

Understanding the Socio-Religious Significance of the Temple and Jesus' Action in Cleansing the Temple

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Abstract

This paper explored the socio-religious significance of the Temple in ancient Israel and the implications of Jesus' action in cleansing the Temple. The Temple was a central religious and socio-political institution in Jewish life, symbolizing God's presence among His people and serving as a hub for religious worship, sacrifices, and communal gatherings. Jesus' cleansing of the Temple, as recorded in the Gospels, is a profound act of prophetic protest against the corruption and commercialization of the sacred space. By driving out the money changers and merchants, Jesus challenged the exploitation of religious practices for personal gain, highlighting the need for spiritual purity and justice. This study examined the historical context of the Temple, the socio-political dynamics of first-century Judaism, and the theological implications of Jesus' actions. The cleansing of the Temple is interpreted as a symbolic gesture pointing to the transformation of worship from ritualistic practices to a focus on a genuine relationship with God. Furthermore, the study explored how Jesus' act foreshadowed the eventual destruction of the Temple in AD 70 and the shift towards a new understanding of worship in the early Christian community. This analysis provides insights into the continuing relevance of Jesus' actions for contemporary religious practices.

Keywords: Temple, Jesus, Cleansing, Socio-religious significance, Worship, Corruption.

Introduction

The cleansing of the Temple is one remarkable event that happened during the life time of Jesus Christ. This singular event in history is recorded in virtually all the Gospel accounts (Matt 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-48; John 2:12-22). However, Shaner states that the narrative in the Gospel of Mark singles out Jesus as the only one responsible for the disturbance.¹ Meanwhile, the fundamental question in the minds of New Testament scholars is: “what is the significance of Jesus’ action in respect to this event?” Jesus disrupted commercial activities in the temple by flipping tables and subsequently taught the people the significance of the temple to “all the nations.” Commenting on this, Jazz Salo posits that while there are many interpretations of the meaning behind Jesus’ actions, there remains a gap that divides scholars into presumably two distinct camps. Firstly, Jesus’ actions were first and foremost a “temple cleansing,” an attempt to bring to light and to reform some abuses that were occurring within the temple court. Secondly, Jesus’ action is an inaugural act of an impending paradigm shift in Israel’s cultic landscape.² This paper is therefore undertaken to evaluate these distinct views and to arrive at the most plausible view considering the historical, political, cultural and socio-religious settings that shape the context of Mark 11:15-19.

Historical Background

Temple was an important arena for Jews and it stands as an important place for their religious activities. The temple was at

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1. Katherine A. Shaner, “The Danger of Singular Saviors: Vulnerability, Political Power, and Jesus’s Disturbance in the Temple (Mark 11:15–19)” *JBL* 140 (2021), 152.
 2. Jazz Salo, “The Temple Cleansing,” An Unpublished Paper Presented to Cornerstone University (2011), 2.

the center stage of Israel's national, economic, and religious identity at the AD pre-70 era.³ Temple was mainly built for but not limited to religious activities. For Jagersma the temple had a key position not only in religious matters, but also in finance and economy. Hence, the temple acted as a kind of bank.⁴ Salo argues that temple is by far more than being a mere place for religious ceremony.⁵ He therefore outlines three main functions of the temple thus:

(1) The Temple was a political center. Judaea's existence was undergirded by a 'temple state' rationale. The Jerusalem Temple was symbol of political identity that distinguished Judaism within Hellenistic and Roman empires. (2) The Temple was an economic center. Due to Jerusalem's poor economic geography, the Temple was its main source of revenue. This included the consent flow of daily sacrifices and offerings, the pilgrim traffic for the three main pilgrim feasts, the Passover, and the 'second-tithe'. Furthermore, the Temple courts functioned as a major economic center; it was an integration of market-place and principle sanctuary. (3) Finally, the Temple was most significant of all as a religious center. It is in this expression that the whole of Israel's worldview is knit together.⁶

Everett Ferguson categorically states that the temple was the focal point of world Jewry.⁷ He describes it as the goal of the pilgrim festivals, the seat of the Sanhedrin, and the site of the sacrificial cultures which was located near the site now known

3. Salo, "The Temple Cleansing," 3.

4. H. Jagersma, *A History of Israel from Alexander the Great to bar Kochba* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 122.

5. Salo, "The Temple Cleansing," 3.

6. Salo, "The Temple Cleansing," 3.

7. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 562.

as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.⁸ He maintains that Herod the Great in about 20-19 BC had undertaken the rebuilding of the temple, which was largely completed in his life time but was still in progress during Jesus' earthly ministry and was not completed until about A.D. 63, shortly before the Jewish revolt that brought its final destruction in A.D 70. ⁹ The temple was made of compartments which include an open area of the sacred enclosure, mainly to the south known as the Court of the Gentiles. This area was a principal thoroughfare providing a shortcut across the temple mount and also a place for commercial activity.¹⁰ Shaner states that the temple in Jerusalem usually draws "thousands of pilgrims during major Jewish festivals like Passover, *Yom Kippur*, *Sukkot*, and *Shavuot*.... During these festivals, pilgrims to the Jerusalem temple, especially impoverished pilgrims coming from afar, needed to buy appropriate offerings for the temple."¹¹

Maurice Casey observes that the buying, selling, and changing of money was done in where it is often referred to as the court of the Gentiles, the outermost court, which everyone, even foreigners, were allowed to enter.¹² He further states that it is culturally obvious that the inner courts would not be used for this purpose, and that Jesus' citation of Isa 56:7 makes sense only if this is taken for granted.¹³ At the time of Jesus, everyone knew that the only part of the temple foreigners were allowed in was the court of the Gentiles; hence, if they are to be joyful "in my house of prayer" and this is to be "a house of prayer for all peoples" then prayer and not trade, must be what the court of the Gentiles was to be used for.¹⁴ Casey

8. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 562.

9. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 562.

10. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 562.

11. Shaner, "The Danger of Singular Saviors," 154.

12. Maurice Casey, "Culture and Historicity: The Cleansing of the Temple" *CBQ* 59 (1997), 309.

13. Casey, "Culture and Historicity: The Cleansing of the Temple," 309.

14. Casey, "Culture and Historicity: The Cleansing of the Temple," 312.

reiterates that it is apparent that the trading was not done in the inner courts, and Jesus' use of Isa 56:7 (Mark 11:17) makes this doubly so.¹⁵ F. F. Bruce on the other hand argues that "if the court of the Gentiles were taken up for trading it could not be used for worship."¹⁶

It is worthy of note that money had to be changed for the payment of the temple taxes or dues and for the purchase of sacrifices and also for other things. However, Jesus clearly objected to the temple's being used for these purposes. One may wonder why Jesus would express such a bitter emotion at this time. Casey again suggests that it would be helpful to know whether or not buying and selling was a normal thing which had traditionally been done there, or whether this was a recent innovation.¹⁷ But he was also quick to add that Jesus' prohibition of buying and selling and exchange of money in the temple is entirely coherent with his removal of traders, in that it defends the sacred space of the house of God.¹⁸ This is so because most Jews believed that God really dwelt in his temple. Therefore, such practice of buying and selling in the temple was probably a recent innovation. If this was probably so then it was apt for Goodwin to have observed that "the worship space taken up for trading was taken away from those who could not complain about being marginalized: the poor and the Gentiles who, although allowed to worship within the temple, were still considered outsiders."¹⁹

Goodwin equally alludes that merchant activities were taking place in the court of the Gentiles, thereby further marginalizing the poor and the outsiders from participating in

15. Casey, "Culture and Historicity: The Cleansing of the Temple," 323.

16. F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel and Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), 75.

17. Casey, "Culture and Historicity: The Cleansing of the Temple," 309.

18. Casey, "Culture and Historicity: The Cleansing of the Temple," 310.

19. Douglas Thompson Goodwin, "The Cleansing of the Temple in the Fourth Gospel as A Call to Action for Social Justice" Unpublished MA Thesis Submitted to Gardner-Webb University (2014), 4.

true worship in the temple. Adding to this problem was the fact that these moneychangers and animal traders were taking up valuable space within the temple complex that could have been better utilized for purposes of worship.²⁰ Maintaining his line of thought, Goodwin states that Gentiles were being discriminated in the temple as it was clear that the Gentile worshippers were being marginalized, as the space provided for them to worship was being used to house animals, stalls, feed supplies, and other essentials necessary for maintaining animals worthy of temple sacrifices.²¹ To buttress his point further, Goodwin traces the origin of Gentiles acceptance and providing a space for them to worship in the temple back to the prayer of David in 1 Kings 8:41-43²² which states:

Also regarding the foreigner who is not of Your people Israel, when he comes from a far country on account of Your name (for they will hear of Your great name and Your mighty hand, and of Your outstretched arm); when he comes and prays toward this house, hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and act in accordance with all for which the foreigner calls to You, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name, to fear You, as do Your people Israel, and that they may know that this house which I have built is called by Your name (NASB).

Goodwin cites Leon Morris as saying that instead of being able to pray or meditate in peace, the Gentiles were unable to worship due to the noises and distractions that surrounded them within the court of the Gentiles. Instead of a place for meditative reflection and worship, theirs had become a marketplace for making money instead of being a place of prayer. While this marginalization and taking advantage of the

20. Goodwin, "The Cleansing of the Temple," 5-6.

21. Goodwin, "The Cleansing of the Temple," 6.

22. Goodwin, "The Cleansing of the Temple," 32-33.

Gentiles may have been acceptable among the Jews as a way to distance themselves, it was clearly not acceptable to Jesus.²³ Jagersma states that the primary purpose of the temple as a “house of God” often has been relegated to the background. This is why Jesus’ action against the moneychangers and merchants in the temple court must be in this light.²⁴

It should be noted however, that the Jews did not have a uniform favorable attitude towards the Gentiles. Many Jews were driven by their stereotypical attitudes towards the Gentiles for their low ethical values and the almost lack of good moral upbringing. These low moral standards are often seen as being synonymous with the Gentiles and thus provided a reason for the Jews to remain separated.²⁵

Jesus’ Action and Its significance

Considering this episode of temple cleansing, Jesus’ actions could be viewed by many as a serious affront that was not limited only to the merchants and traders whom he cast out, but also to the temple’s authorities. According to Goodwin, by overturning the tables of the moneychangers and tradesmen, Jesus publicly shamed those who were essentially providing much needed services for the temple and for the visitors who had traveled from far distance places to the temple in Jerusalem to observe Passover and probably some other important Jewish feasts. Depending on the extent to which Jesus “cleared” the temple, the effects of his actions would have been felt throughout and across the hierarchy of the Jewish leaders.²⁶

23. Goodwin, “The Cleansing of the Temple,” 37.

24. Jagersma, *A History of Israel from Alexander the Great to bar Kochba*, 122.

25. Goodwin, “The Cleansing of the Temple,” 33.

26. Goodwin, “The Cleansing of the Temple,” 27-28.

Goodwin maintains that even if the actions of Jesus were not significant enough to gain the attention of the Roman authorities who were keeping watch over the temple activities, it is doubtful that the public shaming of the merchants, traders, and temple authorities, no matter how small the feeling could have been, this would have resulted in an attempt to eliminate Jesus (Mark 11:18), thereby preventing further opportunities for Jesus to humiliate those who were so zealous and responsible for maintaining the status quo.²⁷

Shaner on the other hand, thinks that those who suffer the effect of Jesus' action were people of low status and the vulnerable who could have been working for the wealthy in the society. He argues that during Jesus' cleansing of the temple "neither those who owned money-changing tables nor the temple authorities would have been significantly harmed economically or physically in the disturbance ... Historically money changers and those who held mercantile permits were not physically present at their tables or booths. Their slaves were."²⁸ If this is the case, then the questions are: "what is Jesus doing when he disrupts business, damages property, displaces vulnerable workers, and then begins teaching in the temple (Mark 11:17)? Why would Jesus put innocent, already exploited people in peril?"²⁹ By all standards, Jesus would not have targeted the poor and more especially the vulnerable in the society since they were the ones being oppressed by the wealthy and the highly placed. Jesus is always compassionate to all and especially to the poor and the less privileged in the society (Mark 6:34). Hence, the acts of Jesus in the temple do not seem to have anything to do with the poor Centiles.³⁰

27. Goodwin, "The Cleansing of the Temple," 32.

28. Shaner, "The Danger of Singular Saviors," 140.

29. Shaner, "The Danger of Singular Saviors," 157.

30. Edmondo Lupieri, "Fragments of the Historical Jesus? A Reading of Mark 11, 11-[26]" ASE 28 (2011), 295.

Even though Jesus' action was very vigorous which might be perceived as disrupting the arrangements for divine worship, yet it was taken to teach some lessons. Casey again thinks that Jesus must have had a reason for his action, and he would have had to explain what that reason was. He would also have had to have some means of doing something so authoritative in order to gain the attention of the audience.³¹ Blomberg states that Sanders places great significance on the incident of the temple cleansing which he thinks is better understood as part of Jesus' expectation that the temple would be destroyed and rebuilt. In simple terms, Jesus' agenda was one of restoring Israel to a right relationship with God.³² Wenell posits that Jesus' conflict in the temple in Mark's Gospel may be seen as communicating a shift in the meaning of the temple."³³ He maintains that because of the temple incident, the chief priests and scribes hear (*ακούω*) what Jesus says in the temple and seek to destroy him (11:18).³⁴ The temple in the gospel of John is used metaphorically to refer to the body of Christ which will be destroyed and in three days' time will be raised to life again (John 2:18-22).

Corroborating this line of thought, Shaner opines that the symbolic significance of temple cleansing by Jesus entails opening the door for all peoples to pray, and that is all the action that is really needed. Thus, Jesus's overturning of the money changers' tables symbolically shifts the focus of worship to a new, "spiritualized" form of worship.³⁵ Instead of being a spiritual arena for spiritual rejuvenation, they have turned it to a "den of robbers" (Mark 11:17). One will wonder

31. Casey, "Culture and Historicity: The Cleansing of the Temple," 310.

32. Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 211.

33. Karen J. Wenell, "Contested Temple Space and Visionary Kingdom Space in Mark 11-12" *BI* 15 (2007), 329.

34. Wenell, "Contested Temple Space and Visionary Kingdom Space in Mark 11-12," 331.

35. Shaner, "The Danger of Singular Saviors," 143.

why Jesus chose to use a strong word *klh/sthv~* (a bandit) as distinct from *klhvpth~* (an ordinary thief). George Buchanan suggests that Jesus does not adequately describe the role of the priests in the story of the cleansing of the temple, unless this term be understood metaphorically. But that Jesus most likely called the traffic in the temple robbery instead of a word for stealing because this traffic was in opposition to the golden rule in principle.³⁶

From Shaner's perspective, this strand of interpretation therefore argues that Jesus's disturbance was an endorsement of Christian universalism.³⁷ But with this perspective, it will seem to mean that Christianity replaces Judaism which is not the view of this paper. Rather, Christianity is quite a different religion from Judaism even though they share some things in common.

Jacob Neusner alludes that the overturning of the moneychangers' tables in the temple by Jesus "represents an act of the rejection of the most important rite of the Israelite cult, the daily whole offering, and, therefore, a statement that there is a means of atonement other than the daily whole-offering, which now is null."³⁸ He further adds that the counterpart of Jesus' negative action in overturning one table must be his affirmative action in establishing or setting up another table, that is to say, the action turns to the passion narratives centered upon the Lord's Last Supper.³⁹

An alternative view suggests that by his action, "Jesus wanted to reform the temple practices to make them less corrupt and to get back to a more pristine, original temple practice where economic gain or exploitation and religious practices did not

36. George Wesley Buchanan, "Mark 11.15-19: Brigands in the Temple" *HUCA* 30 (1959), 175.

37. Shaner, "The Danger of Singular Saviors," 143.

38. Jacob Neusner, "Money-Changers in the Temple: The Mishnah's Explanation" *NTS* 35 (1989), 290.

39. Neusner, "Money-Changers in the Temple," 290.

mix.”⁴⁰ By cleansing the temple Jesus signals its destruction but also anticipates its replacement by his resurrected body (John 2:21).⁴¹ Shaner aptly captures this view thus:

Jesus was cleaning up a mess created by money- and power-hungry ruling elites who were in charge of the temple, especially those who had been in cahoots with Herod the Great a generation earlier.... The assumption, however, that underlies this reading of the story is that the temple is economically and religiously corrupt as opposed to the Jesus movement. Thus, Jesus’s actions were done out of religious fervor and frustration with the dissonance between practices instituted by Herod’s alliance with the Romans and the ideal practices that Jesus endorsed.⁴²

Shaner feels that this assumption underlying corruption within Judaism, Israel, and the temple itself is framed by Mark’s presentation of the fig tree story (Mark 11:12–14, 20–21). Some interpreters see this frame as a literary design that alerts readers to the meaning they should make of the central account.⁴³ Shaner attempts to tie these two events together when he states that within this frame, the proof of Jesus’s righteous actions is strengthened by the symbolism of a barren fig tree that is destroyed from the inside out. Similarly, Jesus’s actions with the money changers demonstrate that the temple’s practices are hopelessly corrupt and will never bear fruit. Many of these interpretations suggest that Jesus outburst responds to a lack of faith among the Jews.⁴⁴ Braden alludes that by driving out both those selling and buying, one might see virtues of justice, truth, and transparency in Jesus

40. Shaner, “The Danger of Singular Saviors,” 144.

41. Carl R. Holladay, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017), 296.

42. Shaner, “The Danger of Singular Saviors,” 144.

43. Shaner, “The Danger of Singular Saviors,” 145.

44. Shaner, “The Danger of Singular Saviors,” 145.

action. He may have been attempting to make the temple a spiritual abode again, arguing against usury, or wanting to protest the support of the priests for commercial transactions in this holy space.⁴⁵

Another strand of interpretation suggested by Shaner asserts that Jesus's actions in the temple were an act of awakening, of anti-imperial political resistance, and of "speaking truth to power." Jesus objects to the economic exploitation that the temple as a Roman imperial puppet institution exacted on the largely peasant, less privileged and the economically disadvantaged population outside of Jerusalem and particularly in Jesus's home territory of Galilee. Jesus threatens Rome's power with His own populist power. In the act of overturning small money changers' tables and pigeon-sellers' stools, in the act of disrupting buying and selling and sending them out of the temple, Jesus disrupted exploitation as usual and showed His power as a singular savior figure.⁴⁶ Shaner again maintains that "Jesus's actions in such a light carries paternalistic connotations in both ancient and contemporary worlds, namely, that a singular, all-powerful savior figure can justly disrupt temple activities and protest his way into liberty and justice for all."⁴⁷

Shaner draws a conclusion that "Jesus's intentions and actions are always effective. Jesus, by himself, has the power to fix the corrupt temple establishment, which was trying to appease Rome. Jesus, by himself, has the power to oppose Roman imperial exploitation."⁴⁸ Hence, the temple cleansing event in the Gospels is significant and places Jesus in the right perspective as the liberator of the poor and the weak in

45. Kathleen E. Braden, "Exploring the Notion of 'Good' in Sack's Geographic Theory of Morality" *CSR* 31 (2002), 441.

46. Shaner, "The Danger of Singular Saviors," 145.

47. Shaner, "The Danger of Singular Saviors," 146.

48. Shaner, "The Danger of Singular Saviors," 146.

the society from the oppressive tendencies of both the Jewish and the Roman leaders of that time.

Conclusion

Jesus's actions in the temple is a clear indication of a direct action that aims at reforming a corrupt system that had a long standing negative history and at the same time speaks the truth to the powers that be in that era. Jesus left a great lesson for His followers to learn. By overturning the moneychanger's tables and forcing them out of the temple, however, means that Jesus has always stood up for the oppressed and marginalized and became the voice for the voiceless and promoted a different kind of kingdom that He has come to establish. Open to all who would accept it, Jesus promoted a renewed kingdom. His actions therefore demonstrated that in the kingdom of God, there was no room for oppression and marginalization.

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