannine literature.* In the Gospel of John, the occurrences of *ναός*, a temple building, are limited to John 2:19–21. Setting aside John 2:20 as the passage under discussion, it ought to be noted that in John 2:21 claims that when Jesus was speaking about a temple building, he was speaking about his body as God’s dwelling (see Col 1:19; 2:9). Since Greek *ναός* denotes a building that is a residence of a god, it is certain that Jesus was not using the term as an equivalent of *ἱερόν*, the temple complex as a whole.

Jesus was not a Levitical priest, so he could not enter the temple building (*ναός*). John is careful always to use the noun *ἱερόν* when speaking of Jesus’s presence in the temple, that is, in the temple complex’s courtyards. In John 2:14–15, Jesus drove the moneychangers and their livestock out of the temple. Note that economic activity took place in the temple courtyard, not in the temple building that only the priests could enter.

Often Jesus taught in the temple courtyards (John 7:14, 28; 8:2, 20 [specifically, in the temple treasury], 59; 18:20). In the *ἱερόν* he met a man he had healed (5:14), and he walked in the colonnade of Solomon in the temple courtyard (10:23). At 11:56 some men were looking for Jesus as they stood in the temple (*ἱερόν*).

While neither *ναός* nor *ἱερόν* occur in John’s letters, *ναός* is used sixteen times in Revelation, all but one in reference to God’s heavenly temple. *Ἱερόν* never occurs in Revelation. All occurrences of *ναός* in Revelation refer to a temple building and not a wider temple complex. Revelation 3:12 is a promise at the end of the letter to the angel of the church of Philadelphia that guarantees the one who over-

<sup>20</sup> Harris, *John*, 67.

<sup>21</sup> Michaels, *Gospel of John*, 164. Similar is Moloney, *Gospel of John*, 78.

comes will be a pillar in the temple of God and never leave it. This is a promise of always being in God's immediate presence and depicts the recipient as a constituent of the temple building. In 7:15, the saints in heaven are in front of God's throne in the temple building. At 11:1–2, John is given a measuring rod and told to measure the temple building, but not the surrounding courtyard outside the temple. The ark of the covenant is seen inside the temple building at 11:19. Various angels are depicted coming out of the temple building, apparently dispatched by God for various tasks (14:15, 17). At 15:5–6, the “sanctuary of the tent of witness” (ὁ ναὸς τῆς σκηνῆς τοῦ μαρτυρίου) is opened, and from it come seven angels. This sanctuary later is filled with smoke (Rev 15:8; see Isa 6:4). Revelation 16:1 and 17 depict a voice from the temple building, apparently the divine voice issuing a command and making a pronouncement. Finally, 21:22 notes that in the New Jerusalem there will be no temple building, since God and the Lamb by their presence are the temple.

Considering how careful John is to differentiate between the terms *ναὸς* and *ἱερόν*, the assertion that the Jews who responded to Jesus at John 2:20 were referring to the entire temple complex when using the word *ναὸς* is highly questionable.

b. *Ναὸς and ἱερόν in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts.* The same careful distinction between the temple building and the temple complex that characterizes John's writings is also found in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts. I will treat occurrences of *ναὸς* before turning to occurrences of *ἱερόν*.

In Matthew 23, Jesus warns his hearers not to take oaths by the temple building (ἐν τῷ ναῷ) or its gold (23:16–17), because whoever takes an oath by the temple building takes an oath by the one who dwells in it (23:21). Later in Matthew 23, Jesus speaks about a certain Zechariah who was murdered between the temple building and the altar that was immediately east of it (23:35).

In Matthew 27:3–4, Judas sought to return the money he had received for betraying Jesus. When the chief priests and elders refused to accept it, he threw the money into the temple building (εἰς τὸν ναόν, 27:5), thereby forcing the priests to receive it, since they alone could enter the temple building.

When Jesus died, the curtain in the temple building was torn (Matt 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). Zechariah had a vision that revealed that he was to name his son “John.” This happened in the temple building where he was to burn incense (Luke 1:9, 21, 22). On the Areopagus in Athens, Paul proclaimed that the God who made the world and everything in it does not dwell in temple buildings made by humans (Acts 17:24). Finally, Acts 19:24 introduces a silversmith named Demetrius who manufactured silver shrines of Artemis (ναοὺς ἀργυροῦς Ἀρτέμιδος), the Greek goddess of the hunt. Apparently, these were intended to be smaller versions of the temple building known as the Artemision of Ephesus, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, and they served as personal temples to the goddess.

Turning to occurrences of *ἱερόν*, it ought to be noted that, like John 2:14–15, all three Synoptic Gospels depict Jesus disrupting the economic activities in the temple courtyards (Matt 21:12; Mark 11:15–16; Luke 19:45). Also like John, the Synoptics frequently depict Jesus in the temple complex, often mentioning Jesus's teaching activity (Matt 21:14–16; 26:55; Mark 11:11, 27; 12:35; 14:49; Luke 2:46;

19:47; 20:1; 21:37–38; 22:53). Both Simeon and Anna found the infant Jesus in the temple courtyards with his parents (Luke 2:27, 37).

Luke also mentions other non-priests in the temple courtyards: the eleven apostles (Luke 24:53) and two men going into the temple courtyards to pray (Luke 18:10). In addition, Luke mentions the temple police or guardsmen who served in the temple complex (στρατηγούς τοῦ ἱεροῦ, Luke 22:52).

During Jesus's temptation, the devil took him to the edge of the temple complex (τὸ πτερύγιον τοῦ ἱεροῦ, Matt 4:5; Luke 4:9).<sup>22</sup> This need not be seen as the edge of the temple building. A note to Matthew 4:5 and Luke 4:9 in the NET Bible states,

What the highest point of the temple refers to is unclear. Perhaps the most popular suggestion is that the word refers to the point on the temple's southeast corner where it looms directly over a cliff some 450 ft (135 m) high. Others have suggested the reference could be to the roof of the temple or a projection of the roof; still others see a reference to the lintel of the temple's high gate, or a tower in the temple courts.<sup>23</sup>

"The temple's southeast corner" refers to the southeast corner of the temple courtyard, not the southeast corner of the temple building. Note that three of the suggestions given by the NET Bible are places in the ἱερόν, not the ναός. The Gospels' clear differentiation elsewhere between the temple building and the temple courtyards and cloisters, combined with possible locations for the πτερύγιον as part of the ἱερόν, indicate that the reference need not be stretched to include the ναός. There is no compelling reason to accept suggestions that locations on the temple building itself (such as the roof of the temple building or a projection from it) might be referenced in these two verses.

In Acts, Luke also uses ἱερόν only in reference to a wider temple complex. He frequently mentions the activity of Christians in general or the apostles in particular in the temple complex (2:46 3:1–3, 8, 10; 4:1; 5:20–21, 24–25, 42). Paul's activity in the temple courtyard is also noted. He prayed in the temple (22:17). His arrest in the temple courtyard is related in Acts 21 (see 21:26–30 where the ἱερόν is mentioned five times). This incident is referenced later in Paul's various trials, where the temple complex is mentioned by him or his accusers in his hearings before Felix (24:6, 12, 18), Festus (25:8), and Agrippa (26:21).

Of particular interest is the use of ἱερόν in Acts 19. This is part of the account of the riot at Ephesus. Demetrius gathered workmen in various trades connected to his occupation and spoke against Paul. In part he said, "Not only do we run a risk that our business may be discredited, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis (τὸ τῆς μεγάλης θεᾶς Ἀρτέμιδος ἱερόν) may be despised and her magnifi-

<sup>22</sup> Πτερύγιον is literally a "little wing," probably meaning an edge. LSJ defines it as "the wing of a building, a turret or pinnacle, N.T." BDAG offers, "dim. of πτερυξ 'wing'; it serves to denote the tip or extremity of anything, end, edge."

<sup>23</sup> NET Bible, note 5 to Matt 4:5 and note 35 to Luke 4:9. <https://netbible.org/bible/Matthew+4> and <https://netbible.org/bible/Luke+4>.



cence come to the verge of ruin—the very one all of Asia and the world worship” (19:27, CSB). The concern is expressed not simply for the temple building (*ναός*) but for the wider temple complex (*ἱερόν*). Demetrius stirred up the workmen because their economic activity was threatened. This, in turn, threatened economic support for the cult of Artemis in Ephesus. Like the Jerusalem temple and temples in general in antiquity, economic activity at the Artemision took place in the precincts around the temple building. Activity within the temple building was limited to religious rites. Thus, Demetrius’s use of *ἱερόν* is deliberate and designed to foment civil unrest.

As can be seen from this complete survey of the uses of *ναός* and *ἱερόν*, the Synoptic Gospels and Acts are quite meticulous in their use of these terms. Once again, NT usage runs counter to the claim of supporters of the standard translation of John 2:20 that *ναός* might be used to encompass the wider temple complex.

c. *Ναός and ἱερόν in Paul’s letters.* The balance of the occurrences of *ναός* and *ἱερόν* are in Paul’s letters. He frequently uses *ναός* as a temple building in metaphors depicting God dwelling among the believers or in their bodies (1 Cor 3:16–17; 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21). At 2 Thessalonians 2:4, Paul depicts the coming man of lawlessness as taking a seat in the temple building, thereby making himself God.

Paul uses *ἱερόν* only once: Those who serve in the temple and at its altar share in what is on the altar (1 Cor 9:13). This is clearly a reference to the courtyard in front of the temple building. Thus, Paul, like the rest of the NT, offers no support for the contention that *ναός* might be used to encompass the wider temple complex. Instead, the NT writers are careful and precise in their use of both *ναός* and *ἱερόν*.

## II. THE LENGTH OF THE TEMPLE CONSTRUCTION PROJECT

Closely related to the previous issue is the statement by many commentators that the temple construction initiated by Herod the Great was still in progress in Jesus’s day. The observations offered by F. F. Bruce are typical of this approach:

The reconstruction of the temple in the form which it had at this time was begun by Herod the Great in early 19 BC. The main part of the work was completed and consecrated in ten years, but other parts were still being carried out; in fact, the finishing touches were not put to the whole enterprise until AD 63, only seven years before its destruction.<sup>24</sup>

The source for this information about the construction on the temple is Josephus, *Ant.* 15.380 [15.11.1] and 20.219 [20.9.7].<sup>25</sup> Although not explicitly cited by commentaries, *Ant.* 15.421 [15.11.6] on the completion of the temple building proper (*ναός*) and *Ant.* 20.191 [20.8.11] on the initiation of construction of a wall around the temple courtyards also factor into the discussion of the total length of the construction project begun by Herod.

<sup>24</sup> Bruce, *Gospel of John*, 76. See also Boice, *Gospel of John*, 1:217; Kruse, *John*, 107n4; Martin and Wright, *Gospel of John*, 66.

<sup>25</sup> As cited by Haenchen, *John* 1, 184; Hoskyns, *Fourth Gospel*, 195; Schnackenberg, *Gospel according to St John*, 351; Thompson, *John*, 73n107; Weinrich, *John* 1:1–7:1, 336n67.

John 2:20 is often used to date Jesus's conversation with his opponents. Josephus indicates that the temple construction began after Augustus visited Syria in the spring of 20 BC, the temple construction likely began in late 20 or early 19 BC.<sup>26</sup> Thus, one may compute forty-six years later as:

$$-20/-19 + 46 + 1 [\text{no zero year}] = \text{late AD 27 or early AD 28}$$

Jesus was speaking with his fellow Jews during Passover supposedly after at least 46 years had elapsed (John 2:13, 23), but before 47 years had elapsed. Thus, it is often stated that the conversation took place at Passover in AD 28.<sup>27</sup>

There is a problem with this reckoning, however. In *Antiquities* 15.421–23, already noted, Josephus clearly states that the temple building was completed after one year and six (or five) months. Thus, the completion of the ναός was in mid-to-late 18 BC. The standard translation attempts to bypass this information by claiming that John 2:20, although using the term ναός, was actually referring to the wider temple complex (ἱερόν). That is dubious, especially in light of the use of both ναός and ἱερόν throughout the NT, as has been shown.

Yet, even if one holds to a blurring of the distinction between ναός and ἱερόν, there is another problem: Josephus also notes the completion of the entire temple complex by Herod eight years after construction began (*Ant.* 15.420 [15.11.5]): “King Herod passed into none of these three [areas]:<sup>28</sup> not being a priest, he was prevented from doing so. But he engaged himself in the construction work of the porticoes and the outer enclosed areas and built those in eight years.”<sup>29</sup> This would date the completion of the temple complex to late 12 BC or early 11 BC.<sup>30</sup> Once

<sup>26</sup> *Ant.* 15.354 [15.10.3]; *War* 1.401 [1.21.1]. This visit of Augustus to Syria is dated by Dio Cassius to the consular year of Marcus Apuleius and Publius Silius, 20 BC (*Roman History* 54.7.4–6). Josephus writes that this was after Herod had reigned seventeen years (i.e., during the eighteenth year of Herod's reign). In the *Antiquities* passages, Josephus measures eighteen years from Herod's investiture by the Roman Senate in late 39 BC, whereas in *War*, he measures fifteen years from Herod's capture of Jerusalem, three years after his investiture. See Andrew E. Steinmann and Rodger C. Young, “Elapsed Times for Herod the Great in Josephus,” *BSac* 177 (2020): 317.

<sup>27</sup> E.g., Haenchen, *John* 1, 184.

<sup>28</sup> That is, the three temple courtyards.

<sup>29</sup> Van Henten, *Antiquities* 15, 320–21 (*Ant.* 15.420 [15.11.5]).

<sup>30</sup> Some would add the two figures together (8 years + 1 year and 6 [or 5] months) and date the conclusion of Herod's construction project to about 10 BC, apparently with the temple building completed at the end of the project. See Bruce, *Gospel of John*, 76; Van Henten, *Antiquities* 15, 321n3042 (*Ant.* 15.321 [15.9.3]). However, it appears that Josephus first relates the entire construction project that ended after eight years (*Ant.* 15.380–420 [15.11.1–5]). Then he backtracks to focus specifically on the completion of the temple building (ναός) and the magnificent dedicatory celebration at its completion (*Ant.* 15.420–23 [15.11.6]). As Van Henten observes, Marcus Agrippa's visit to Jerusalem in the autumn of 15 BC where he offered sacrifices is placed after the account of the completion of the temple (*Ant.* 16.12–15 [16.2.1]) (321n3042). Later, Herod traveled to Rome in early-to-mid 12 BC. There before Augustus he made accusations against his sons, and one of them—namely Alexander—made a defense in which he mentioned the completed Jerusalem temple (ναός, not ἱερόν; *Ant.* 16.115 [16.4.3]). Herod had accused his sons of plotting to kill him. Alexander notes that if he had killed Herod, he would have been prevented from entering the temple building (ναός) by the Jewish populace. They would not have allowed someone who committed parricide to serve as priest. Alexander could claim to be eligible to be a priest through his mother's side of the family. His mother Mariamne was a Hasmonean princess. These two

again, it is difficult to maintain that there was a continuing temple construction project that lasted for forty-six years after Herod commenced it in late 20 BC or early 19 BC. Josephus appears to portray all construction work on the temple and its courtyards as finished after only eight years.

After finishing his account of Herod's construction on the temple complex in *Antiquities* 15, Josephus mentions no further construction on the temple or its courtyards until *Antiquities* 20. This passage dates to the early seventh decade of the first century (about AD 62–64). It is to this information that advocates of the standard translation of John 2:20 appeal. They claim that it indicates that the ongoing construction from Herod's time did not cease until about AD 64. It is interesting to note that even advocates of the alternate translation for John 2:20 do not question that *Antiquities* 20 indicates an ongoing construction project for the temple courtyards from Herod's day until about AD 64.<sup>31</sup> However, it ought to be asked whether Josephus actually depicts the construction project on the wall of the temple courtyard in the first century AD as part of an ongoing construction project or whether it was a new project altogether.

The history of this construction can be outlined as follows:

1. Herod Agrippa II renovated a Hasmonean-era palace, and this provided him with a view of the ἱερόν and the sacrificial rites held there (*Ant.* 20:189–90 [20.8.11]).
2. Men of Jerusalem objected to those outside of the temple courtyard viewing the rites in the temple courtyard. They started erecting a wall to block Agrippa's view as well as the view of the Roman guards who would be on duty during the festivals (*Ant.* 20:191–92 [20.8.11]).
3. When Agrippa appealed to the procurator Festus, Festus ordered work on the wall stopped. However, the Jews petitioned the emperor Nero to allow it to proceed (*Ant.* 20:193–94 [20.8.11]).
4. Nero granted permission for the work on the wall to proceed (*Ant.* 20:195–96 [20.8.11]).
5. Festus died, and Albinus was named his successor as procurator of Roman Judea (*Ant.* 20:197 [20.9.1]).
6. Josephus proceeds to relate other events after the appointment of Albinus and during his time in Judea as procurator, including the death of James, the brother of Jesus (*Ant.* 20:198–218 [20.9.1–7]).
7. Josephus reports that “now at that time the temple complex was finished” (Ἡδὴ δὲ τότε καὶ τὸ ἱερόν ἐτετέλεστο, *Ant.* 20:219 [20.9.7]).

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incidents in *Antiquities* 16 imply that the temple had been completed before 15 BC and most certainly before late 12 BC. Therefore, a 10 BC completion for Herod's temple project is completely unrealistic.

<sup>31</sup> Finegan, *Handbook*, 348 (§595); Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, 42; Köstenberger, *John*, 109; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 560. Only a few have denied that the temple or its courtyards were part of a continuing temple construction project in Jesus's day. See Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 176n89. Morris notes that it is possible that there was no temple construction in Jesus's day, although his main text favors the standard rendering of John 2:20. Moreover, Morris does not examine the evidence from Josephus as to whether the temple was actually under construction in Jesus's day.

8. A request was made that the eastern cloisters of the temple complex be rebuilt. Agrippa denied the request (*Ant.* 20.220–222 [20.9.7]).

Several important features of this account ought to be carefully noted. First, Josephus presents this construction project as a reaction to an act by Herod Agrippa II. Josephus does not portray it as part of continuing temple construction from Herod's time. It apparently began shortly before Festus's death in about AD 62. Second, the construction project does not involve the temple building (*ναός*) in any way. Third, from the context in Josephus, it appears that the construction was finished shortly before the end of Albinus's time as procurator in AD 64 (see *Ant.* 20.215, 252 [20.9.5; 20.11.1]). Finally, when Josephus says that "the temple complex was finished," context places this as a statement about the construction begun around AD 62. There is no reason to understand this as a reference to the construction begun under Herod the Great as related in *Antiquities* 15, and it is contextually inappropriate to do so. It is especially specious to argue that the construction during Albinus's procuratorship was part of a continuing construction project from Herod's time in light of the fact that Josephus portrays the work on the temple courtyards under Herod to have been completed eight years after it was begun (*Ant.* 15.420 [15.11.5]).

It would appear as if all commentators who mention a continual construction project on the Jerusalem temple from Herod's time until AD 64 are simply repeating a claim that has become standard. However, a close examination of Josephus's actual text reveals otherwise. Therefore, there is no evidence for a continuing construction project on the Jerusalem temple starting from the eighteenth year of Herod's reign, active in Jesus's day, and completed during Albinus's procuratorship. In addition, there is no support for the standard translation's view of the forty-six years of John 2:20, even if one were able to demonstrate a lack of clear differentiation between the terms *ναός* and *ἱερόν* in the NT.

### III. THE ALTERNATE TRANSLATION OF JOHN 2:20 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHRONOLOGY OF JESUS'S MINISTRY

The alternate translation of John 2:20 would be, "Therefore the Jews said, 'This temple was built forty-six years ago, and will you raise it up in three days?'" (CSB, using footnote alternative). This translation has none of the problems exhibited by the standard translation. It understands the dative according to the most common use of temporal datives. It does not strain the syntax of the aorist verb. It does not require a muddling of the distinction between the terms *ναός* and *ἱερόν* that is exhibited nowhere else in the NT. It does not rely on a supposed nine-decade building project for the Jerusalem temple that is not in evidence in Josephus.

The alternate translation of John 2:20, though endorsed by only a small minority of scholars, is preferable due to its alignment with both Greek syntax and semantics as well as the known historical events of the construction of the Jerusalem temple in the first century BC and first century AD. As such, it offers a better way of determining the chronology of Jesus's ministry. The temple building was

completed in mid-to-late 18 BC. The date of the encounter in John 2:19–21 can be calculated as:

$$-18 + 46 + 1 [\text{no zero year}] = \text{mid-to-late AD 29}$$

On Passover forty-six years after the completion of the temple building, Jesus was in the temple in Jerusalem near the beginning of his ministry but after his baptism. Therefore, the date of the events of John 2 would be the following spring of AD 30. This matches well with Luke's notation that Jesus was baptized in the fifteenth year of Tiberius (Luke 3:1). Tiberius succeeded Augustus as emperor by proclamation of the Roman Senate on 17 September AD 14. His fifteenth year would have run from 17 September AD 28 to 16 September AD 29. If official Roman imperial years were used, his fifteenth year would have been all of AD 29. Using either method, Jesus's baptism can be dated to summer of AD 29. Since Jesus's ministry lasted about three and one-half years after his baptism, Jesus's crucifixion can be dated to AD 33.<sup>32</sup>

Beyond the chronology of Jesus's ministry, this study has also highlighted a danger that presents itself to every interpreter and translator of the Scriptures: allowing an assumption about the logic that underlies a text to override the semantics and syntax present in the text. In this case, many have assumed the logic of John 2:20 must be about two continuous spans of activity—forty-six years of construction on the temple versus three days of raising up the temple. That assumption then led to reasoning about the use of the dative case, arguing for a less common syntax rather than the more common syntax. It also produced attempts to justify a syntax for aorist verbs that is not in evidence in Koine Greek. That assumption also gave rise to a facile dismissal of the semantic difference between two related but distinct terms, *ναός* and *ἱερόν*. Finally, it also led to a misreading of the historical evidence provided by Josephus. In some ways this is a cautionary tale for all readers of texts—especially the Scriptural texts.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Andrew E. Steinmann, *From Abraham to Paul: A Biblical Chronology* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011), 257–62.

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