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Assessing Jesus' character in the temple-cleansing narrative in the Nigerian context: A response to Alana

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Relying on the temple-cleansing narrative, Alana asserted that the humility ascribed to Jesus by the European missionaries does not conform to his portrait in the NT narratives. In view of this action of Jesus, in the Nigerian context, he would be described as a hooligan. Applying historical-critical exegesis and the descriptive method, the article examined the narrative with a view to assessing Jesus' character in response to Alana's thesis. The study found, that in a way, Alana's view resonated with the traditional interpretation of the story, which considers it as a historical event. The liberal approach, however, considers the narrative as historically inauthentic, relying on the writers' wrong view of the temple's size at the time of Jesus, by which Jesus' supposed action would have gone unnoticed. Moreover, the Markan and Johannine versions of the narrative are variants of an older tradition of kings acceding to office and purifying the cult, a tradition that was older than the evangelists and Jesus himself. That the story is historically inauthentic implies that all interpretations relating it to Jesus' character constitute a misrepresentation of his personality, just as they are inconsistent with his Christology and widely attested humility.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article is a study in Christology. It argues that the temple-cleansing narrative is historically improbable, and therefore, all interpretations relating it to Jesus' character are a misrepresentation of his personality.

Keywords: temple cleansing; Jerusalem temple; symbolic act; Jesus' character; Jesus and violence.

Introduction

In 2025, Prof. Olu Emmanuel Alana retired from Adekunle Ajasin University, Nigeria. As a professor of the NT, Alana's research had focused mainly on 'the true identity of Jesus of Nazareth' as obtained in the gospels as against the presentation of the European missionaries who brought Christianity to Africa (Alana 2025:8). In his inaugural lecture, Alana asserts that the portraits of Jesus as a humble, easy-going gentleman known in African Christendom over the years were formed by the missionaries but do not match the picture of Jesus presented in the NT narratives. Relying on the narrative of temple cleansing, among others, Alana states that Jesus was 'not … a quiet man who always pursues peace' (Alana 2025:12). Rather, his action at the temple would portray him as arrogant, haughty and pompous; in the Nigerian context, Jesus would be seen as 'a big guy' (Alana 2025:12). The aim of this article is to examine the shades of interpretation of the narrative of Jesus' action in the temple; how this event possibly portrays his temperament compared to his humility in other passages; and the extent to which Alana is correct that Jesus' action would portray him in the Nigerian context as a hooligan.

The article employs the historical-critical exegesis (or historical criticism) and the descriptive method. The historical-critical approach takes into account issues like the literary form, the *sitz im leben* and possible date of composition of the text, and the meaning of key words in the original language (Krentz 1975:6) and then attempts 'to reconstruct a history as a background to facilitate [a] better understanding of the text' (Cranford 2002:150). In this article, historical criticism is employed for the study of the relevant passages containing the temple-cleansing story, particularly Mark 11:15–17 and John 2:13–17. The descriptive method, as used here, simply means to 'describe a phenomenon and its characteristics' (Nassaji 2015:130).

The temple event

The story of temple cleansing seems to be considered by the gospel writers as 'one remarkable event' in the ministry of Jesus, hence its appearance in all the gospel accounts (Turgong & Hundu

2024:1; cf. Mt 21:12–13; Mk 11:15–19; Lk 19:45–48; Jn 2:12–22). Apparently, there was a tradition of temple 'cleansing' by Jesus among the early Christians, which each evangelist attempts to encapsulate, offering his 'own interpretation of the Jesus event' (Domeris 2015:2). However, in view of the commonly held priority of Mark (i.e. that Matthew and Luke used Mark), many commentators apply the gospels of Mark and John to represent 'the two different traditions' (Domeris 2015:2; cf. Fredriksen 2008:247), which is the approach adopted in this article:

> And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. And he taught and said to them, 'Is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?"' But you have made it a den of robbers. (Mk 11:15–17 [RSV])

> The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons and the money-changers at their business. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple; and he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, 'Take these things away; you shall not make my Father's house a house of trade'. His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for thy house will consume me'. (Jn 2:13–17 [RSV])

One of the differences in the two accounts is that, while John recounts the incident at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the synoptists place it towards the end. For this reason, some interpreters (e.g. Chapple 2015:546) suggest that 'two such episodes took place, one at the beginning and one at the end' of the ministry of Jesus. However, there is the general 'consensus … that there was only one' temple cleansing, and that it happened towards the end of Jesus' ministry (Allin 2017:1). John recounted it at the beginning of his gospel to suit his own theological purpose, namely to show 'Jesus as authoritative, fearless, passionate … and decisive in his actions' (Allin 2017:1). It is important to note also that some scholars deny the historicity of the temple event. Another difference is that it is only John that specifies that Jesus used a whip in the action. The section below examines the traditional approach to the interpretation of the temple event.

The traditional interpretation of Jesus' action

The traditional interpretation is the view held by interpreters who consider the temple event to be 'a key historical moment in Jesus' ministry' (Domeris 2015:1). But even among them, it is admitted that it 'is one of the most confusing to understand' (Norman 2023:5). Hence, the debate has always focused on what Jesus was trying to achieve through the action and what indeed he was protesting against. It is suggested that by his action, Jesus predicted the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, a view which is usually supported by the fact that Mark places the cursing of the fig tree in the middle of the temple narrative. In the narrative of the triumphal entry, on entering Jerusalem, Jesus went into the temple in the evening, looked around and proceeded to Bethany with his disciples (11:11). In verses 12–14, Mark inserts the narrative of cursing the fig tree. By this approach, the intent of the story that was originally meant to teach faith in God (v.12) has been changed considerably. Mark's redaction is thus a deliberate attempt 'to give an interpretive frame' to the temple event (Norman 2023:5). In other words, the evangelist intends his readers to keep the narrative of the fig tree in mind as they read the story of temple cleansing. In Mark, then, the temple is cleansed 'because the Jewish cult has remained fruitless' like the barren fig tree (De Jonge 2003:95). Therefore, the same judgement that has befallen the fig tree is awaiting the temple. Thus, Mark views the cleansing of the temple as a pointer to the forthcoming destruction of the temple, apparently 'looking back on the events of the year 70 CE' (De Jonge 2003:95). As expressed by Hooker (1991:266), writing at a time when the Jews seemed to have rejected the gospel, Mark employs the story of temple cleansing as 'pointing inevitably to the temple's destruction'.

There are several suggestions as to what Jesus protested against by his action in the temple. It is argued that Jesus' action points to a rejection by God of the sacrificial system (Sanders 1985:70; cf. Rogers 2011:6) that had turned into some form of 'commerce in the temple precincts' (Fredriksen 2008:247) under the control of the 'aristocratic priestly families' (Horsley 1987:300). It is important to note that for the Jews, the Jerusalem temple was of both religious and economic significance, being the focal point for religious festivals, 'the site of the sacrificial cultures', and the seat of the Sanhedrin and the priestly families (Ferguson 2003:562). In spring, the Jewish Passover occasioned the visit of 'hundreds of thousands of Jews' to Jerusalem, particularly the temple, where pilgrims made various forms of sacrifice as well as paid 'the annual temple tax of half a shekel' per male older than 20 years of age (Cochran 2024; cf. Devine 2011:5; McGrath 2014:2; Norman 2023:6; Turgong & Hundu 2024:4). As it was required that all payments for the tax and animals for sacrifice be made in the Tyrian shekel, the stage was set for a market for the buying and selling of animals as well as the exchange of currencies. For instance, '[m]oney changers converted Greek, Roman, and Parthian coins into shekels of Tyre' (Devine 2011:5). Dove sellers provided a necessary service for those who needed them for sacrifice, as the temple authorities had to certify the animals as unblemished and fit for the purpose. This means that worshippers who had the animals at home still had to bring them to the temple where they would 'be confident that they met the required standard' (Norman 2023:6). Some interpreters argue that Jesus' action was warranted by the fact that these commercial services had 'become oppressive and exploitative' (Wise 1992:820). It is conjectured that (Ituma & Solomon 2012:17):

> 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 [*possibly*] charged a commission for their transaction. (cf. Devine 2011:5)

It is also argued that the siting of this commerce inhibited the gentiles who would have used it for the worship of Yahweh. The marketplace was situated in the outer court, which was the only place where the gentiles were permitted to pray. If that court were converted to a place for trading, 'it would have a deleterious effect … on the gentile worshippers' (Norman 2023:10).

Herod the Great had begun the reconstruction of the temple in about 20–19BCE, which was not completed until about 63CE, 'shortly before the Jewish revolt that brought its final destruction' in 70CE (Turgong & Hundu 2024:4; cf. Ferguson 2003:562). This reconstruction is said to have involved remodelling the outer courts of the temple for civic use 'resembling a Greek marketplace or Roman forum' (Norman 2023:11). This seems to have followed the permission of Caiaphas the High Priest in CE 30, allowing trading within the temple in preference to the markets outside on Mount Olives (Lane 1974:404). Thus, with Herod's remodelling, commercial activities that were previously prohibited in the outer courts began to take place. To this end, Jesus' action was also a protest against usurping the place that would have been used by the gentiles for the worship of Yahweh, subverting it for money-changing and the sale of animals (Collins & Attridge 2007:527; cf. Ituma & Solomon 2012:14).

The interpretation of the marketplace being a disadvantage to the gentiles rests on Jesus' statement in Mark 11:17, 'Is it not written: "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations"? But you have made it "a den of robbers,"' in which he combined two OT passages, Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11. Isaiah 56:6–7 contain the prophecy to the effect that on the day of the Lord, those who are faithful to the law of Yahweh shall be made joyful in the house of the Lord; 'for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations' (v. 7, [NKJV]). Commentators agree that the house of Yahweh here refers to the Jerusalem temple. Hence, Mark 11:17 suggests that the spiritual 'purpose of the temple was being compromised' (Norman 2023:10), thereby depriving 'all nations' (i.e. the gentiles) the opportunity to worship therein. In Mark's interpretation of Jesus' action, then, the sin of Israel is 'the exclusion of the Gentiles' (Lupieri 2011:294) whose chance to worship is being jeopardised (cf. Kostenberger 1999:75–76). The Jeremiah text believed to be cited by Jesus queries whether the house (the temple), which was called by Yahweh's name, has become a 'den of robbers' [ληστων]. Norman (2023:7) suggests that 'den of robbers' might be referring to 'the price inflation of the money changers and animal sellers', as it might be offensive to Jesus that people were profiting from the worship processes. On the contrary, De Jonge (2003:96) argues that in Mark, Jesus is not protesting against situating a market in the temple or buying and selling therein. Rather, from the perspective of the meaning of ληστοά, which in Mark refers to nationalist rebels, revolutionaries, and insurrectionists, in 11:17, the evangelist 'contrasts the house of prayer for all nations with the den of Jewish nationalists' (De Jonge 2003:96). De Jonge (2003) states:

> In Mark, the protest is against the temple being a stronghold of Jewish nationalism instead of being a place of prayer 'for all nations'. Clearly, this Markan protest is levelled against the temple of the year 70 CE … when the temple was indeed a stronghold of nationalists and zealots of all kinds. (p. 96)

Thus, the traditional approach to the interpretation of the temple action views it as a historical event that took place in the ministry of Jesus and that it intends to portend the destruction of the temple because it was not being used for its intended purpose. The next section considers Jesus' character in the narrative as interpreted by the traditional commentators.

The portrayal of Jesus' character in the temple narrative according to the traditional interpretation

Being aware of the apparent contradiction between the said action of Jesus and his humility as portrayed elsewhere in the gospels, commentators in the traditional fold make deliberate attempts to deny that Jesus was violent in his action of driving merchants and their wares out of the temple. They cannot imagine that Jesus lost his composure (Cochran 2024)

> The vivid imagery of Jesus overturning the tables, dumping out the coins, and wielding a whip to drive animals out of the courtyard visually stands in great contrast to tender moments [*in his life*]. (n.p.)

That would absolutely contradict the teachings of the preacher who was known to abhor violence in any form; the teacher who had taught love for one's enemies to the point of turning 'the other cheek when slapped' (Ituma & Solomon 2012:15). Relying on John's account, Cochran (2024) believes that Jesus certainly did not lose his cool in carrying out the action. Rather than acting on impulse, Jesus halted and took his time to make a whip from small cords, which signifies a deliberate act 'rather than an instinctive reaction' (Cochran 2024:n.p.). Allin (2017:1) harps on the nature of the whip Jesus used in the action. It must be understood that Jesus 'was not wielding a weapon [but an] improvised "leaf-whip"', such that was used to drive away flies from the user's face. John's account also indicates that Jesus 'displayed tender regard' towards the animals in order not to harm them (Cochran 2024:n.p.). Thus, even in this 'dramatic physical act' (Mumford 1984:12), Jesus was in perfect control, and this is shown in his directive to the merchants, 'Take these things from here' (Jn 2:16). As expressed by Allin (2017:8), to put a stop to the criminal behaviour in the temple, Jesus 'was acting decisively but not violently'. It is further claimed that the Jewish authorities would have arrested

Jesus on the spot if he had lost control of his emotions, having challenged the status quo on a number of occasions during his teachings. In the words of Mumford (1984:12), 'that his actions were fully justified seems clear from the fact that he was not challenged to stop'.

Devine (2011:13) admits that Jesus was driven to 'the point of passionate anger', positing that the episode raises Christological concerns. He, however, opines that it must be understood that the 'coming of Jesus is anything but comfortable'. His coming is for judgement, as he represents the end of the current phase of the created order and the ushering in of the new one. Hence, the coming of Jesus to the temple means more than overturning tables and driving out some merchants. 'It's the driving out of chaos in the form of oppression to begin the eschaton and usher in the new order' (Devine 2011:13). It is, therefore, not violence to creation but violence to chaos and anti-creation. Moreover, the narrative presents the duality of the person of Jesus, namely his human and divine nature. As human, Jesus has 'a complete spectrum of human feelings', including anger (Devine 2011:14).

As part of their reasons for the non-violent view, interpreters in the traditional circle express the concern that the temple incident 'might be used to justify violence in the name of Christ' (Allin 2017:8). This warning becomes necessary in view of the fact that this story 'continues to play a role in Christianizing violence of all sorts' (Ituma & Solomon 2012:19; cf. Allin 2017:8). On the basis of the narrative, some have claimed that Jesus was 'a political and religious revolutionary' (Onwu 2002:216). Ituma and Solomon (2012:21) disagree that Jesus' action in the temple connotes violence. For them, with the whip as a symbol of power and authority, Jesus unleashed divine punishment on the merchants as they abused the use of the temple, an attitude which they recommend for the church in Nigeria. The church has 'a divine mandate' which has to be employed to transform both the church and the society at large (Ituma & Solomon 2012:21). Jesus' temple action is a challenge to the leaders of the church in Nigeria to 'take bold steps to clear the church of the clogs in its wheels'. Rather than relying on prayer alone to change the hearts of the money changers, Jesus used a physical means, thereby teaching that practical ways can be employed to resolve certain issues. Ituma and Solomon (2012) note:

> [*Jesus' example*] makes non-sense of the position of some individuals who think that all problems must be resolved in prayer … While prayer is necessary, Christians must understand that taking proactive practical steps in challenging ills in the society is exemplified in the action of Jesus. (p. 21)

Such are the pains of the traditional interpreters to deny that Jesus was violent in the said temple incident. In the section below, the article reconsiders the traditional interpretation.

Reconsidering the traditional interpretation

One of the arguments put forward against the traditional approach comes from the perspective of the size of the Jerusalem temple at the time of Jesus. As portrayed in the gospel narratives and assumed in the traditional interpretation, the size of the temple must have been such that most of the people in and around it witnessed Jesus' action. Contrary to this impression, however, research has shown that such an action by Jesus would have gone virtually unnoticed, given the size of the temple. It has been discovered that the temple complex was approximately 'equivalent in area to thirty-five football pitches' (Wise 1992:812), able to accommodate 'as many as 400,000 pilgrims' (Sanders 1992:127). The outer court, where the tables of the merchants stood and where Jesus' action supposedly took place, was 'over 300 m wide' (Rogers 2011:5), a size which 'shrinks the significance of Jesus' putative gesture' (Fredriksen 2008):

> [*The outer court*], in this season, would have been jammed with humanity, tens of thousands of people. Imagine Jesus walking over to some of the vendors who sat at the edges of this huge area and overturning their tables. How many people would have been able to see him? [*Only*] those in his retinue and those standing immediately around him. … [*Thus*] shrunk by the size of the Temple's outer court, muffled by the density of the pilgrim crowds, Jesus' [*supposed*] gesture… would simply have been swallowed up. (p. 258)

Scholars also point out the security that the Roman authorities routinely put in place, especially during Jewish festivals. Moreover, the Romans attached such significance to temple worship that they 'would have stepped in if a riot broke out to the scale that all sacrifices were stopped', as purported in the gospel narratives (Rogers 2011:6, citing Hooker 1991:342). Or could it be part of the evangelists' attempt to 'sanitise' the telling of the events so that they do 'not explain why Jesus' violence was not met with violence'? (Rogers 2011:6). As will be seen later, that Jesus was not opposed by the relevant authorities might be a pointer to the possible inauthenticity of the story rather than the acceptance of his authority to so act, as posited by the traditional interpreters.

Thus, the size of the temple at the time of Jesus and the imagination of the gospel writers do not match. Perhaps in realisation of this fact, some have interpreted the temple event as 'a symbolic act predicting its destruction' (McGrath 2014:2). In this regard, Rogers (2011:6) seems to acknowledge the disharmony between the temple size and the description of the evangelists when he states that most commentators on the temple action accept it as 'symbolic and representational rather than a demonstration of force with a big impact'. Rogers (2011:6) adds that it is 'much more sensible' to recognise Jesus' action as a symbolic action, following the tradition of enacted prophecies of the OT.

Meier (2001:501) states categorically that what is contained in Mark 11:15–17 and John 2:13–17 are versions of the temple event 'which most likely is a symbolic, prophetic action by which Jesus foretells … the imminent end of the present

temple'. Fredriksen (2008:248) also affirms that most scholars agree that 'the historical Jesus did enact this scene in the Temple … symbolically proclaim[*ing*] the Temple's impending destruction'.

In furtherance of the symbolic act interpretation, passages in the gospels are cited to indicate that Jesus had actually foretold the destruction of the temple. Relying on passages such as Mark 13:1–2; 14:57–58; 15:29; Matthew 26:60–61; 27:40; and John 2:18–22, Sanders (1985:75) concludes that, 'Jesus publicly predicted or threatened the destruction of the Temple … and made a demonstration which prophetically symbolized the coming event'. Citing particularly the accusation that Jesus promised to destroy the temple and build another not made with human hands (Mk 14:58 & pars.), Norman (2023:15) asserts that Jesus' temple action should be understood as 'a judgment upon the Temple for not already becoming the eschatological Temple'. In the words of Meier (2001:501), 'The sayings about the Temple explain the otherwise puzzling prophetic action of Jesus in the temple'.

However, many others have raised the question of the historicity of the tradition of the prediction of temple destruction attributed to Jesus. In Fredriksen's (2008:252) hypothesis, that a tradition is widely attested does not necessarily demonstrate authenticity but antiquity. '[A] given tradition predates its various manifestations in different witnesses, if those witnesses are independent' (Fredriksen 2008:252). Nonetheless, the attested tradition still has to be critically assessed. In reference to the said prediction of temple destruction, attestation by independent witnesses does not necessarily preserve historically what Jesus actually did or said, but what 'he was thought to have done [or said]', and there is a big difference between the two (Fredriksen 2008:252). Therefore, the attestations only prove that the traditions that Jesus predicted the destruction of the temple antedate their appearance in the various Christian texts post the destruction, not that Jesus actually made the predictions. It is rather puzzling that the issue of the prediction of the temple destruction does not appear at all in Paul's letters in spite of the fact that they predate the gospels by several decades. Paul was the only writer who undoubtedly lived before Jerusalem's destruction by the Romans. He knew some of the original disciples of Jesus, at least Peter and John (Gal 1:18, 2:9). Vivid in Paul's instructions to the gentile churches is the second coming of Jesus. The inevitable question is this (Fredriksen 2008):

> If Jesus had made such a spectacular prophecy (as in Mk 13:2) or had enacted it at such a key moment in his mission; if Paul were colleagues with the men who must themselves have known that prophecy (they had been with Jesus in Jerusalem); and if Paul himself throughout his letters specifically proclaimed the signs of the coming Kingdom, then why does Paul evince no knowledge of Jesus' prediction? (p. 255)

Being raised here, therefore, is the question of the authenticity of the sayings attributed to Jesus on the prediction of the temple's destruction as well as the story of temple cleansing itself. As seen earlier, the disparity between the size of the temple at the time of Jesus and the description of the gospel writers raises doubts about the historicity of the temple event, which apparently led to the symbolic act interpretation. It appears Mark and John both inherited different versions of a common tradition about Jesus chasing out some people from the temple, which they then adapted differently in their respective narrations. Apart from the differences already pointed out, Mark and John 'give Jesus different lines to speak' (Fredriksen 2008:257). In Mark, Jesus cites Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11, while John alludes to Zechariah 14:21 in Jesus saying that the people should not make, 'the house of my Father a house of business' (Norman 2023:8). John also adds that Jesus' disciples later associated his temple action with Psalm 69:9 in the statement, 'Zeal for your house will consume me' (Norman 2023:8).

De Jonge (2003:90) locates the pre-Markan version of the tradition adapted by Mark in Zechariah 14:21, arguing that Mark 11:15 is actually 'a working-out of the final sentence of the book of Zechariah'. On the day of the Lord:

> [*E*]very pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be holy to the Lord of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and take of them and boil the meat of the sacrifice in them. And there shall no longer be a trader[1] in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day. (Zch 14:21, [ESV])

De Jonge (2003:90) conjectures that, beginning from the 1st century CE, there was an ancient tradition which interpreted Zechariah 14:21 to mean that on the day of the Lord traders would no longer be needed in the temple. This is because on that day everything in Jerusalem would be sacred to the Lord, including cooking pots and sacrifice animals and items.

Several reasons are suggested to back up the proposition of the existence of a pre-Markan version of the temple-cleansing story. As discussed earlier, in the pre-Markan stage, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the temple event formed one literary unit, unlike in its present stage in Mark, where it is sandwiched between the two sections of the narrative of the cursing of the fig tree. This argument is supported by the fact that in both Matthew 21:12 and Luke 20:45 the entry and the cleansing episode form a single story, contrary to their common source, Mark. Thus, 'Matthew and Luke preferred to stick to a common older tradition' (De Jonge 2003:91). Illustrating further, De Jonge (2003:91) points out that stories of kings acceding to office and purging the cult, 'form a traditional, clearly discernible genre' in Jewish literature. For instance, in 1 Maccabees 4:36–61 Judas Maccabaeus, upon assuming power in Judea and Jerusalem, purified and 'dedicated the temple and restored the cult'. Similarly, 2 Maccabees 10:1–8 relates how Judas, when he had recovered Jerusalem and the temple, cleansed the

1.For 'traders' the MT has כנעני, the Hebrew for Canaanite, hence the reading 'Canaanite' in several English translations. But in biblical Hebrew the noun כנעני repeatedly refers to a trader, trafficker, or merchant (e.g. Is 23:8; Pr 31:24), which might explain the translation *trader* in some modern English versions (e.g., ESV; the New Revised Standard Version, NRSV). Therefore, in the context of Zechariah 14:21 כנעני 'must be taken to mean "trafficker," "trader," rather than "Canaanite"' (De Jonge 2003:90).

sanctuary and put up a new altar of sacrifice. A similar tradition about a new Davidic king who is about to gain dominion over Israel is contained in *Psalms of Solomon* 17 (ca. 40BCE). One element of purification that is absent in these earlier accounts is the expulsion of traders. Idols are removed, sacrifices to deities other than Yahweh are discontinued, among other things, but never do we 'hear that salesmen and their clients are driven out' (De Jonge 2003:91). Hence, this new element in the gospel narratives cannot be accounted for in the tradition of accessions to the royal office. The source is most probably Zechariah 14:21; in the prophet's vision of the day of the Lord when 'there shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord of hosts'. Thus, just like the Markan narrative of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem borrowed the colt from Zechariah 9:9, 'the pre-Markan account of temple cleansing borrowed the traders from' Zechariah 14:21 (De Jonge 2003:92). As far as De Jonge is concerned, then, the story of temple cleansing is an adaptation of the prophetic vision of Zechariah 14:21 in narrative form. Therefore, any attempt to interpret it 'as a historical event in Jesus' life becomes superfluous' (De Jonge 2003:92). Rather, the story is better understood in terms of viewing the person of Jesus in light of the vision of the day of the Lord in Zechariah 14, in which Jesus represents the appearance of the Lord as he comes 'to assume the kingship over all the earth' (De Jonge 2003:93; cf. Zech 9:9).

Thus, going by De Jonge's thesis, sometime post the resurrection of Jesus, in the view of some of his followers, Zechariah's vision had become true in the person and ministry of Jesus. This conforms to the practice of early Christians in applying the prophets' visions about the coming of God to Jesus' earthly ministry. For instance, in his introductory remarks, Mark 1:3 interprets the emergence of John the Baptist as a fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy, 'prepare the way of the Lord' (Is 40:3). In the vision of Isaiah, 'the Lord' is Yahweh, whereas in the context of Mark, the way of the Lord to be prepared by John the Baptist is that of Jesus. Similarly, Fredriksen (2008:257) denies the authenticity of Jesus' sayings predicting the Temple's destruction. She shares the view that the origins of the temple event 'are to be sought not in Jesus' mission', but in the aftermath of the 70 CE war, when both the Jews and early Christians attempted to explain why God should permit such a great catastrophe. Indeed, the story of temple cleansing as attributed to Jesus contains several 'historical improbabilities' (Fredriksen 2008:257), some of which have already been alluded to. The evangelists fail to give an idea of how Jesus could have overcome the resistance that his action would certainly have generated from the temple police or the Roman garrison, who had the responsibility to maintain peace (contrast Ac 4: lff). It is also surprising that the matter was not raised at Jesus' trial.

Thus, the story of temple cleansing by Jesus raises several points of improbability. In the first place, it loses sight of the size of the temple at the time of Jesus, which may also account for its failure to explain why the temple security personnel did not oppose him. Unfortunately, the symbolic act theory does not resolve these issues. It is unlikely that the soldiers failed to do their job because they recognised Jesus' action as symbolic. Indeed, the differences in the two versions of the narrative prove the existence of a version older than both. Moreover, the existence of stories around the 1st century BCE of kings acceding to office and purifying the cult is further proof of a tradition older than the evangelists and even Jesus' ministry. Therefore, it is most unlikely that the story of temple cleansing can be 'trace[d] back to an event in the earthly ministry of Jesus' (De Jonge 2003:92).

The next section examines the implications of the non-historical authenticity for Jesus' character.

Implications for Jesus' character

As seen at the beginning of this article, in his inaugural lecture, citing the temple-cleansing incident, among other narratives, Alana claims that the portrayal of Jesus by the European missionaries as an easy-going, peace-loving reformer does not match his picture in the NT narratives. Alana (2025) asserts that as the management of the temple was under the control of the Pharisees and Sadducees:

> Jesus' action was more of an invasion and … a clear beacon to anarchy … He was a revolutionary … And right from that age, [*revolution*] had been associated with a change that is characterised by force, suddenness and abruptness. (pp. 12–13)

In the Nigerian context, then, Jesus' action at the temple might rather portray him as an arrogant hooligan, a bully, one of those guys terrorising their respective localities (Alana 2025:8–12). Alana's thesis is thus based on the assumption of the historical authenticity of the temple narrative and hence aligned with those already discussed, such as the efforts that either accept or deny that Jesus was violent. Also assuming the historical authenticity of the story is the proposition that it could serve as a transformative agenda in Nigeria for the church and society at large.

However, the non-historical status of the story as proposed in this article would set a different tone for its interpretation in relation to Jesus' character. That the incident cannot be traced to a historical event in the life of Jesus implies that all interpretations relating the narrative to Jesus' character constitute a misrepresentation of his personality. Nonetheless, in place of all the efforts denying that Jesus was violent, it should be recognised that the story attributes violence to Jesus, which does not only contradict his personality but is, in fact, further proof of its historical inauthenticity; as the picture of Jesus being violent or destructive 'presents some problems to our understanding of Christology' (Devine 2011:13). To this end, De Jonge (2003:92) doubts if the version in Mark was created by the evangelist himself because in Mark's Christology, Jesus is someone who fears to disturb public peace and order. In fact, the narratives of the triumphal entry and temple cleansing are not really consistent with Mark's own Christology; the inconsistency which 'is an additional reason to see these stories as deriving from pre-

Markan tradition' (De Jonge 2003:92). In Mark's view, Jesus is the Christ, the son of David, the royal son of God. But at the same time (De Jonge 2003):

> Mark does everything in his power to make it clear that Jesus had not been an agitator, not an insurgent, not a revolutionary in a social or political sense of the word. For Mark, Jesus is the Son of God, but as a suffering righteous one and as the one who accepted death on the cross. (p. 92)

The temple-cleansing narrative is not only inconsistent with Christology but also with Jesus' humility as observable in other narratives. In other words, the imagery of a destructive Jesus inside the temple cannot be reconciled with tender moments in his life such as those of personally caring for the outcast or lovingly carrying children 'into his arms and blessing them' (Cochran 2024:n.p.). Or, did Jesus lose his temper? There had never been known instances in his life when such happened. The temple-cleansing story is, therefore, inconsistent with everything Jesus was known for. Hence, in the Nigerian context, rather than adopt this narrative as an agenda to attach hooliganism or radicalism to the person of Jesus, the emphasis should be on its contradiction with his personality.

Conclusion

Relying on the temple-cleansing narrative, Alana opines that the portraits of Jesus as a humble, easy-going gentleman created by the European missionaries do not conform to the picture of Jesus found in the NT narratives. In the Nigerian context, Jesus' action at the temple would portray him as a hooligan. Alana's view resonates with the traditional interpretation, which considers the temple action as a historical event in Jesus' ministry. This school of thought believes that by his action, Jesus foretold the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. It is argued that the cleansing points to God's rejection of the sacrificial system, as it had turned into some form of business. In view of Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11, which Jesus is believed to have cited according to the Markan version, it is also posited that the location of this commerce in the outer courts of the temple inhibited the gentiles who would have used it for their worship of Yahweh. Thus, it is suggested that by 'den of robbers' Jesus refers to the price inflation of the money changers and animal sellers who were profiting from the worship processes. However, some opine that as far as Mark is concerned, Jesus is not protesting against the marketplace or the business in the temple but against nationalist rebels, revolutionaries and insurrectionists who have taken over the temple management. As they find it difficult to accommodate Jesus' supposed action in the temple with his humility as portrayed elsewhere in the gospels, commentators in the traditional fold resort to a non-violent interpretation of this event, expressing concern that the story might be used to justify violence in the name of Jesus. Nonetheless, some Nigerian interpreters who hold the non-violent interpretation recommend the temple-cleansing narrative for the transformation of both the church and the society at large.

The liberal approach begins with the size of the Jerusalem temple at the time of Jesus. Against the imagination of the gospel writers of a small structure, research has it that the temple complex in the days of Jesus was approximately equivalent in area to 35 football pitches and was able to accommodate 400 000 pilgrims. The outer court where Jesus' action is said to have taken place was over 300 m wide. The implication is that by this size, Jesus' supposed action would have gone virtually unnoticed. The gospel writers, as well as the traditional interpreters, are also oblivious of the security measures usually put in place by the Roman authorities, which would have quelled any action that attempted to stop all sacrifices, as suggested by the story. Perhaps in realisation of these facts, some have interpreted the temple event as a symbolic act by which Jesus predicted the temple's destruction, for which passages in the gospels are cited to support the claim that Jesus had made the forecast.

Unfortunately, the symbolic act theory does not resolve the problems of improbability raised by the temple-cleansing narrative and the traditional approach to its interpretation. Apart from the issues of temple size and security, the differences in the Markan and Johannine versions of the narrative prove the existence of a version older than both. Moreover, the existence of similar traditions around the 1st century BCE is further proof of a tradition older than the evangelists and even Jesus' ministry. Therefore, it is most improbable that the story can be traced back to an event in Jesus' ministry. Alana's thesis is based on the assumption of the historical authenticity of the temple narrative, just like the efforts that either accept or deny that Jesus' action was violent, as well as the idea that it could serve to transform the church in Nigeria in a radical manner. However, the non-historical status of the story implies that all interpretations relating the narrative to Jesus' character constitute a misrepresentation of his personality. Nonetheless, it should be recognised that the story attributes violence to Jesus, which not only contradicts his personality but is also further proof of its historical inauthenticity. The temple-cleansing narrative is inconsistent not only with Christology but also with Jesus' widely attested humility. Hence, in the Nigerian context, as it relates to Jesus' character, the emphasis should be on the narrative's contradiction with his personality rather than adopting it as an agenda to attach hooliganism or radicalism to the person of Jesus.

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