



In February, 2012, five members of the masked female Punk Band “Pussy Riot” entered the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow and performed an obscenity-laced song, protesting the Russian Patriarch’s open support for Vladimir Putin’s re-election, calling him “A miracle from God.” Three were arrested for “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred.” Two served 2-year prison sentences. Was this an act of blasphemy? Or, as the above photo “mash-up” suggests, might we also draw parallels to Jesus’ “Temple Incident”?

**I**n today’s climate of heightened political rancor, some believers use the cleansing of the temple Gospel narrative as a proof text to justify all manner of egregious and violent behavior toward others—“After all, Jesus whipped people, didn’t he?” The cleansing of the temple account is one of the favorite proof texts of those who want to try to deflect the potency of Christ’s clear ethical commands to overcome evil with good and to love one’s enemies.

The NEB version translates Psalm 69:9, “*The zeal for your house shall destroy me.*” According to the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), within one week of the cleansing of the temple, Jesus is dead.<sup>1</sup> The Synoptics make it clear that this event sealed his fate. His first public sermon in the synagogue (Luke 4) and the cleansing of the temple stirred visceral human hatred unto murder. Why? What was it about those events that stirred such deep hatred among “normally decent” people? What was going on? How should we understand the cleansing of the temple narrative in the light of illegitimate attempts by so many to justify their violence and hatred by claiming Jesus as their model?

### 1st Century Background

At the time of Christ, the institutions of religion, commerce and politics were not separate entities as they are (supposedly) in our day. They were embedded together in the Temple and operations associated with it: touch one and you touch them all. The cleansing of the temple was not just a dust-up over religious ritual. It was a confrontation with principalities associated with the order of their world: religious, commercial and political. It was a cosmological statement. We know it was not just about zealotry for religious reform because there is not a shred of evidence to suggest that anything permanently changed. It was “back to business as usual” the next day. Something else was going on.

The cleansing of the temple is a bit of a misnomer. It occurred in the outer court. This is the space that was specifically dedicated for the

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Gentiles. Gentiles could gather in the outer court for prayer, but they were not allowed elsewhere.

Imagine a Gentile trying to pray in a space crowded with animals and their sellers! Hear the noise! Smell the odors! Be sure to watch your step! At the very least we see here Jewish indifference, if not outright hostility, toward the Gentiles. “It is okay to defile your space, but not ours”—us versus them.

The phrase “den of robbers” is not merely rhetorical flourish.

The English “robbers” is the Greek *lestes*. The term refers to those who in their zeal for holiness had become freedom fighters for God (or terrorists if you will). There is an implied association with violence that “thief” does not connote. In other words, it is not just thievery as in breaking and entering, but thievery plus violence against persons. Robbers stored their ill-gotten gain in their “den.”

Jesus made an evaluative statement of who the temple proprietors were as people and what they were doing. They had enriched themselves in exclusionary zealotry at the expense of the least among them.

Jesus specifically quotes Isaiah 56 about Yahweh’s concern for the nations, the Gentiles. Where it occurred (the outer court of the Gentiles) was as significant as what was occurring (commerce associated with sacrifice).

Just as when Christ quoted Isaiah 61 in the synagogue in a way that showed compassion for the non-Jewish world (God was not going to “even the score” with the Gentiles), so here, his concern for the welfare of those whom the religious establishment considered “less than” precipitated his death.

Not only was Jesus dealing with the exclusionary practices of the sacrificial system and the rapacious greed associated with it, but he also suspended the sacrificial system itself. He forbade anyone to carry a “vessel” (*skeuos*) through the Temple courts. The NIV translates this term as “merchandise” as though he were stopping shoppers in a modern mall, but the term refers to vessels used in the sacrificial process. *The entire sacrificial machinery temporarily ground to a stop. It was a foretaste of a cosmically altering act that would find its fulfillment at Calvary.*

## History of Interpretation

Up until Augustine, *no one* interpreted the cleansing of the temple account in John 2:15 to condone violence or even implied that Jesus had struck any human beings.<sup>2</sup> In the first 300 years in the life of the Church, Origen was the only person that we know who commented on this passage, and he gave it a purely spiritual rather than literal reading. Cosmas Indicopleustes writing ca. 550 CE argued:

*What is alleged is false, for he did not in any way strike a human being, but he adopted an admirable and becoming and appropriate course, for he struck the brute beasts only, as it is written: “And having made a whip of cords he expelled all from*

*the temple, both the sheep and the cattle.” But the rational beings he neither struck nor pushed away, but chastised with speech, as it is written: “And to those who sold doves he said, ‘Take these things hence, and do not make my Father’s house a marketplace.’”*

Augustine was the first to use this passage to justify force, including the just use of force in war. Was Augustine justified in doing so? A quick look at the grammar of the passage shows that he was not.

Nathan W. O’Halloran’s<sup>3</sup> reading of the Greek word *pantas* indicates that Jesus took some ropes he found lying around “to drive out the sheep and oxen, like any shepherd or cattle herder would do,” followed, no doubt, by their owners. He also notes that the Synoptics do not make mention of a whip; and that Mark uses the word “drove,” as it was used elsewhere for the spirit “driving” Jesus into the

desert, or Jesus himself “driving” out demons.

O’Halloran identifies the actions of Jesus with a calculated prophetic action evocative of the temple condemnation in Jeremiah 7:1-15, which Christ also cites during the incident.

The cleansing of the temple is a unique, one-off, prophetic statement challenging the authority structures of the cosmos: the unholiness of sacrificial religion in league with mammon, and by inevitable association in their culture, political power.

withholds the truth from them, etc. These things were normal in interpersonal interchanges of his day, being the expression of the cultural practice known as challenge and riposte—insult and counter-insult. Understanding the cultural role of insults helps us unpack what can seem to us to be not only rude and insensitive, but also unloving behavior. It is not.

Behavior that to us may seem socially inappropriate is not necessarily unloving in the kingdom. Clearly, irritating people and making them unhappy is not outside of the love of God. Jesus made a career

Even if Christ had hit people with the whip (which the text does not indicate), using that analogously as justification for war or other violent acts is absurd. Going from throwing crooks out of a building to dropping an incendiary bomb on people is not a rational leap. Ethical debates about “just war theory” can occur, but not with the cleansing of the temple narrative as a proof text.

## Conclusion

The cleansing of the temple incident is a prophetic statement, particularly regarding God’s concern for the poor, the widow and the Gentiles, all of whom at the time would have been considered “less than, other-than,” disenfranchised classes.

It is always an exegetical mistake to normalize a one-off and isolated passage. This passage is not normative interpersonal behavior for followers of Christ. Using it to justify outrageous and even violent behavior is lazy interpretation and ethically inexcusable.

Advocating God’s care for, and inclusive goodness to, those the establishment deems unworthy stirs the deepest hatred and violence in human hearts. This is the “doctrine” that got Jesus killed. Those who would desire to emulate him can expect similar treatment from the religious establishment.

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## Endnotes

1. I believe all the Gospel accounts of the cleansing of the temple are a single event.
2. Andy Alexis-Baker, “Violence, Nonviolence and the Temple Incident in John 2:13-15,” *Biblical Interpretation* 20 (2012) 73-96.
3. Nathan O’Halloran, “Jesus, the Whip, and Justifying Violence,” *The Jesuit Post, Patheos*, March 7, 2015.

**THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE IS A UNIQUE, ONE-OFF, PROPHETIC STATEMENT CHALLENGING THE AUTHORITY OF THE STRUCTURES OF THE COSMOS...**

It serves as Jesus’s final public sermon and statement of his eternal antipathy toward the systems of this world and its values, including the practice of sacrificial religion. It is his confrontational swan song, not a passing pique of emotional irritation rooted in anger. It is a thoughtful and purposeful action intended to be read by all.

## What about Christ’s Severity Elsewhere?

We have established that the scripture doesn’t say specifically that Jesus used a whip on people. Nonetheless, turning over the tables and driving out the animals and people is a severe act. When dealing with the establishment powers of his day, Jesus was often severe. He insults people, calls them names,

of it and was crucified for it. The point is that the love of God demonstrated in Jesus does not preclude stirring negative emotions in others. Jesus is not Mr. Rogers with a beard!

Now, this can be a precipitous slope—establishing a precedent to be a bully, literally or emotionally, and to think of oneself as God’s instrument for correcting the world.

That is why a one-off example from Jesus’ life is not the norm for our behavior. Our norm is the greater body of Jesus’ ethical teachings. They may at times be punctuated by confrontational, peacemaking truth-telling. The practice of *agape* does not preclude confrontation in our human interactions.

Regardless of how some translations handle this passage, there is no reason to believe that Jesus used a whip on people.