

The Cleansing of the Temple and the whip of cords

Did Jesus use violence against animals and people?

A contribution to the correct understanding of the cleansing of the Temple

by

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Introduction

A preacher whom I heard on the Internet claimed that Christ used violence in his ministry. He justified this claim by referring to the description in John's gospel of Jesus driving the money changers, the sellers of animals and their animals out of the Jerusalem Temple, the incident generally referred to as "The cleansing of the Temple". His interpretation raises numerous questions, which I seek to address in this article.

It may be that even those who have not heard that message find this Bible passage difficult to understand. This study is for them, too. I hope that it will help all those who wish to understand the significance of this incident in the life of Christ.

The cleansing of the Temple

The incident of the cleansing of the Temple by Jesus is recounted in all four gospels. The synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) specify that this occurred during Jesus' last visit to Jerusalem, shortly before his arrest because of his teaching, healing on the Sabbath and for claiming to be the Son of God.

John recounts the incident near the beginning of his gospel (in chapter 2, verses 13-17), but there is plenty of evidence that the ordering in the gospels of many incidents in Jesus' ministry is not chronologically based. This reflects the practice that was common in biographies at that time, which often followed a thematic approach, grouping together similar events or teachings. Biographies also frequently started with one of the most dramatic or famous incidents in the person's life (an approach imitated in many modern films).

The consensus is therefore now that there was only one cleansing of the Temple, and that it occurred near the end of Jesus' ministry but that John recounted it near the beginning of his gospel to set the scene and the tone of his account by showing Jesus as authoritative, fearless, passionate about holiness and decisive in his actions.

The speaker's thesis

The preacher claims that this incident shows that Jesus used violence against the animals and the people in the Temple on that day. He also claims that this provides a justification for going to war, adding "for instance, against Hitler". A modern comparison (perhaps with Isis/Isil) would have been more relevant, and the concept of the "just war" merits detailed discussion, but I will make no further reference to it in this paper. My concern here is with the speaker's analysis of the gospel descriptions of the original event.

The "whip"

Much is made by the preacher of the fact that Jesus used a "whip". It is assumed by him that Jesus was violently wielding a weapon designed to inflict pain or used as a means of torture. The Romans used such whips.

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However, this is not the kind of whip that is described here. On the contrary, the description is of a small implement used by animal herders. The authoritative “Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature” by Bauer, Danker, Arndt and Gingrich (referred to hereafter as “BDAG”)¹ distinguishes between these two types of “whip”. (See entry on φραγέλλιον [“fragéllion”] on page 1064.)

Although the same Greek word is used for both types of whip, the author of John’s gospel (the only one that mentions this whip) is careful to make clear what it was that Jesus had in his hand. John 2:15 states, “he made a whip out of cords”. BDAG defines the Greek word here translated as “cords”, σχοινίον [“s-choiníon”], as “*rope or cord* (orig. of rushes, then gener. of other material).” (p. 982)

This was, essentially, a few pieces of string or leaves of a plant, twisted together and usually carried by children herding goats or other animals. It is commonly seen in Mediterranean and Middle-Eastern lands, even to the present day, and the child with this sort of “whip” might in many cases be between six and ten years old, not even tall enough or strong enough to lift up a Roman military whip that was used as an instrument of punishment or torture.

This improvised “leaf-whip” or “string whip” is used to flick the ground and raise up dust, or it is flicked in the air to chase back to the herd any animals that are straying off. It is also flicked in the air around the user’s own face, to chase away the flies. Similar “whips” of odd bits of string were and still are also used by little children in many countries as part of a toy to spin tops.

John makes it clear that Jesus was not wielding a weapon, but flicking in the air some plant leaves or strings that he had hastily twisted together moments earlier from materials that happened to be at hand.

Jesus’ attitude to animals

None of the gospel reports state that Jesus beat the animals or the people with a whip. They say that he “drove” the animals and the traders out of the Temple. Little children – and even adults who were *good* shepherds – did not drive animals by beating them, and the adult involved here was the supreme “Good Shepherd” (John 10:11) who had described giving individual sheep a name (John 10:3) and the sheep knowing the shepherd’s voice and obviously “trusting” him (John 10:4-5), so that they followed him and went where he led them.

Jesus had in fact emphasised the importance of showing compassion to suffering animals, to the extent of describing how people were right to make efforts to rescue animals in danger, even on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:11, Luke 14:5). He also said that even the most observant Jew should give his animals water to drink on the Sabbath (Luke 13:15). On another occasion, he told of the shepherd gave time and effort to find just one lost sheep that had wandered away (Matthew 18:12-14, Luke 15:3-7). He said that when the shepherd finds that sheep, “he joyfully puts it on his shoulders” (Luke 15:5) and carries it home.

Jesus was so skilful in dealing with animals that he was able to make his entry into Jerusalem seated on a donkey that was not used to carrying people, since it was one on which no-one had ever ridden before (Mark 11:2).

¹ Third Edition, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000

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It is because we are aware of these facts that the speaker's claims about Jesus' alleged use of violence against animals do not ring true with us. So we must look at the actual evidence that is presented in the historical records that were written by eye-witnesses and based on eye-witness reports, a short number of years after the event, in all four of the gospels.

What does “drove them out” mean?

The Greek verb that is translated here as “drove out” is ἐκβάλλω [“ekbállō”]. BDAG defines ἐκβάλλω as:

- | | |
|---|----------|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. force to leave, <i>drive out, expel</i>2. to cause to go or remove from a position (without force), <i>send out/away, release, bring out</i>3. to cause someth. to be removed from someth., <i>take out, remove</i>4. to pay no attention to, <i>disregard</i>5. to bring someth. about, <i>cause to happen, bring</i> | (p. 299) |
|---|----------|

This same verb is used in Mark 1:12, which is translated by the NIV as “the Spirit sent him out into the desert”. Jesus' words as recorded in Matthew 9:38 also use this verb. The NIV translates that verse as: “Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” The parallel passage in Luke 10:2 uses the same verb. No force or violence is implied in any of these passages, nor in many other cases in the New Testament where the verb ἐκβάλλω [“ekbállō”] is used.

In his “Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament”, F W Gingrich states that the meaning in the context of Luke 10:2 is “send out, *without the connotation of force.*”² This matches the second BDAG definition given above: “to cause to go or remove from a position (without force), *send out/away, release, bring out*”.

Thus, John 2:15 could legitimately be translated, he “brought the sheep and cattle out of the Temple area, without using force.” However, since even the English word “drive”, when applied to herding animals, does not imply the use of force or physical violence, the clarification that this translation provides may not be necessary. This is especially the case when we remember Jesus' description of how the sheep follow the good shepherd (John 10:4), and when we observe that here he was moving sheep as well as cattle, we have a clear indication from him of how he would do this.

In this incident we can see Jesus modelling by his actions what it meant to be the Good Shepherd, even if it meant driving, leading or herding animals away from a place where they should not have been. He herded the animals in this incident with skill and care, not violence, getting them to go where he wanted, not causing them to run amok in panic.

Jesus was using his home-made bunch of strings to herd the animals – and the traders! – out of the Temple. The “whip of cords” is not recorded as having entered into contact with any animal or person. Even if it had accidentally touched someone, it would not have hurt them. Thus, no physical violence against animals or people took place and no pain or injury was inflicted.

It is thus not surprising that three of the four gospel writers consider that Jesus' use of an improvised whip made from string or the leaves of plants was so unimportant a detail of the event that it was not even worth mentioning.

²“Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament”, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965, as reproduced in the computer program “Bible Works 8”

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From where do we get our mental image of Jesus violently driving the people and animals out of the Temple?

We need to recognise that our mental image of what Jesus did on this occasion in the Temple and how he did it is probably based more on a half-forgotten memory of some late-Renaissance painting than on what the Biblical text actually says. All such paintings are of course based purely on the *imagination* of the painter.

Likewise, our image of what constitutes a whip may be based on cowboy films about 19th-century America, or on a visit to the circus when we were children.

Reading things into the Bible texts

As we look at the Biblical accounts, we must not *interpret* them through the lens of such inaccurate images, which can cause us to “see” a scene that does not correspond to the one that is described by the words in the text.

We can also all fall into the error of looking for something in the Bible, and finding it – even if it’s not there! Theologians call this “eisegesis”, which means: reading into a passage something that is coloured by what we *expect* it to say, or *want* it to say – even if in fact it says nothing of the sort!

The preacher who makes these claims about Jesus being violent also talks about how violent he himself was as a young man. In his study of this theme, he had looked for material to support his thesis that God is violent and that Jesus was violent during his ministry on earth. This background and this agenda clearly coloured his understanding of the texts that he read. They also appear to have influenced the texts that he failed to notice, texts that undermine his argument.

The reaction of the Temple authorities

The reaction of the Temple authorities gives us important clues as to how Jesus behaved. They had a Temple police force. Why didn’t they restrain Jesus? Why didn’t they arrest him, the same as they did with Peter and John a couple of months later? (See Acts 4:3.) Why did they acquiesce and *not say anything at all*?

It is significant that when Jesus was arrested about four days later and the leaders of the Jews were seeking to bring charges against him, even to the point of enlisting false witnesses, no mention was made of this incident, which would have been witnessed by so many of the same people who were present at his “trial”.

One can be certain that if physical injuries, however minor or temporary, had been sustained by any of the people or animals present in the Temple that day, this would have been used as one of the charges against him. We have detailed reports of what was said in the trial, but this is not mentioned in any of them. The absence of any such charge is a clear indication of *how* Jesus “drove” the animals and merchants out.

Portobello Road Market: a valid comparison?

The speaker compares the incident in the Temple in Jerusalem with what would happen if someone overturned market stalls in Portobello Road Market in London, but is that comparison relevant?

He is right to say that if someone overturned market stalls in Portobello Road Market, they would be stopped. But Jesus was not stopped. Why not? It was not because he was the

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Son of God, since this was unknown by most of those present and rejected by most of the rest. (The only possible exceptions were Jesus' disciples, but they clearly hadn't at that point understood his claims, and when a confrontation did arise, just a few days later, they all ran away.)

So why was Jesus not stopped and not arrested for what he did in the Temple that day? We must verify the validity of the comparison with Portobello Road Market that the speaker makes.

If someone turned over market stalls in Portobello Road Market, they would be disrupting people who were trading legally in an area that was reserved for the use of the market, and would inevitably be restrained. People would think that the perpetrator had either gone mad, or was drunk, or was a criminal or terrorist, and they would call the police.

But Jesus was not in a market; he was in the most holy place in the whole world, for Jews: the Temple.

The leaders hated Jesus, but they knew that he was right. *Moreover*, he was careful not to injure anyone or hurt any of the animals. For these two reasons none of the Temple leaders or police restrained him and no-one laid a hand on him when he was driving out the animals, the traders and the money changers.

Anger

Jesus was angry with the traders and the leaders of the Temple, of course, and his overturning of the tables of the money changers was dramatic. This is not the only place in the New Testament where Jesus is shown as being angry. In Mark 3:5 we read: "he looked around at them in anger ... deeply distressed at their stubborn heart" (NIV). But he did not use physical violence against people or animals on the occasion recounted in Mark 3 nor during this incident in the Temple.

In order to understand why Jesus was angry, we must consider the background in which God is described in the Old Testament as being angry with evil-doers. See, for instance, Psalm 7:11: "God is an honest judge. He is angry with the wicked every day."³

The Temple: the contrast between the purpose and the reality

We must also consider two factors about the situation on this occasion:

1) Firstly, there should not have been a market in the Temple.

Three of the gospels tell us that Jesus quoted Isaiah 56:7 to them: "my house shall be called a house of prayer" (Matthew 21:13, Mark 11:17 and Luke 19:46). For Isaiah, quoting God, this was the purpose of the Temple. Jesus had the same attitude as Isaiah. The Temple was the place to worship God and to pray. Worshippers were to draw near to God in surroundings of calm and quietness. The phrase "house of prayer" is used twice in Isaiah 56:7, and Isaiah was one of the most commonly-read prophets amongst the Jews at the time of Christ, so his hearers will have recognised the quotation.

Instead of being the calm and quiet place that it should have been, the Temple in the first century A.D. was filled with all the noises of a livestock market, with stallholders shouting out their wares, the sounds of the animals, and haggling between traders and customers, trying to be heard above the inevitable din.

³ New Living Translation ©, copyright © 1996, 2004 by Tyndale Charitable Trust.

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2) Secondly, not only should the traders not have been trading in the Temple, but some of them, at least, were swindling their customers.

This was the reality. That is why three of the evangelists report Jesus' condemnation of those who had made the Temple into a "den of robbers" (Matthew 21:13, Mark 11:17, Luke 19:46). His words were, ὑμεῖς δὲ αὐτὸν ποιεῖτε σπήλαιον ληστῶν ["humeis de auton poieite spēlaion lēstōn"], which means "But you are making it a bandits' hideout." Note the present tense: "you are making it", i.e., right now, by having these market stalls here and by cheating your customers.

The word σπήλαιον ["spēlaion"] literally means a "cave" (think of the English word speleology, which means "caving", the hobby of exploring caves). Used metaphorically, as here, it here means a hideout.

Then Jesus used the word ληστῶν ["lēstōn", singular: ληστής "lēstēs"] to describe the merchants and money changers. The translation of this word is "thief", "robber" or "bandit". It is used by Jesus in John 10:1 about a sheep stealer and in Luke 10:30 in the story of the Good Samaritan about the bandits who attacked a traveller and left him for dead. In John 18:40 it is the description given of Barabbas, who was being held for insurrection and murder (Mark 15:7). Jesus is comparing the traders in the Temple with people such as these. So the Temple, the most holy place in Judaism, had become like a hideout for bandits. They felt safe there, at the very time that they were stealing from the people who were coming to worship.

The reaction of the common people

Jerusalem was thronging with thousands who had come to the city from throughout the known world, in order to celebrate the Passover (see Acts 2:5-11). There were crowds of devout Jews everywhere and some of them had travelled vast distances to be in the most holy part of what they believed was the holiest city in the world.

Faced with this unexpected confrontation between Jesus and the merchants and money changers, they could easily have overpowered him and beaten him up. Why didn't they?

They had looked forward to arriving at a place of worship and sanctity. Instead, they had found themselves in the midst of the noise and commotion of a market. They had looked forward to arriving at a place of utmost purity. Instead, they were having to cope with the smells of the sheep and cattle and were having to mind where they put their feet, as they stepped between the animal droppings. They must have been as shocked as some devout fifteenth and sixteenth-century pilgrims were when they finally reached the "holy city" of Rome and found that it seemed to be full of drunken priests and monks queuing up outside brothels.

If these devout crowds had seen violence in the Temple, they would almost certainly have instinctively intervened to stop it. But they didn't. We must conclude that they did not see violence: Jesus was not hitting people; he was not injuring nor even frightening animals.

What is more, the crowds that had come to the Temple to worship God must have known that they were being over-charged for the animals that they had to buy for use in the Temple sacrifices – and that the exchange rate that was being used by the traders for the Jewish coins that they needed to buy for the offertory was unfair. Consequently – just the same as the Temple leaders – they didn't stop Jesus, either. They knew that what was going on in the Temple was wrong, and that Jesus was the only person who was doing something about it.

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Did Jesus practise what he preached?

Jesus was justified in what he did, and both the leaders and the people knew it, but when he cleared the Temple of the animals and the traders he did not go against his own teaching and his own habitual behaviour, as described throughout all four gospels. He did not undergo a personality change during this incident. The one who said “I am gentle and humble in heart” (Matthew 11:29 NIV) did not inflict physical violence on people or animals. His behaviour was thus in keeping with his command to Peter, “Put your sword back in its place, ... for all who draw the sword will die by the sword” (Matthew 26:52, NIV). It was also in keeping with his statement in John 18:36, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.” (NIV)

Conclusion

The claims that this speaker makes about Jesus’ supposed use of violence with a weapon against people and animals fail to convince, for they are based on numerous errors and misunderstandings:

- a failure to take account of Jesus’ attitude to animals and his teaching about them;
- a failure to consider how Jesus normally treated animals and how animals reacted to him;
- a misunderstanding of the range of objects described by the word “whip”;
- a disregard for the detailed description given in John’s gospel of the type of whip used, what it was made from and how it was fashioned;
- a lack of awareness of the cultural context and the way that these whips of leaves or cords were and are used in the Middle East and in Mediterranean countries;
- a misapprehension of how animals were “driven” when they were being herded along;
- a misunderstanding of the meaning of the Greek word that is translated “drove out”;
- a failure to pay attention to the actual description of what Jesus did;
- an unjustifiable comparison between the Temple, the holiest place in Judaism, and a London street market;
- a disregard for the true nature of the trading that was going on in the Temple and the type of people who were involved in carrying it on, who are described as robbers or bandits;
- a non-recognition of the reasons why the authorities did not arrest Jesus on the spot and why they failed even to mention the incident during his “trial” a few days later, when they were trying to find reasons to accuse him and have him killed;
- a failure to observe the significance of the non-intervention by the crowds of devout worshippers who were in the Temple at the time;
- a failure to take into consideration the reasons why even the vendors and money-changers themselves didn’t try to stop Jesus or to punish him for what he had done.

If we are looking for evidence of Jesus using violence against people or animals, we will not find it in any of the accounts of the cleansing of the Temple.

Implications for followers of Jesus

Jesus constantly called people to follow him. The phrase “Follow me” occurs on the lips of Jesus 21 times in the NIV translation of the New Testament and can be found in all four gospels (see, for instance, Matthew 4:19, Mark 2:14, Luke 9:23, John 12:26). “Following” Jesus meant much more than just accepting that his teachings were good; it meant living the way he lived and putting his teachings into practice in one’s life. The first believers

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understood this to mean living according to the principles that Jesus had not only taught but also demonstrated. For example, in Philippians 2:5 we read, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Jesus Christ” (NIV).

A major danger of the misrepresentation of the Temple incident is that it might be used to justify violence in the name of Christ. Sadly and notoriously, there have been many periods in the past when people claiming to be Christians have used violence to try to achieve their ends. For example, we need look no further than the Inquisition and the torture and the burning at the stake of preachers, reformers and Bible translators.

In opposing the criminal behaviour in the Temple and in putting a stop to it, Christ was acting decisively but not violently. He was exposing himself to the possibility of being attacked and he knew that, in time, his enemies would seek to destroy him. He calls those who believe in him to follow his brave example and condemn things that are wrong.

However, the incident of the cleansing of the Temple by Jesus does not provide any justification for the use of violence by people in the name of religion.

9.2.15.

Revised 1.1.17.