

Ethical Implication of the use of Whip in the Cleansing of the Temple According to John 2:13-16

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Abstract

The narrative of the cleansing of the temple in John 2:13-16 presents Jesus as using a whip to chase out the animal merchants, the dove sellers and the money changers from the temple court area. This story has led some people to see Jesus as being violent. While some scholars see Jesus' action as violent, others see it as nonviolent. This provoked a re-examination of the texts to establish how violent, or otherwise, Jesus was in the use of the whip. By textual critical analysis and exegesis of the text it was noted that Jesus' action was not violent. Jesus was in full control of his passion and anger. His action was a mark of zeal as was predicted in the Scriptures of the Jews. A lesson for practical demonstration of faith through proactive challenge to social ills is noted in the text.

Key Words: Temple cleansing, whip, violence, nonviolence, ethical

Introduction

In John 2:13-16 Jesus entered the Temple of Jerusalem to join other ardent Jews to celebrate the Passover. Incidentally there were many, supposedly, worshippers outside the Temple area engaged in the business of buying and selling liturgical items. Jesus was enraged by these activities. He made a whip and drove them out of the Temple area. This incidence is called the cleansing of the Temple. It will be recalled that the first Temple, built by king Solomon, was demolished in 586BC by the Babylonian soldiers. The second Temple was built by Nehemiah, as the Exiles were returning to Jerusalem. It was this Temple of Nehemiah that Herod the Great renovated and made gorgeously magnificent. Being a Gentile convert, he may have conceived the idea of a space in the Temple for the Gentile converts like himself. This brilliant idea was observed in the inclusion of the various courts of the Priest, Israel, Women, and Gentiles. It was this court of the Gentiles that was occupied by the animal merchants, the dove sellers and the money changers. Blankenship (togblankenship.blogspot.com) notes,

by putting this market place in The Gentiles Court of the temple, the Jewish folks abused the temple and went against Gods' desire for the temple to be a place of all nations to come to him.

It was to this court that Jesus came and in "flaming anger" (Barclay 2009, 129), drove out the animal merchants, the money changers and the dove sellers. The action of Jesus evokes pertinent questions; could his action be termed violent? This issue formed the purpose of this research.

In his various teachings, Jesus never encouraged violence. He taught love for one's perceived enemies and even encouraged people to turn the other cheek when slapped. It was a statement to discourage retaliation. It has been remarked that,

He was in many ways both typical of his times, and extraordinary in his religious convictions and beliefs, in his scholarship of Biblical literature, and in the fervency with which he lived what he taught.

(www.humanjourney.us/Jesus)

This action of Jesus has been variously interpreted as being violent while some insist he was not (<http://christianthinktank.com/violentx.html>). The implication of this is that Jesus could not have taught one thing and meant another. He lived by what he taught. This paper is therefore required to establish the non-violent attitude, or otherwise, of Jesus in the Temple cleansing. This paper aims at showing that Jesus initiated a just action against the abuse of the temple and the exploitation of the vulnerable. It examines the employment of the whip in Jesus' act of cleansing the temple and calls on the Church to free herself from being a "conforming member of the State" (Hobby <http://perthanabaptists.wordpress.com>), concerned only with the spiritual without paying attention to the society.

Textual Analysis

και ποιησας φραγγέλιον² εκ σχοινων παντας ἐξεβαλεν ἐκ του ιερου τα τε προβατα και τους βοας, και των κολλυβιστων ἐξεχεεν το κερμακαι τας τραπεζας ἀνετρεψεν,

This Greek text introduces textual variance in verse 15, φραγγέλιον (whip). An alternative reading has ὡς φραγγέλιον (as whip/ a kind of whip). The first reading ὡς φραγγέλιον is supported by most respected evidences, Codex Sinaiticus **ℵ**, Codex Alexandrinus A, Codex Vaticanus B and other uncials, f family, Coptic etc manuscripts. The variant ὡς φραγγέλιον is supported by papyrus, uncials, f family, Syriac, Origen, and other fine manuscripts. However, with Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus B in support of the first reading φραγγέλιον it is difficult to ignore it. [B] is an indication that there is a high degree of certainty that the first reading would be more original, hence its preference. Though both readings can be equally accepted the first reading is obviously a better reading.

Going by the first reading; Jesus had a whip. Alexis-Baker attempting to prove a nonviolent view submits,

Although earlier nonviolent reading strategies for interpreting John 2:13-25 were eclipsed in literature for several centuries, recent scholarship has looked a new at the story and came to similar conclusions as those nonviolent readings; *ὡς φραγέλλιον* “a kind of whip.” (Alexi-Baker <http://www.academic.ed>)

Other scholars as Ennst Haenchen and Daniel Izuzguiaza are of the same exegetical view with Alexis-Baker. Their preference for the variant reading seems to be based on the possibility of *φραγέλλιον* in the first rendering being interpreted to give the “whip” a violent connotation. According to the Greek-English Lexicon “*φραγέλλιον*” could refer to an instrument consisting of a thong or thongs, frequently with metal tips to increase punishment” (Danker 2000, 1064). This description fits the Roman Scourge of Jesus’ day. It is unlikely that Jesus had that kind of whip with him, since no weapons were allowed in the temple area.

The other keyword in the text is *παντας* (“all”) which is viewed by some scholars as referring to *τοὺς πωλουντας* and *τοὺς κερματιστας*. “*παντας*” is a masculine pronoun. In this case it takes its gender from *τοὺς πωλουντας* and *τοὺς κερματιστας*. However, the word *τε* which can be translated as “and” and “both” defines *παντας*. Thus the text could be translated as; “...he drove all out of the temple, and the sheep and the oxen” alternatively it could be translated as; “he drove all out of the temple both sheep and oxen” The Greek text seems to be complex and unclear. The sheep are neuter in gender, but the cattle are masculine; which should John have used for *παντας*? After all he needed to pick one of the genders (Dodd 1963, 153).

Jesus could have used the whip on the merchants and money changers as well as the sheep and the oxen. He could as well have used the whip to drive out the animals only as he addressed the people. In all of these, one thing is clear; Jesus was not in doubt of what he had in mind when he made the whip.

The Whip in Antiquity and in the Jewish Custom

The whip in antiquity was a symbol of authority and dominion. In various religions it was seen as an instrument of purification and discipline. Tusker describes the scourge as a whip with one or more lashes attached to its handle. A symbol of both human and divine punishment... The whip was a symbol of power and dominion akin to the scepter and was held by Pharoah as a sign of their right to met out discipline (Tucker <http://wwz.netnitco.net/users/legendol/scourge.html>).

The Jewish community recognized the whip in no less a way. The whip symbolized the authority in the bearer to exercise discipline. In the hand of animal merchants the whip was the instrument of control. It was the proverbial “rod” for the discipline of erring ones. In Jesus’ day, “The Roman scourge also called the “*flagrum*” or “*flagellum*” was a short whip made of two or three leather (Ox-hide)

things or ropes connected to a handle” ([www.aisz.oromhirck.hu/Angol/...The %20 Roman %20 Scourge. html](http://www.aisz.oromhirck.hu/Angol/...The%20Roman%20Scourge.html)).

The sight of Jesus with a whip in hand was an unmistakable message to the people he confronted in the Temple Court Of The Gentiles. It spoke of his position and authority. It carried the message of his right to exercise discipline. The question of Jesus’ authority in the pericope following (John 2:18) clearly indicates that the people were not in doubt of the position assumed by Jesus in his action.

Temple Abuse and Exploitation

The Passover was one of the great feasts in Judaism. It was the dream of every adult Jew to take part in its celebration. Pilgrims who came from far lands had need of animals for use in ritual sacrifices. This need was catered for by the animal merchants. Temple tax was an obligation to be fulfilled by every adult-male Jew above nineteen years of age. The temple tax had to be paid in the shekels of the sanctuary. Pilgrims needed to exchange their currencies for the acceptable temple coins. This need was adequately taken care of by the money changers. According to Reid (1992, 1068)

The dealers and money-changers were performing an essential service for pilgrims and other worshippers. Indeed, without their infrastructure of services, it would be difficult to see how the temple sacrifices would have continued.

John’s narrative suggests that these necessary and essential services of the merchants and money-changers had “become oppressive and exploitative” (Green 1992, 820). The temple Priests had a way of declaring as unclean the animals that were brought to the temple. The worshippers would then be forced to trade their own animals to have what was considered clean. Usually they had to pay something extra to have the ‘clean’ animal. The money-changers charged a commission for their transaction. The commercial activities of these traders became a flourishing business taking over the Outer Court of the Temple meant for the Gentiles. And as Barclays (2009, 148-49) puts it;

The desire for money tends to make people selfish. If they are driven by their desire for wealth, it is nothing to them that someone has to lose in order that they may gain. The desire for wealth fixes people thought upon self, and others become merely means or obstacles in the path to their own enrichment.

In the plan of God, the Gentiles were not shut out from seeking His face. The Outer Court signified their inclusion. These Jewish folks by their activities were working against God’s clear purpose. “What was supposed to be sacred and used to bring people closer to God was being used for evil and separating people from God” (www.bible-story.com).

The religious leaders and the priests being compromised turned a blind eye to the sacrilege. Without a voice and no court to appeal, the degradation of the Gentiles was overwhelming. “Jesus chose to stop at this place to show his anger... and this was not the first time that he came to the aid of non-Jews” (Reid 2004, 1171).

Jesus and the Temple

The temple was more than an ordinary structure to the Jewish people. It was a sign both of their covenant relationship with God and “of Israel’s election from among the peoples of the earth” (Ituma 2003, 17). Jesus was a Jew and lived as a Jew. “As a Jew, Jesus worshipped in the temple... He observed the Passover and other feasts as strictly as a Jew” (Ituma 2003, 17). The temple was considered to be God’s dwelling place where they came to seek the face of God.

The Mosaic Law (Torah) and the traditions of the elders (halakah) were instruments for shaping the life and living of the average Jew. As appropriately observed, “The Jews didn’t compartmentalize their religious faith and daily lives” (www.bible-history.com). As a child, Jesus was brought to the temple. He was found in the temple arguing with the Rabbis. As a teacher, he is found teaching in the temple.

Beyond the Jewish understanding of the temple, Jesus knew the temple to be the place of worship and prayer for all peoples of the earth. He laid claim to the temple as his father’s house. In responding to the question of his authority, “he defined himself in relationship to the temple” (Hergarthy www.goodnews.ie/Jesusintemple.html). Jesus showed great respect for the temple. His activities and claims over the temple portray him as one who was not just an active participant but also a stakeholder. His understanding of the temple defined his life and informed his actions and reactions in matters of the temple.

Jesus and his teachings

Jesus was a great teacher and was recognized as being in the category of the Rabbis of his days. He had his disciples too. His “disciples called him a Rabbi and he did not repudiate it. He therefore accepted he was a Rabbi” (Ituma 2003, 21). The Rabbi was highly respected. They played a very significant role in the training, education and spiritual life of the Jewish child. According to Ituma, while one’s parents only brought the one into physical and transient world... the Rabbi brings the one into the spiritual and world of God” (Ituma 2003, 21).

Though a Rabbi, he was distinctively different from his contemporaries. Those who came to hear him observed that he taught as one with authority and not as the other Rabbis. His words marvelled his hearers. His teachings ruffled the religious leaders. On several occasions his teachings drew the enmity of the Pharisees. When he “taught on any given life-principle, he shot right through the surface and aimed his arrows directly at the heart of the matter” (www.bible-history.com).

The Jewish leaders were concerned with the observance of the minute details of the Law. Jesus sought to bring out the mind of God in his interpretation of the Law. According to Onwu (2002, 89) the need for an authoritative interpretation of the law had long been recognized in Judaism but only Jesus was capable of doing this. For Jesus, the Law was the will of God and He taught the people to live accordingly. His Sermon on the Mount condemned anger, (Mt 5:21-28), he preached love of enemies (Mt 5:43-48). In every way he lived and acted in accordance with his teachings.

Violent or Nonviolent

Scholars are divided in their opinion as to the violent or nonviolent nature of Jesus' action in John's narrative of the temple cleansing. As rightly observed by Alexis-Baker (<http://www.academic.ed>) "Far from being a pedantic obscure verse, John 2:13-15 has played and continues to play a role in Christianizing violence of all sorts." Also Onwu (2002, 216) posits that many scholars have used this event as evidence to prove that Christ was a political and religious revolutionary. Both scholars, Alexis-Baker and Onwu, hold the view of nonviolence.

Hobby (<http://perlanabaptists.com>) holds the view of violence and encourages same. Accordingly he states that New Testament scholars are realizing that Jesus was a radical man who defied a lot of what his society stood for and who had a vision of what our common life and actions should look like. It is clear that the "whip" in the narrative informs the debate for violence or nonviolence. Whether the whip was used on the people or on the animals only is not very clear as shown in the text analysis and exegesis. The Dictionary (Hornsby 2006, 1642) defines violence as "behavior that is intended to hurt or kill somebody; involving or caused by physical force that is intended to hurt or kill somebody." If Jesus intended to hurt or kill he would look for some weapon and not a mere whip. Violence is "marked by extreme physical force: using or involving to cause physical harm." In the narrative it is very obvious that Jesus did not apply extreme force nor was it his intention to cause physical harm. If violence means the intention to hurt or kill somebody, the use of physical force with the intention to hurt or kill, and is marked by extreme physical force; then, Jesus' action cannot be termed violent.

There is so much evidence to show that Jesus' action was not violent but "a demonstrative condemnation" (Barne www.bible-cc.com/John/2-15.html). Violence is a very strong feeling that is not controlled. Jesus could not have condemned violence only to engage in violence. So, the text must be allowed to speak for itself and the research should draw from there. Jesus made a whip of cords. With the cords he drove away all those who were involved in the business. The text says that he drove both the sheep and the cattle. That gives the owners the opportunity to re-gather these items of merchandize. If he was not in control of the situation he would use dangerous materials to inflict injuries on the animals and their owners. To buttress this point, he merely scattered the coins, giving the owners the opportunity to re-gather them. To those who sold doves, instead of opening or throwing away the

cages, which would lead to a loss of the doves, he merely asked the sellers to take them away.

A careful look at the points raised above indicates that violence is not to be interpreted from the passage. If he was violent he would not be composed enough to express the spiritual implication of their attitude. He reiterated, "How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!"

Neither the Jews nor his disciples interpreted the action as violence. In fact, the Jews and his disciples are in agreement that his action was Messianic. The disciples linked his action to a messianic Psalm (Psalm 69.9) while the Jews required further proof that he was the Messiah. "Prove your authority" implied that they understood his action as messianic but needed further proof to be convinced. Perhaps they expected him to command fire from heaven to consume Jewish enemies. Even the response of Jesus to their request shows that he himself was fully aware of the messianic implication of his action. He referred to the self sacrifice of his body which restores the sanctity of the spiritual order. When he said, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (2.19) they misunderstood him to be referring to the Temple of Jerusalem. But it is the self sacrifice of his body that is messianic and not the Temple of Jerusalem, in this regard.

It will therefore be naive of the modern interpreter to interpret violence out of the passage when neither the Jews nor the disciples saw violence in the event. It was a spiritual exercise which is well buttressed in the Jewish scriptures. It was a fulfilment of Jewish messianic aspirations. The Jews understood the action in that light. However, the response of Jesus to their request only brought confusion in their minds. This is because their understanding of Messiah does not seem to agree with the Messianic ideas Jesus presented to them.

But a more serious issue that should have occupied one's mind would be how Jesus alone, with a mere whip, drove out all these people. But the point was quite clear and only an understanding of the aura that Jesus commanded on the people would answer the question. He could not have required violence when his personality as a prophet was enough to do the job. They have witnessed him perform miracles. He would have raised the dead a number of times, perhaps many unrecorded ones, and shared empathy with the people. They had good reasons to run away. After all, they had recognized him as the Messiah, even if the Jewish leaders do not. So, violence is completely out of the place.

The Whip and its Implication

As noted earlier, the whip in Jesus' hand as he moved in to drive out the merchants and money-changers had a clear message. Those he targeted were also clear on this. Jesus was recognized as a teacher (Rabbi) not only among his disciples. His hearers recognized him as such. Jesus himself had a clear knowledge of his heavenly mandate and the authority behind that mandate. In his life and teachings, this understanding was never in doubt.

With the whip in hand, Jesus was coming from the point of his position and authority. The whip was symbolic of both. Barne (www.bible-cc/John/2-15.html) captures this position in his exposition; “this whip was made as an emblem of authority and also for the purpose of driving the cattle which had been brought there for sale.” There can be no mandate without authority and authority has its responsibilities. Jesus was very clear on His mandate and authority. He employed same in the situation to restore the purpose of God.

The Church has a divine mandate to change the society. This mandate cannot be exercised without a transformative and cleansing act on the Church. With many hypocrites who are ready to exchange integrity with money or sell their conscience for political appointments it becomes very difficult for the Church to carry out its divine mandate in Nigeria. The Church leaders are challenged to take bold steps to clear the church of its cogs in the wheel. With the mandate is the responsibility of exercising the authority for the shaping of human lives and society. “Where the Christian service is mainly interested in the spiritual... without interest in the socio-political integrity and governance... it becomes an incomplete service and un-Christian” (Ituma 2009, 49).

But Jesus could as well have gone into prayers for God to forgive the money changers and to change their heart. This action of Jesus makes non-sense of the position of some individuals who think that all problems must be resolved in prayers. In the first place, if one is hungry the one does not need to pray to God to remove hunger. What one needs is to take some food and that will satisfy the one. It does not make one very spiritual at that point to pray but only shows how naive some people could be at some points. Jesus wants to teach that there are many practical ways of resolving problems and Christians must note that. Sometimes Christians think that it makes them more spiritual to remain aloof to societal problems and resort to prayers. While prayer is necessary the Christian must understand that taking proactive practical steps in challenging ills in the society is exemplified in the action of Jesus. If using the cord defines violence then God would have commanded violence when he says, “He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him” (Proverbs 13.24). The second part of the verse implies that love is exemplified in the rod.

Conclusion

The story of the cleansing of the temple is very dramatic and apt in the contemporary Nigerian Christianity, where hypocrisy is observed in Christian lives; where some Christians are ready to ignore the promptings of conscience in their quest for money and fame. The Christian cannot be passive to mundane activities because the Christian needs to be in the world so as to be in the world after. Only those who were alive and remain faithful to their Christian calling are expected to hope to the future and eschatological world. The use of the whip encourages the Christian to adopt all godly practical ways of resolving problems beyond just praying. Christians are enjoined to pray. But more than that, they are required to

take practical steps to evangelism, politicking, resisting evil people in the society and challenging social ills. It is a wakeup call to the Church to re-examine her mandate and rise in that understanding to confront the abuse and exploitation prevalent in the society.

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