

ECHOES IN THE TEMPLE?
JESUS, NEHEMIAH, AND THEIR ACTIONS IN THE TEMPLE

GEOFFREY M. TROUGHTON

INTRODUCTION

Recent trends in New Testament scholarship have emphasised the Jewish context of early Christianity. Interest in the contours of first century Jewish life and thought, and its influence on Jesus' life and ministry, has stimulated fresh methodological approaches and highlighted particular themes. Methodologically, the crucial role of 'inter-textual echo' in the New Testament literature,¹ and appreciation of the symbolic world of the first century have been significant. Thematically, 'exile and restoration' has been identified as one of the most powerful ways in which Israel's identity and experience was understood, and Jesus' message mediated.² Within this milieu, the Temple, and Jesus' action in the Temple have been thoroughly examined. The Temple itself has been described as one of the essential symbols of Jewish identity.³ Jesus' action there has been closely scrutinised ever since E.P. Sanders' moved to focus on Jesus' actions rather than his words.⁴

¹ Notably in the light of the seminal work in Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989).

² See N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 126. For a recent study on the theme of exile see James M. Scott, ed., *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Conceptions* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

³ N.T. Wright, 'Jesus' Announcement of the Kingdom', *Stimulus* 4:4, Nov 1996, 25-28.

⁴ E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1985). See Chapter One, especially 61-71.

Despite this, the influence of Ezra and Nehemiah have not received anything like full attention. First century Judaism was certainly not a wholly unified entity,⁵ but the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah were an important factor that shaped the dimensions of second Temple Judaism. Aside from largely suggestive observations about the operation of the ‘narrative grammar’ of the ‘exilic prophets, and the books of Ezra and Nehemiah’, scholars like Wright leave the details largely undeveloped.⁶ This article explores Nehemiah 13.4-9 in relation to Jesus’ action in the Temple. It suggests that Jesus’ action echoes some important features of Nehemiah’s, and that appreciation of the latter adds a neglected layer to our appreciation of the aims and action of Jesus.

A NEGLECTED EPISODE

Nehemiah 13.4-9 appears to have been largely unnoticed by Jesus scholars, despite some striking similarities to Jesus’ action in the Temple. The passage describes how, during Nehemiah’s absence in Babylon, Eliashib ‘the priest’ (though he is probably actually the High Priest)⁷ entered into a conspiracy with ‘Tobiah the Ammonite’. For reasons the text does not explain, Eliashib allowed Tobiah to insinuate a presence in the Temple precincts. On his return to Jerusalem, Nehemiah became aware of this situation. He took exception to Eliashib’s action and had Tobiah expelled in vigorous fashion. With Tobiah and his belongings ejected, Nehemiah moved to have the chambers ‘cleansed’ and the space restored to its intended purpose.

⁵ Zeitlin’s comment that despite the unifying factors in Judaism, there was a ‘remarkable diversity’ of outlook in the first century is representative of scholarly opinion here. Irving M. Zeitlin, *Jesus and the Judaism of His Time* (Cambridge / Oxford: Polity Press / Basil Blackwell, 1988), 10 and following.

⁶ Wright, *Jesus*, 126. Wright suggests that this ‘grammar’ lies behind parables like the Prodigal in Luke 15.11-32.

⁷ The precise identification of Eliashib is a disputed point, with some commentators preferring to differentiate between the Eliashib of 13.4 and 13.28. However, see Lester L. Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 65.

Old Testament commentators have occasionally, though briefly, noted the similarity of Nehemiah and Jesus' actions in the Temple. For example, Yamauchi observes that 'Nehemiah's action reminds us of Christ's furious expulsion of the moneychangers from the Temple area'.⁸ A more recent expository study by Raymond Brown goes further: 'Nehemiah acted exactly as Jesus did five centuries later. Christ also found Jerusalem's holy place cluttered with things which defiled its glory, contradicted its holiness and marred its witness'.⁹ However, the remainder of Brown's discussion focuses on interpreting Jesus' action rather than elucidating the connections with Nehemiah. By contrast, the Nehemiah text scarcely evoked any comment by New Testament scholars. Davies and Allison's observation is something of an exception. They merely note 'The obscure Mk 11.16 (Jesus did not permit vessels to be carried through the temple; cf. Neh 13.8?)'.¹⁰ Elsewhere, Kim Huat Tan offers another tantalising reference, but leaves it undeveloped since his study is primarily concerned with the relation between symbolic and prophetic acts.¹¹ Before moving to a closer exploration of possible connections between the two incidents, it will be useful to briefly survey some significant features of the passages concerned – beginning with Nehemiah.

NEHEMIAH 13.4-9

Nehemiah's vehement ejection of Tobiah seems to have been based on three fundamental premises. Most significantly, Tobiah was a 'foreigner'. Elsewhere in

⁸ Edwin Yamauchi, *Nehemiah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984). See also Derek Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah* (Leicester: IVP, 1979), 129: 'Nehemiah stormed in as violently as, one day, his Master would'. Interestingly, the more substantial treatment in the Anchor Bible series does not draw any parallel: Jacob M. Myers, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1965).

⁹ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Nehemiah* (Leicester: IVP, 1998), 230-31.

¹⁰ W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Volume 3* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 134.

Nehemiah, this same character is referred to explicitly as ‘Tobiah the Ammonite’ (e.g. 2.19, 4.3). Within the framework of Ezra-Nehemiah, ‘foreigners’ included all those who were not part of the community of returnees. Hence the label of ‘Ammonite’ was but one of many that carried this wider referent. The importance of Tobiah’s ‘foreignness’ in Nehemiah’s action is inferred from the incident immediately prior (13.1-3), which prefaces and justifies what follows.¹² There the people agreed to exclude Ammonites and Moabites from entering ‘the assembly of God’ – a decision justified by reference to the ‘book of Moses’ (13.1). Nehemiah’s action against Tobiah confirmed that he was an Ammonite, just as the earlier careful references represent him.¹³

A second motive for hostility emerges from the portrait of Tobiah’s character in earlier sections of the narrative. Throughout the story, Tobiah is consistently represented as a mortal enemy of the project of rebuilding. He is variously portrayed mocking and ridiculing (2.19), plotting to destroy (4.7-8), and intimidating Nehemiah and his colleagues (6.12-13). Accommodating Tobiah was therefore seen as accommodation of the enemy. Finally, it seems that Tobiah’s presence in the Temple precincts was considered a direct threat to the recently renewed Temple cult. This cult had been a crucial element in the whole process of reform: commitment to Temple service had been a fundamental aspect of the renewed commitment to the covenant.¹⁴ Tobiah occupied a large chamber (13.5) that was principally used for storing Temple supplies. The result was that the Temple materials were displaced, and the Temple itself was inadequately

¹¹ Kim Huat Tan, *The Zion Traditions and the Aims of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 165-66.

¹² The opening words, ‘Now before this...’ in 13.4 point to the closest possible connection between 13.1-3 and what follows.

¹³ Note that this designation as an ‘Ammonite’ comes despite the fact that he had obvious Jewish ancestry (see 6.17-18). See Grabbe, 174.

¹⁴ See especially 10.32-39.

equipped to carry out its intended function. As McConville notes, the removal of the vessels of the house of God threatened to ‘undo’ the ‘re-establishment of the worship of Yahweh and the vindication of his people’.¹⁵

THE NARRATIVE CONTEXT

Recent studies have tended to note the importance of the thematic unity within 12.44-13.14. Thronveit argues that this section displays an overall unity of theme based on dealing with the use and abuse of the Temple chambers.¹⁶ He represents the structure of this section in a chiasm that focuses on appointment of storeroom stewards for support of Temple Personnel (12.44-47 and 13.10-13), and expulsion of Ammonites in conformity with the Mosaic Law (13.1-3 and 13.4-9).

The episode in 13.4-9 also needs to be understood within the context of chapter 13 as a whole. This presents an ambivalent picture of the restored community in Jerusalem. The book of Nehemiah begins by recounting the remarkable reconstruction of Jerusalem’s walls, despite persistent opposition (4.1-23, 6.1-14), and the renewal of covenant commitment. Yet, despite this promise, the concluding chapters of Nehemiah close the story with the picture of a community in crisis. This final chapter presents the threats to renewal through the continuing temptation to abandon the covenants they had made. In 10.30-39, the people made a covenant in relation to three key areas. In Nehemiah’s absence each of these were systematically abandoned or abused: ‘intermarriage (10.30), Sabbath observance (10.31), and support of the cult (10.32-39) – were carelessly disregarded as the community fell prey to the continuing temptation of

¹⁵ J.G. McConville, *Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther* (Edinburgh: St Andrews Press, 1985), 147.

¹⁶ Mark A. Thronveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1992), 121.

foreign influence'.¹⁷ Nehemiah 13.4-9 details the threat to the Temple cult through accommodation of 'foreign' influences.

KEY THEMES

A number of key themes clearly emerge from Nehemiah's action. His action is fundamentally one of denunciation. Yet the object of his denunciation is complex. On the one hand, Nehemiah acts against Tobiah himself – after all, it is Tobiah whose 'household furniture' is thrown out of the room. This is the explicit dimension. Yet there is also an implicit denunciation of the people – and specifically of the (high) priest. The weakness of the people allows the wrong to occur, and disturbingly, the leadership of Israel is directly involved. Their continuing failure is as much the object of Nehemiah's denunciation as Tobiah himself is.

The action of denunciation, directed as it seems in twin directions, is generated by two other primary themes. The first of these, corresponding to the denunciation of Tobiah, is the exclusion of 'foreign' influence. The action against Tobiah is a function of his being a 'foreigner'. The whole programme of reform instituted by Ezra and Nehemiah was grounded in an ideological opposition to 'foreign' influence in the reconstituted Israel. The cleansing from foreign influence was seen as a necessary removal of the primary threat to Israel's identity.

This in turn points to the pre-eminent theme. For Nehemiah, the removal of Tobiah and the wider question of exclusion of 'foreign' influences only makes sense in the context of Israel's covenant status; it was supremely an act of covenant keeping. Nehemiah's decisive and dramatic action is performed on behalf of Israel in order to help

¹⁷ Thronveit, 125.

her remain faithful. Keeping of the renewed covenant was to be marked by renewed faithfulness to Torah, including reinvigoration of the Temple cult.¹⁸ Foreign influence was considered a threat in that it would draw Israel away from faithful adherence to Torah, and the symbols of that faithfulness (13.11).

JESUS' ACTION IN THE TEMPLE

Turning to Jesus' action, we find that despite the close scrutiny it has received, considerable controversy still surrounds it. The dispute centres around both the content and the meaning of the action. A.E. Harvey once observed that the fact of something occurring in the Temple was 'easy to say; but when we go on to ask what it was exactly that happened, we find ourselves in great difficulties'.¹⁹ These difficulties, and the diverse range of interpretations proposed, derive in part from the diversity of the Gospel narratives themselves. It is unnecessary to rehearse all the differences, or the full debate about the Temple action here. While noting that the different portrayals serve important narrative and theological functions in their own right, the greater emphasis here is on the constitutive elements of Jesus' action as they may be apprehended from the different accounts. In this, perhaps contrary to Harvey's pessimism, there is considerable agreement. In particular, it is widely accepted that Jesus' action was really a series of events that taken together comprise the 'action in the Temple'. Kim Huat Tan suggests that there were four component actions in this series: the driving out of the traders, the overturning of the tables, the refusal to 'allow anyone to carry anything through the

¹⁸ 'The exaltation of the law did not betoken any loss of interest in the cult, but rather resulted in a heightened diligence in its prosecution – after all, the law required it!' John Bright, *A History of Israel* (3rd edition; London: SCM Press, 1981), 435.

¹⁹ A.E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History* (London: Duckworth, 1982), 129.

Temple', and the concluding saying.²⁰ These are present in divergent form in each of the gospels.

Of the four gospels,²¹ Mark and John offer the most substantial accounts of the action in the Temple.²² However, there are significant divergences in their accounts. In Mark, the episode is intercalated within the episode of the withered fig tree, so that each event provides a mutual commentary on the other.²³ Thus, the action in the Temple and the withering of the fig tree are each seen to be symbolic prophetic actions enacting destruction; the absence of fruit provokes the action against the fig tree, while the absence of 'true fruit' in the Temple (or 'fruit' of the wrong kind), is the catalyst for action.²⁴ On the other hand, the Fourth Gospel uniquely places the event at the start, rather than the end, of Jesus' ministry. It alone describes the 'whip of cords' fashioned to drive out the 'sheep and the cattle', the 'pouring out' of the coins of the money-changers, and Jesus' address to the sellers of the doves. The messianic allusion to Zechariah 14.21 when Jesus accuses the dove-sellers of 'making my Father's house a marketplace' is also distinctive.²⁵

²⁰ See Tan, 162-63. Compare with Richard Bauckham, 'Jesus' Demonstration in the Temple', *Law and Religion: Essays on the Place of the Law in Israel and Early Christianity*, ed., Barnabas Lindars, (Edinburgh: James Clarke, 1988), 72-89 and 171-176. Bauckham identifies five components, but only because he sees John's reference to the sheep and the oxen as an independent entity. See especially, 74-81.

²¹ Jesus' Temple action is described in Matthew 21.12-13, Mark 11.15-17, Luke 19.45-46, John 2.13-16 and following.

²² Mark almost certainly provides the basis of the other synoptic accounts. Davies and Allison, 133. See also, Bauckham, 77-78.

²³ On the significance of the device of 'intercalation' here see James R. Edwards, 'Markan Sandwiches: The Significance of Interpolations in Markan Narratives', *Novum Testamentum* 31:3 (1989), 193-216. William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 400.

²⁴ 'Just as the leaves of the tree concealed the fact that there was no fruit to enjoy, so the magnificence of the Temple and its ceremony conceals the fact that Israel has not brought forth the fruit of righteousness demanded by God' Lane, 400.

²⁵ Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 197ff; especially 198.

OLD TESTAMENT ALLUSION

For present purposes it is noteworthy that each gospel interprets the incident through reference to the Jewish scriptures. This overt allusion provides a compelling explanation why any possible connection with Nehemiah 13.4-9 has been overshadowed. Mark's account draws on at least two crucial prophetic texts, presented together as a single statement from Jesus. In the first, Jesus recalls Isaiah 56.7, asserting that the Temple should be 'a house of prayer for all nations'. In context, Isaiah 56.1-8 describes a gathering of the righteous from foreign nations with the faithful of Israel in their worship in Jerusalem. This is interposed between a call to 'maintain justice' (56.1) and accusations that Israel's leaders are blind and corrupt (56.9-12). It is unclear whether exiles, proselytes or simply Gentile visitors are in view.²⁶ Clearer is the vision of a restored Jerusalem, and the failure of Israel's leadership to respond appropriately.

The Isaiah text is blended with an accusation from Jeremiah 7.11, which asks: 'Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?' Jeremiah brings charges against Judah's priests and rulers – in part for their commercial dealings. The term *ληστης* imports violent connotations, but the crucial idea is the shielding of criminal behaviour behind the supposed security of the Temple. Significantly, the oracle is accompanied by the threat of destruction: 'I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of my sight, just as I cast out all your kinsfolk, all the offspring of Ephraim' (7.14-15). Jesus appears to turn the text against the Temple establishment of his own day, who 'by virtue of their an

unassailable authority and prestige... were abusing their position to plunder the people of God and oppress them'.²⁷

The sole explicit Old Testament reference in John's account of the Temple incident comes through the disciples' remembrance and application of Psalm 69.9 to Jesus. This psalm explains the suffering that befalls a person dedicated to Temple prayer.²⁸ Significantly, in the disciples' recollection there is a crucial alteration from aorist to future tense that foreshadows the crucifixion. As Moloney notes, the disciples appear to recognise that Jesus' actions are pointing to a life and death struggle in the same tradition as other figures whose commitment to God cost them their lives.²⁹

COMPARING JESUS' AND NEHEMIAH'S ACTIONS IN THE TEMPLE

Whether his act symbolised cleansing, a protest or a portent of imminent destruction, Jesus asserted the necessity and imminence of change to a system presently awry. This demonstrated some sympathy with widespread discontent about the operation of Temple within contemporary Judaism.³⁰ Comparing the elements of Jesus' Temple action with Nehemiah's provides a basis for evaluating the similarities and divergence between them, and the possibility of Nehemiah's influence on Jesus.

²⁶ See the discussion in Craig A. Evans, 'Aspects of Exile and Restoration in the Proclamation of Jesus and the Gospels', *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Conceptions*, ed., James M. Scott, (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 299-328. Reference, 321-24.

²⁷ Tan, 183-84.

²⁸ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 39.

²⁹ Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 77-78.

³⁰ Chilton, B., P.W. Comfort and M.O. Wise, 'Temple, Jewish', *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, eds, Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove/Leicester: IVP, 2000), 1167-83. Reference, 1176.

DRIVING OUT THOSE WHO BOUGHT AND SOLD

In the first instance, Nehemiah's 'driving out' is clearly analogous to Jesus' action. In both cases, a form of expulsion is carried out. There is only slight variation in terminology: where Mark 11.15 uses *εκβαλλειν* John 2.15 offers the form *εξεβαλεν*, while the Septuagint translates the Nehemiah 13.8 verb as *ερριψα*. The differences are therefore insubstantial. In each case an expulsion is described, though it is worth noting that Tobiah himself is not actually 'driven out'. The text describes direct physical action against his belongings rather than his person. However, the ejection of Tobiah's belongings must be seen as symbolic of the ejection of Tobiah himself, since removal of Tobiah from within the Temple is the ultimate purpose of the episode.

At other points, the actions of Nehemiah and Jesus appear to diverge. The incident in Nehemiah appears to affect Tobiah alone, whereas the inference in the gospel accounts is that Jesus acted against a larger number. Number are never specified, but the Fourth Gospel claims that Jesus drove 'all of them out of the temple' (2.15).³¹ Similarly, in Jesus' action, livestock were also driven out of the Temple, while there is no mention of animals in Nehemiah. However, in the first case, the expulsion of Tobiah was part of a wider programme whereby Tobiah the individual is representative of the exclusion of Ammonites and Moabites from the cult, and of 'foreigners' in general.³² Likewise, though not livestock, paraphernalia associated with Tobiah was ejected.

There is no clear evidence that 'buying and selling' was as significant for Nehemiah as it seems to have been in the gospel narratives. The objection to Tobiah's presence owed more to the conviction that his presence was a 'foreign' element within

³¹ Mark obviously sees the action as plural, though not involving 'all' as John suggests (Mark 11.15).

the Temple that disrupted its appropriate functioning. It is possible that commercial reasons lay behind the initial move to install Tobiah within the Temple precincts, since a man of Tobiah's evident status presumably also had financial resources and influence at his disposal. However, there is no explicit evidence of objection to financial dealings in his ejection. There has been some debate about the extent to which 'buying and selling' was significant for Jesus. Overall, it is commonly taken that this element signals Jesus' desire to highlight disruptive and offensive practices within the Temple precincts. Jesus either urged for 'purification' from such activities, or simply used them as a focal point for his wider challenge to the authorities shaping Jewish national life.³³ In either case, Jesus' motivation for 'driving out' displays points of similarity to Nehemiah.

Both actions were in some way generated by objection to 'foreign' influence in national life generally, and the Temple cult in particular. In the case of Nehemiah, the expulsion of Tobiah is predicated on an ethnic and ideological designation of him as a 'foreigner'. Ethnically, because Tobiah was an 'Ammonite' who, following Deuteronomy 23.3ff, must be excluded from the 'assembly of the LORD'. Ideologically, because Tobiah appeared to have Jewish ancestry. In Nehemiah's view, 'Anyone not descended from those who returned from captivity was considered 'foreign', however much they were indigenous'.³⁴

Jesus offered a modified critique of 'foreign' invasion. The forms of 'foreignness' to which Jesus and Nehemiah objected were substantially different.³⁵ Whether his reaction is interpreted as a reaction against particular trade practices or a prophetic

³² See Myers, 207-8.

³³ See Zeitlen, 151.

³⁴ Grabbe, 174.

denunciation of ‘the establishment’, Jesus highlighted the detrimental impact of ‘foreign’ practices and ideas. Assuming that revulsion at trade was primarily in view, Jesus’ aimed to remove alien practices that impeded true piety. In this case, ‘foreign’ practices were those with no rightful place in the proceedings of Temple worship. Alternatively, if Jesus’ target was a wider criticism of the Jewish authorities, ‘foreignness’ consisted in the failure to promulgate an authentic and faithful national life. The triumph of erroneous or misguided ideas undermined Israel’s efforts to live out her vocation as the people of God. In Wright’s terms, Jesus’ action represented an internal critique of Israel and Israel’s symbol-system: ‘The critique was sharp. Israel’s present appropriation of her national symbols was leading her to ruin. Jesus was warning of this...while at the same time inviting all who would do so to repent and come with him in his way of being Israel’.³⁶

OVERTURNING THE TABLES OF THE MONEY-CHANGERS AND THE SEATS
OF SELLERS OF PIGEONS

Perhaps the most vivid similarity between the actions of Jesus and Nehemiah is the overturning of the tables. Both actions involve a direct, physical interaction with the equipment that furnished the ‘foreign’ presence. In each case, violence is enacted against inanimate objects rather than directly against people.³⁷ The violence was generated by the articles’ implication in, and symbolic representation of, the wider evil to which each person objected. The Septuagint describes Nehemiah throwing the

³⁵ Admittedly, this argument turns on the premise that ‘foreignness’ can cover a wide semantic field without being utterly undermined. The way that Nehemiah himself used the notion seems to suggest that this is indeed possible.

³⁶ Wright, ‘Jesus’ Announcement’, 29.

³⁷ Nehemiah was certainly capable of direct physical violence on persons: his personal testimony in 13.25 records that he ‘contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair’. Ambiguity in the ‘whip of cords’ tradition means that the question of Jesus’ direct violence on

σκευη οικου, ('household furniture', or 'household vessels') 'out of the room'. The reference is to a full range of personal possessions, rather than specifically cultic articles or items related to trade. This implies a significant number of objects, and that Tobiah had endeavoured to fix a dwelling place, or a permanent presence, in the Temple precincts.

The vivid and physical action of Nehemiah is mirrored in the gospel accounts. Mark's representation of Jesus has him 'overturning' (*κατεστρεψεν*) the furniture of the sellers and the money-changers. In this case, the furniture is identified specifically as tables (*τραπεζα*) and seats (*καθεδρα*), which are also potentially 'household' goods. However, they are not present in the Temple as such, but are technically in the Court of the Gentiles. They are present to assist the trading activities of their owners, and it is primarily this association that inspires Jesus' action. The description of Jesus 'pouring out' the money of the changers (John 2.15) confirms this: *και των κολλυβιστων εχεξεεν τα κερματα*. It is their representative character as instruments facilitating wrong practices that provokes Jesus' violent response. In this respect, Jesus and Nehemiah respond in kind.

PROHIBITING ANYONE FROM CARRYING 'ANYTHING' THROUGH THE TEMPLE

According to Davies and Allison, the prohibition against carriage through the Temple is the likeliest source of allusion to Nehemiah. Specifically, they highlight the linguistic connection through common use of the term *σκευος* ('vessels').³⁸ In the gospel

persons is inconclusive. Humans and animals were both driven out (see Moloney, 81), but the manner in which the cords were used is not clear.

³⁸ Davies and Allison, 134.

accounts, it appears that Jesus endeavoured to disrupt the carriage of certain objects through the Temple, though identification of the prohibited items has occasioned considerable debate. NRSV translates *σκευος* as ‘anything’ (thus, ‘he wouldn’t allow anything to be carried’), but the word is more properly rendered ‘vessel’.³⁹ Noting the proximity to Jesus’ repudiation of trade, commentators often refer to Zechariah 14.21, which states that ‘every vessel in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the LORD of hosts... And there shall no longer be traders in the house of the LORD of hosts in that day’.⁴⁰ The allusion makes good sense.

However, a possible connection with a technical cultic use of the term in Nehemiah should not be neglected. Nehemiah’s action in ejecting Tobiah and his ‘furniture’ (*σκευη οικου Τωβια*) is complemented by his enterprise in restoring the ‘vessels [*σκευος*] of the house of God’, along with the grain-offering and incense (Neh 13.9). It is possible that the ‘vessels’ in Jesus’ action are also formally associated with the Temple cult.⁴¹ This raises intriguing possibilities. Nehemiah was concerned about the ‘proper’ functioning of the Temple, including ensuring that the items necessary for proper worship were readily available. These included the ‘vessels’, but also items such as the incense and grain for offering. Nehemiah moved to restore these articles in order that worship could continue in the appropriate manner.

The reason for Jesus’ prohibition of movement of the ‘vessels’ has not always been satisfactorily addressed. Indeed, the apparent obscurity of the action may explain its

³⁹ Technically *σκευος* can be a generic term for any object, but can be modified by context or an additional statement to become an object of a specific kind. See William Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, revised and edited by Frederick W. Danker (3rd edition.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

⁴⁰ See Lane, 406.

⁴¹ See the discussion in Tan, 180.

excision from the accounts in Matthew and Luke. What seems certain is that concern for the 'proper' functioning of the Temple also lay behind Jesus' action. It may be plausibly argued that Jesus was opposing the carriage of sacred supplies that would later be sold to worshippers at a significant profit. Thus, 'Jesus was protesting against the Temple establishment for turning the sacrificial system into an oppressive profit-making industry'.⁴²

THE SAYINGS

Unlike the gospel accounts, Nehemiah's action is not justified or interpreted with reference to additional sayings. In each of the gospels, a 'saying' consisting of quotation from Scripture complements Jesus' action. These references provide an important commentary on Jesus' action, as well as justifying it by providing a Scriptural precedent. The lack of a saying in Nehemiah is a formal but insubstantial difference that is readily understandable. In the first instance, the narrative is quite explicit about the reasons for his action against Tobiah. This is implied in the context of the book as a whole, but particularly in the immediate context of chapter thirteen which deals with responses to threats against renewed covenant commitments. The wider context, then, is the 'Scriptural' authority that legitimise Nehemiah's reforms. After all, his whole programme was conceived as an expression of covenant-centred piety. More significantly, Nehemiah's action is justified in explicitly 'Scriptural' terms through the preface in 13.1-3 that appeals to the unqualified prohibition against Ammonites and

⁴² Tan, 181.

Moabites in Deuteronomy 23.3-5. As with Jesus' 'sayings', this association is announced publicly, since it was heard in the context of the public reading of the Law (13.1).⁴³

OTHER ELEMENTS

Apart from these basic elements, there are other points at which Nehemiah and Jesus' stories cohere and diverge. An interesting point of coherence is the manner in which Nehemiah and Jesus both find themselves in opposition to the Temple establishment. Such conflict is widely accepted in discussions concerning Jesus' action.⁴⁴ In Nehemiah's case, the priest Eliashib is roundly condemned even though it is Tobiah who is expelled (13.4,7). Once again, the incursion of 'foreign' influence was made possible by the complicity of the authorities.

Traditionally, the favoured interpretation of Jesus' action regards it as an act of purification, or cleansing. Interestingly, the Nehemiah episode makes the theme of purification explicit, though in quite different ways. For Nehemiah, the act of expulsion did not constitute 'cleansing', but preceded it. Cleansing and purification of the violated space required a separate activity (13.9). The sacred vessels were only restored to the Temple when this action was completed. In other words, Nehemiah's action went hand in hand with a more specific ceremony of purification. Clearly this option was open to Nehemiah as a national leader in ways that were not possible for Jesus.

This in turn raises the question of the symbolic nature of each action. Thus far, it has been argued that Jesus' action is primarily to be understood in symbolic terms. Was Nehemiah's action also symbolic? Perhaps so, but not in the same way that Jesus' action

⁴³ Kidner, 128.

was. Broadly speaking, there were symbolic elements to Nehemiah's action. The expulsion of Tobiah was only intelligible in light of the whole ideology that Nehemiah espoused. Tobiah was effectively representative of all 'foreigners', and the 'weakness' expressed in Eliashib's actions were indicative of the threat to all Israel. In a sense, the purification, like all rituals, was symbolic.

While both actions involved some form of challenge to Israel's self-realisation, there are qualitative differences between them. On the one hand, the reference of Jesus' action seems to be a wider, more comprehensive challenge to Israel. On the other, Nehemiah's action sought to bring immediate change in itself. Nehemiah leveraged his political power to effect change, rather than simply to urge for it. According to Tan, this makes the incident in Nehemiah devoid of symbolic content: it illustrates that prophetic acts 'may be intended simply as a protest against or denunciation of certain practices... without the intention of symbolising anything'.⁴⁵ This goes too far – though it is appropriate to emphasise the limited nature of the symbolism. Nehemiah's symbolism is of a representative nature, in that the action is indicative of the wider programme of Nehemiah's reforms. Jesus' action also is only meaningful within the wider programme that his action seeks to symbolically elucidate. But where Nehemiah seeks to effect change immediately, Jesus highlights an urgent need for change without expecting to effect it fully in the present.

A significant point of dissonance between Nehemiah and Jesus is the contrast between the apparent ethnocentrism of Nehemiah, and the 'universalistic' concerns of

⁴⁴ According to Mann, Jesus' action was not so much directed against the traders themselves as the Temple authorities, since 'The traders were there only because the true offenders – the temple clergy – allowed them to be there'. C.S. Mann, *Mark* (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 447.

⁴⁵ Tan, 165-66.

Jesus. In Mark, Jesus quotes Isaiah 56.7 in advocating that the Temple was meant as a 'house of prayer for all nations'. For Jesus, Israel's covenant fidelity was a central concern; it was a faithfulness that should be expressed among the nations, as a light to the world and a city set on a hill.⁴⁶ But for Nehemiah, as with Ezra, concern for covenant fidelity was precisely the factor that generated a programme to exclude foreign influence. Of course, it is possible to oversimplify this aspect of the post-exilic reforms. For instance, the present text indicates the additional factor that Tobiah's presence impeding the Temple cult in some very practical ways. Despite this, the general antipathy to 'foreign' influence in post-exilic Israel is still evident.

INTERPRETATION: JESUS, NEHEMIAH AND THE END OF EXILE?

There is no *a priori* reason to suppose that the story of Nehemiah should not have influenced Jesus. On the contrary, there are sufficient grounds to imagine that it did. The gospel narratives portray Jesus as one thoroughly steeped in the traditions of Scripture, and capable of utilising these in a variety of ways – including using multiple traditions.⁴⁷ While specific quotation from Ezra and Nehemiah is rare in the New Testament, many characteristic themes are evident. The 'narrative grammar' is prominent in Jesus' teaching, and the significance of the theme of exile is well accepted.⁴⁸ Therefore, the prospect that these are factors in his crucial Temple action is likely. This study has also highlighted possible thematic and textual links between the two incidents. While unlikely

⁴⁶ See Matthew 5.14-16.

⁴⁷ Of this point, illustrations abound. Evans describes the Jesus' 'legal', 'prophetic' and 'analogical' use of the Old Testament. See C.A. Evans, 'Old Testament in the Gospels', *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds, Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove/Leicester: IVP, 1992), 579-590.

⁴⁸ On 'exile', note Neusner's argument that: 'The paradigm of exile and return contains all Judaisms over all times'. Jacob Neusner, 'Exile and Return as the History of Judaism', *Exile: Old*

to have been the pre-eminent influence on Jesus, there is sufficient reason to suggest that Nehemiah's action was a factor. A further merit of this argument is the closer link it suggests between Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God and the motif of exile and restoration as a framework for communicating and interpreting that message.

Among a variety of influences, we can suggest that Jesus apparently engaged the Nehemiah tradition, shaping and interpreting it in the light of his own particular agenda. In this sense, Jesus sought to fulfil Nehemiah's action by interpreting it in fresh ways. He provided an authoritative interpretation that subverted Nehemiah's own ideology and its remnants in the prevailing ideologies of Jesus' own day. Of particular importance is Jesus' 'analogical' and 'prophetic' use of Nehemiah's action.⁴⁹ Prophetically, Jesus points to what has and is being fulfilled in his ministry, even as his action provides an analogical contrast with Nehemiah's career. Jesus' action points to the fulfilment of covenant promises in the form of a restored and faithful Israel – a central theme in the ministry of Nehemiah. His action betokens restoration from exile in that the Temple and its cult are being restored as they were in the return under Nehemiah. In the same vein, Jesus' critique and judgement of the Temple also echoes Nehemiah.

Jesus' symbolic action may properly be understood as highlighting the need for reform at the heart of Israel's national life. That the locus for this call to reform and renewal is the Temple suggests strongly that the message should be read in terms of restoration from exile. To this extent, there is resonance between the actions of Jesus and Nehemiah. Yet Jesus' action is also fundamentally different from the order Nehemiah's

Testament, Jewish, and Christian Conceptions, ed., James M. Scott (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 221-237. Reference, 221.

⁴⁹ For a discussion of analogical and prophetic use of the Old Testament, see Evans, 'Old Testament', 579-590.

action suggests. Crucially, the contrast between them is found in Jesus' challenge to notions of Jewish national exclusiveness. In particular, the re-framing of the meaning of 'foreign incursion' radically redefines what threatens Israel's faithfulness to the covenant. As Wright suggests, Jesus' ministry redefines the enemy of Israel: 'The enemy from whom she needed rescuing, however, was not an outside enemy, on to whom she could project all her insecurities and ambiguities. To this extent his programme was revolutionary indeed, but revolutionary against Israel's own present leaders, real and self-appointed, rather than against Rome.'⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Wright, *Jesus*, 460. See also 459ff.