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Violence as Sign in the Fourth Gospel

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Abstract

The Gospel of John twins the history of Jesus' body with the history of the temple. On John's telling, intersections of those two violent histories are multiple. In the fourth Gospel, the violence directed against Jesus' body that unfolds in the passion narrative is catalyzed (on a narrative level) by Jesus' own physically enacted violence at the temple site. Jesus' action at the temple, his use of a whip to drive out his fellow Jews, is a form of symbolic communication. Jesus' appearance in the temple, whip in hand, functions as a violent epiphany, a moment of self-revelation akin to his self-revelation at Cana. Recognition of the temple incident as sign forces us to consider what, precisely, Jesus reveals about himself when he picks up a whip to clear men and goods from the space he calls his Father's house. As Roger Friedland and Richard D. Hecht argue, "Violence is a form of communication.... Symbolic violence, profanation, is used by members of one community... in order to mobilize their own communities, to make their definition of reality the dominant one.... By profaning the other's sacred place you make the other profane, an alien with no claim to possession of that space." By encoding violence as sign the Gospel of John not only records the history of violence but becomes an episode in that history.

Keywords

violence, symbolic communication, sign, temple, sacred space

In early Christian memory Jesus and Jerusalem were twin sites of violence. The Gospel of John, which I date to the end of the first century, was written while the stench of the flames that scarred Jerusalem in the Jewish War still evoked horror throughout the Roman Empire. According to the Fourth Gospel, Jesus' history of violence, a history that culminates in the violence of crucifixion, begins in Jerusalem when Jesus picks up a whip to clear the temple. The Gospel of John draws our attention to the parallelism between corporeal space and architectural

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space. Destroy this temple, Jesus says, and in three days I will raise it up. His interlocutors understand him to refer to the space of the great Jerusalem temple, but Jesus refers to the space of his own body (2:13-22). The violence narrated in the Fourth Gospel is thus inaugurated here, with Jesus' act of aggression in the temple and his gnomic remark regarding the destruction and restoration of temple space.

Writing about "The Politics of Sacred Place: Jerusalem's Temple Mount/*al-haram al-sharif*," Roger Friedland and Richard D. Hecht argue, "Political violence cannot be understood as simply the irrational acts of desperate men. Violence, no matter how distasteful we find it, is a normal part of political conflict and must be understood as such... What we have shown in the case of Jerusalem is that it is the same for symbolic violence."[1] Published in 1991, the article focuses on twentieth century developments in the history of violence associated with the Temple Mount/*haram al-sharif*. The article thus does not cover the symbolic visit of then-Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount/*haram al-sharif* in 2000, a visit made under heavy armed guard, nor does it mention the ensuing violence that came to be known as the *al-aqsa* intifada. What I find helpful in Friedland and Hecht's analysis is their critique of Mircea Eliade's resolutely ahistorical treatment of sacred space. For Eliade, sacred space is set apart from mundane space by hierophany. In sacred space, God—or divine power—breaks into ordinary place and time; sacred space is continuous with heavenly and chthonic realms rather than the terrestrial realm. Sacred places are qualitatively different from surrounding places, different from landscapes organized by profane human exchanges.[2] Friedland and Hecht challenge the story Eliade tells about sacred space. For Eliade, sacred space exists outside of history; for Friedland and Hecht, sacred space is thoroughly historicized. Friedland and Hecht argue that sacred space

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1) R. Friedland and R.D. Hecht, "The Politics of Sacred Place; Jerusalem's Temple Mount," in J. Scott and P. Simpson-Housley (eds.), *Sacred Places and Profane Spaces: Essays on the Geographics of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (New York: Greenwood, 1991), pp. 21-61 (55).

2) Mircea Eliade developed this position in a variety of writings, including *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History* (trans. W.R. Trask; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) and *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (trans. W.R. Trask; New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961).

is socially constituted, organized, and reproduced. The military power of the state, they write, "stands at the profane perimeter of any sacred space as the guarantor of its sanctity."[3]

How does this relate to the late first-century text in question, the Gospel of John? Like other products of early Christian memory-making, the Gospel of John interanimates a history of violence centered on Jesus with the history of violence at the site of the Jerusalem temple. As a result, for those steeped in a Johannine worldview, violence affecting the temple site may appear to be destined and inevitable, the sequela of an originary act of violence, rather than as the decision of human agents who are responsible for their acts of violence. Friedland and Hecht conclude,

> Violence is a form of communication .... Symbolic violence, profanation, is used by members of one community... in order to mobilize their own communities, to make their definition of reality the dominant one, to demonstrate the ultimate powerlessness of the other, and to redefine the other as... profane. By profaning the other's sacred place you make the other profane, an alien with no claim to possession of that space.[4]

On John's telling or any other, Jesus' action at the temple was hardly a credible attempt to reconfigure temple space and practice in any lasting way. Jesus' appearance in the temple, whip in hand, functions as a self-revelatory sign. The Fourth Gospel represents Jesus' action at the temple as an instance of symbolic violence, a form of communication by which Jesus attempted to make his definition of reality the dominant one, indeed, to displace the space of the Jerusalem temple with and by the space of his own body.

Bodies and Space

Histories of bodies propel histories of space. The space of the temple was defined and altered by the movements and perceptions of each body that worshipped there.[5] The temple was preeminently a place of

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[3] Friedland and Hecht, "The Politics of Sacred Place," p. 23.

[4] Friedland and Hecht, "The Politics of Sacred Place," p. 56.

[5] N.B.: Prayer and hymn-singing were not formally prescribed in temple worship. For an assessment of evidence related to temple worship and more broadly to forms of wor-

sacrifice. The corporal exchanges of sacrifice, the movements of humans executing animals and burning portions of animal flesh, visceral reactions to the odors of blood and of roasted meat, demarcated the temple precincts. We may also imagine the temple as a place of praise: bodies swayed, hands clapped, throats opened in song, and arms were extended to the heavens. The space of the temple was different for a person lifting his hands at night in the holy place and for a person with hands bloodied from slaughter, even though the same person might have both experiences. The space of the temple was moreover different for a priest engaged in slaughter and a pilgrim from a more rural area, a pilgrim like the rube from Galilee who is reported in synoptic tradition to have perched on the hill opposite the temple mount and marveled at the Herodian-sized stones of the temple (cf. Mark 13:1).

Henri Lefebvre, preeminent philosopher of space, refers to space as it is "directly *lived*" as "representational space." What is representational space? "Representational space is alive," Lefebvre tells us. "[I]t speaks. It has an affective kernel or centre: Ego, bed, bedroom, dwelling, house; or: square, church, graveyard. It embraces the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations, and thus immediately implies time."[6] In choosing to approach the temple with a whip in his hand, Jesus acted out of an ideologically charged perception of what the temple should be: the house of his father, not a house of commerce, a marketplace (*oikos emporiou*). As Francis J. Moloney writes, "The *hieron* is now called an *oikos*. It is not only an area where people gather to worship God (*hieron*), but a place among men and women where the God of Israel, whom Jesus calls 'my Father,' has his dwelling (*oikos*)."[7] But as Jesus' whip flicked across the tables of merchants and, John suggests, the backs of buyers, the representational spaces of habitués of the temple precincts were disrupted. The temple space was alive, alive for buyers and sellers and sinners and beggars and pilgrims, alive for the powerful and for the

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ship in the Second Temple period, see S.J.D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2nd edn, 2006), pp. 51-65.

6) H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (trans. D. Nicholson-Smith; Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 42.

7) F.J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (*Sacra Pagina* 4; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), p. 77.

desperate. To return to the formulation of Friedland and Hecht, "By profaning the other's sacred place you make the other profane, an alien with no claim to possession of that space."[8] Jesus seems to have sought to re-sacralize the site, yet from the lived perspectives of those worshipping on the site, Jesus' disruptive action would have functioned as a profanation of space, an attempt to render them alien from a familiar representational space.

In entering and altering the temple space Jesus differently affected the representational spaces of outsiders like Galileans and insiders like priests.[9] According to John, Jesus, brandishing a makeshift whip, strode into the midst of the moneychangers and minor merchants, scattering them and overturning their tables. Some decades later, the Roman army entered and altered this same space in a violent conflagration. Violence is spatial. We may speak of emotional violence, but when we do so we speak metaphorically. Although we may speak of a natural event like a hurricane or tornado as violent, violence better describes an intentional action or the effect of an intentional action, whether the actor is human or divine. Violence rearranges space, at least temporarily. Whip in hand, Jesus briefly reconfigured the space of the temple. In the aftermath of the razing of the Roman temple Christian memory connected the story of Jesus' body to the history of the temple. A history of a body propelled a particular telling of the history of a sacred space.

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8) Friedland and Hecht, "The Politics of Sacred Place," p. 56.

9) B.J. Malina and R.L. Rohrbaugh write that temples in the Mediterranean world, including the Jerusalem temple, "were personified and viewed as moral persons. They had ascribed honor just as did any family or individual and could be insulted, cursed, hated, and dishonored. By dishonoring the temple, one dishonored all of its personnel" (*Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998], p. 79). Although they do not rely on the vocabulary of representational space, their characterization of temple spaces as "moral persons" evokes Lefebvre's characterization of lived space, representational space, as alive. In their analysis of the temple as a locus of exploitation, Malina and Rohrbaugh do not consider whether lower-status persons from Galilee or more distant lands who had pinched together funds to make the Passover pilgrimage, persons who, on Malina and Rohrbaugh's account, would have been exhilarated by an experience of *communitas* (cf. pp. 75-77), would have felt dishonored by Jesus' aggressive actions.

Jesus with a Whip

In the synoptic Gospels, the incident where Jesus overturns the tables of moneychangers and merchants in the temple intensifies tension already existing between Jesus and the authorities. While Jesus' action in the temple motivates the authorities to employ violence to rid themselves of Jesus and the threat they perceive him to represent, by the time the incident occurs Jesus has had a series of run-ins with authoritative figures who oppose him and would like him out of the way. Not so in the Gospel of John. The Gospel of John reports Jesus' action at the temple before reporting any disputes involving Jesus. We have had a hint of conflict with the delegation of priests and scribes sent by the Jerusalem authorities to interrogate John the Baptist. Who are you, they demand, and why do you baptize? Warren Carter emphasizes the hostile tone of the exchange. "This scene," Carter writes, "creates the impression that the Jerusalem leaders exercise constant surveillance, that they spy on, and are antagonistic toward, figures whom they have not authorized."[10] Carter comments that the "ominous tones" present in the interrogation of the Baptist "are intensified" in Jesus' action in the Temple.[11] He does not comment, however, on who is responsible for that intensification of ominous tones. Jesus, not the Jerusalem hierarchy, sets in motion his own collision course with the temple authorities.

A quick review of the few earlier scenes in the Fourth Gospel establishes the peculiar and disruptive character of what Jesus' followers take to be a display of zeal on his part. The Baptist's acknowledgement of Jesus as the Lamb of God marks Jesus' arrival on the scene. Jesus calls disciples, including Andrew, Simon Peter, Philip and Nathaniel. At his mother's prompting, Jesus turns water into wine at a wedding in Cana. Linking self-revelatory sign to the belief of the disciples, the evangelist comments, "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him" (2:11). After this, John writes, Jesus goes with his mother, brothers, and his new disciples

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[10] W. Carter, *John: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), p. 30.

[11] Carter, *John*, p. 31.

to the town of Capernaum for a few days, an unexplained interlude in a beach town on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.[12] From there Jesus travels to the pilgrim festival of Passover in Jerusalem. Whether he travels alone or with his newly-acquired followers is textually unspecified. When Jesus arrives in Jerusalem he finds moneychangers and sellers of livestock in the temple. He devises a whip and drives them all out of the temple. He also overturns the tables of the moneychangers along with their coins. Challenged for a sign of his authority by those whom John calls "the Jews," Jesus says, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." John glosses, "He was speaking of the temple of his body" and adds that Jesus' disciples later interpret Jesus' words in light of his death and resurrection.

Commentators on the scene often note that, unlike in the synoptic Gospels, in the Fourth Gospel Jesus' action in the temple does not move the authorities to conspire to kill him. However, in the Gospel of John, Jesus' action in the temple is the first reported dispute between Jesus and Jewish authorities, initiating the long series of charged encounters that culminate in the decision of the authorities to execute him. In the Gospel of John, the raising of Lazarus is the event that immediately precipitates the conspiracy to execute Jesus. After Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, the Pharisees and chief priests convene the council. Their fear is that the signs performed by Jesus will lead the Romans to destroy their holy place and their nation. The history of violence in the Fourth Gospel continues to intercalate violence implicating Jesus with violence implicating the temple.

Mark Matson acknowledges the importance of the temple incident to the structure of John's Gospel. He writes that the temple incident, which inaugurates Jesus' public ministry, "is also the beginning of opposition by 'the Jews,' a motif that dominates the structure of the F[ourth] Gospel." Matson lists a number of incidents that ensue: Jesus' return to Jerusalem for a festival that concludes with "the Jews" seeking to kill him; Jesus' return to the temple for the Feast of Tabernacles, a visit that closes with a near-arrest at the temple; and Jesus' escape from stoning after he participates in the Jerusalem celebration of the Feast of Dedi-

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[12] See C.W. Hedrick, "Vestigial Scenes in John: Settings Without Dramatic Function," *NovT* 47 (2005), pp. 354-66.

cation.[13] Matson concludes, "*It is difficult to imagine the Fourth Gospel in even an approximate reflection of its current form without the Temple Incident being located near the beginning of the story.*"[14] While Matson thus acknowledges the importance of the temple incident in precipitating the collision course between Jesus and the authorities, he does not comment on the source of the conflict. In the encounter between John the Baptist and the emissaries of the temple authorities, the emissaries travel to the Baptist's turf where they question him aggressively. Not so with the Johannine temple incident. With no reported provocation, Jesus enters the temple precincts and physically forces a reconfiguration, albeit a temporary reconfiguration, of the people and animals there. The violent opposition to Jesus that is born with the temple incident and intensifies over the course of the Gospel is precipitated by Jesus' own act of violence.

In an article entitled "John's Account of Jesus' Destruction in the Temple: Violent or Nonviolent?" Mark Bredin raises the question of whether Jesus' deployment of a whip to clear the temple "harmonizes with the Jesus who teaches love for neighbors and enemies alike."[15] Bredin maintains that the temple is a locus of violence, a house built on plunder and sustained by oppressive distinctions between elites and those they exploited. He concludes that because Jesus' action is a "critique of temple as locus of violence" [44], Jesus' action is therefore "exemplary and courageous. Jesus is the non-violent revolutionary of peace par excellence" [50]. Bredin thus implicitly assumes that because the temple is a site of violence and source of exploitation Jesus' action should be exempt from denomination as an act of violence. Is this the case? Is an attack on a house of violence an act of non-violence?

For a perhaps surprisingly relevant parallel, we might turn to an opinion piece in the New York Times co-authored by Wesley Clark, the former chief commander of NATO forces. Clark and his co-author Kal

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[13] M.A. Matson, "The Temple Incident: An Integral Element in the Fourth Gospel's Narrative," in R.T. Fortna and T. Thatcher (eds.), *Jesus in Johannine Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 145-53 (150).

[14] Matson, "Temple Incident," p. 152. (Sentence is italicized in Matson's article.)

[15] M.R.J. Bredin, "John's Account of Jesus' Demonstration in the Temple: Violent or Non-violent?," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 33.2 (Summer 2003), pp. 44-50 (44).

Raustiala argue that terrorists should be categorized as criminals rather than combatants. Combatants, they note, are permitted by international law to kill military personnel and attack military sites in the conduct of war. "Labeling terrorists as combatants also leads to this paradox," Clark and Raustiala write.

> [W]hile the deliberate killing of civilians is never permitted in war, it is legal to target a military installation or asset. Thus the attack by Al Qaeda on the destroyer Cole in Yemen in 2000 would be allowed, as well as attacks on command and control centers like the Pentagon. For all these reasons, the more appropriate designation for terrorists is not "unlawful combatant" but the one long used by the United States: criminal.[16]

We may ask whether violence is ever justified and, if we agree that it is, debate justifications for violence. Clark and Raustiala, for example, list two factors taken into account by international conventions legitimating violence. They argue that for military violence to be considered legitimate the target must be military and the violent actors must be soldiers or the equivalent. Despite the presence of Roman soldiers, the Jerusalem temple was not a military installation. Nonetheless, in assessing John's version of Jesus' action in the temple we may similarly factor in both the legitimacy of the target and Jesus' authority to act. Justified violence—even if one considers violence justifiable—does not equal non-violence. While one may conclude or presume that the Johannine Jesus is authorized to act as he does, that the temple is a legitimate target, and that Jesus' antagonistic sweep of the temple is therefore justified, when Jesus picks up a whip and drives out cattle and sheep and merchants and moneychangers, he is not an exemplar of non-violence.

In general, commentators on the Johannine temple scene do not question the implications of Jesus wielding a whip. Raymond Brown mentions in passing the "sweeping violence" of Jesus' action in the Temple, but only in the context of considering whether Jesus' intention was to protest abuses of the sacrificial system or to protest the sacrificial

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16) W.K. Clark and K. Raustiala, "Why Terrorists Aren't Soldiers," *New York Times* August 8, 2007.

system itself.[17] Moloney characterizes Jesus' action in the Temple as "aggressive."[18] Rudolf Schnackenburg notes a contrast between Jesus' self-revelation at Cana, at the joyous occasion of a wedding, and his self-revelation in the temple, which is, Schnackenburg observes, "a serious conflict, full of menace."[19] Schnackenburg also observes that no opposition is roiled by Jesus' action.[20] Whence the menace? Whereas in many Gospel narratives Jesus is menaced, in the Johannine temple scene, Jesus menaces the sellers and moneychangers who scramble to escape the flick of his whip.

Discomfort with the violence of the scene may be evident in the desire of some translators to limit Jesus' whip work to four-legged animals. While the scene includes violence against both animals and property, what is more jarring is the violence directed at humans. The NRSV translates 2:14-15: "In the temple, he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle," a translation that could be taken to imply that "all," *pantas*, refers exclusively to the sheep and the cattle. Although the NRSV does not include a footnote to suggest an alternate translation, the majority of commentators understand *pantas* to agree with the preceding references to livestock vendors and moneychangers. Here as elsewhere the evangelist would not win high marks in a course on Greek prose composition. As Howard K. Moulton comments in a 1967 translation note, with either translation "the grammar needs stretching a little."[21] Although Moulton concedes the translation is not crystal-clear, he believes the evidence tilts toward associating *pantas* with the sellers and moneychangers. He writes, "The normal interpretation of *pantas* would be that it refers to the preceding masculines [those engaging in trade at the temple], and not to the succeeding sheep (neuter) and oxen

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17) R.E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (2 vols.; *Anchor Bible* 29; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), vol. 1, p. 122.

18) Moloney, *Gospel of John*, p. 77.

19) R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John* (3 vols.; New York, Crossroad, 1990), vol. 1, p. 343.

20) Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, vol. 1, p. 347.

21) H.K. Moulton, "*Pantas* in John 2:15," *Bible Translator* 18 (1967), pp. 126-27 (127).

(masc.). It might be possible to refer it loosely to the sheep and oxen, but the normal gender for such a combination would be neutral."[22] Brown translates, "In the temple precincts he came upon people engaged in selling oxen, sheep, and doves, and others seated, changing coins. So he made a [kind of] whip out of cords and drove the whole pack of them out of the temple area with their sheep and oxen."[23] Brown's colloquial translation for *pantas*, his homely "whole pack of them," seems to me to capture the mood of the scene as well as a bit of the ambiguity in the phrasing.

Bredin argues for "sheep and oxen" as a preferred referent. As Moulton comments, a case can be made for this translation; Bredin's translation, however, is explicitly shaped by his desire to deny the characterization of Jesus' deployment of a whip as violent. Bredin argues that if Jesus had driven out the sellers, he would have raised hackles among temple, a reaction not evident in the Johannine account. But can we imagine that anyone with the power to retaliate would respond with equanimity to an attack on livestock? The restrained reaction to the disruption of commerce might suggest that the sellers of livestock who made a living in the temple were not especially influential with the temple hierarchy. On this reading, Jesus does not raise his hand against the high priests or the Sadducees but against small-scale merchants who lack the authority even to punish a man who interrupts their transactions by attacking their merchandise.

The first time we see the whip, its handle is in Jesus' hand. Later, of course, Jesus stands at the other end of a whip when he is flogged by Pilate. John tells us that Jesus makes a whip of cords. The Greek word *phrangelion* is used for the kind of whip that in Latin, as in English, is called a *flagellum*, a vicious multi-stranded whip set with lacerating bits of metal or bone. Following a variant manuscript tradition, Brown translates, "Jesus made a [kind of] whip out of cords."[24] Presumably Jesus' whip of cords is characterized as a *phrangelion* because of its multiple strands. Loosely following Brown, we might translate, "Jesus made a [kind of] flagellum of cords," as Jesus would not have gone to the

22) Moulton, "*Pantas* in John 2:15," pp. 126-27.
23) Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, vol. 1, p. 114.
24) Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, vol. 1, p. 114.

trouble of braiding spikes into the whip. Nonetheless, we should pause to note that although we are more accustomed to thinking of whips slicing Jesus' back into ribbons, Jesus as the lamb-like victim of violence, the whip first touches Jesus' skin when it is nestled in the palm of his hand. Jesus does not enter the temple complex as a lamb. Rather, with his improvised flagellum he scatters the lambs and the doves and their sellers.

John reports that, in the midst of Jesus' trial before Pilate, "Pilate took Jesus and scourged him" (19:1). Stephen D. Moore calls our attention to the peculiarity of the phrase, which the NRSV translates, "Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged." Moore summarizes scholarly understanding of the verse: "So far as I have been able to ascertain," he writes, "even the most encyclopedic Johannine commentaries, for all their exhaustive industry, fail to register Pilate's direct agency in the scourging as even an easily dismissible interpretation."[25] It's somehow easier to imagine Jesus than Pilate with a whip in hand. While not impossible that a Roman prefect would pick up a whip to strike a slave or other low-ranking person, a purposeful scourging of a prisoner would typically be ordered rather than executed by a person in authority. In a Roman context, the bodies of lower status persons were systematically vulnerable to violence in ways that the bodies of higher status persons were not. Moreover, higher status persons protected their own dignity by employing slaves and other low-status persons for actual execution of violent acts. A vignette recorded in Aulus Gellius's *Attic Nights* depicts Plutarch watching as a slave is whipped. The slave, privy to Plutarch's moral teaching, charges Plutarch with violating his own precepts against acting in anger. "Not at all," Plutarch replies, "Is my face red, am I breathing heavily? Carry on," he instructs the slave performing the beating (1.26). Part of the diminution of dignity associated with physical execution of violence is the degradation of being carried away by passion.[26] One reason it is difficult to imagine Pilate lifting a whip against Jesus is that Pilate exhibits no other signs of rage.

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[25] S.D. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonial Studies and New Testament Studies* (*Bible in the Modern World* 12; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), p. 58.

[26] For invaluable context, see W.V. Harris's magisterial *Restraining Rage: The Ideology of Anger Control in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

Although John does not state that Jesus is driven by rage as he empties the temple of merchants and moneychangers, he does tell us that Jesus is driven by passion, or at least so Jesus' friends believe. His actions prompt his followers to recollect the sentiment of the psalmist, "Zeal for my father's house will consume me" (cf. Ps. 69:9). Is this the first time Jesus lifts a whip? John does not speculate on Jesus' ur-history of violence, other occasions when Jesus gripped a whip in his fist. I suggest that Jesus has some familiarity with whips because he seems to use one effectively to achieve his end of disrupting temple commerce. The whip may be flagellum-like rather than a flagellum, but the man who lifts it knows what he's doing. John does not suggest that Jesus holds the whip uncomfortably, flicking it impotently as he is dragged away by guards. Neither John nor the Johannine Jesus recoils from the use of violence.

Violence as Sign

Jesus drives away the sellers of animals and the animals themselves, but he does not drive away his followers. John does not report the disciples journeying with Jesus from Capernaum to Jerusalem, nor are they explicitly described as present in the temple, but their presence is implied by their reported reaction to Jesus' words and deeds.[27] When Jesus leaves Jerusalem for the desert, his disciples are by his side. More importantly, Jesus' violent display seems to attract new followers. Immediately following the temple episode John records, "When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs he was doing" (2:23) I argue that Jesus' Jerusalem signs include the temple incident and that many believed in Jesus' name because of their attraction to his violent behavior. As with the Cana

[27] As Jesus demands that merchants clear the temple of avian merchandise, he refers to the temple as his father's house, a pronouncement that prompts his disciples to recall the words of the psalmist with the phrase, "Zeal for your house will consume me" (2:16-17), a sequence that suggests the disciples are present in the temple. For an alternate view, see Hedrick, "Vestigial Scenes in John," p. 355. I agree with Hedrick that vv. 21-22 do not *necessarily* presuppose the presence of the disciples in the temple. Their presumed presence or absence does not affect my argument.

incident where Jesus turns water into wine, John's narration of the temple incident implicitly links self-revelatory sign and the belief of followers, or at least, of would-be followers.

In the Gospel of John, signs are typically either miracles or the kinds of proofs a skeptic might require. C.H. Dodd argues that the word "sign" is also apposite for Jesus' action in the temple. Brown disagrees. He writes, "The fact that the cleansing of the Temple is followed by ii 23, which mentions that Jesus did many *signs* in Jerusalem, does not really prove that the cleansing is a sign."[28] Brown argues that because John 4:54 refers to the healing of an official's son as Jesus' second sign, Jesus' epiphany in the temple cannot be enumerated among the signs. (There may be a geographic restriction to that enumeration, that is, signs associated with Cana.) Brown's verdict is flawed. The logical problem presented by the allusion to a second sign in 4:54 is neither created nor exacerbated by understanding the temple incident as a sign, as 2:23 refers to Jerusalem witnesses to multiple signs and in 3:2 Nicodemus refers to the signs Jesus performs. Dodd, I think, is right. After Jesus empties the merchant stalls with his whips, the Jews ask him for a sign, but his questioners have ironically missed the point. The emptying of the temple is itself the sign, a sign whose deeper meaning Jesus unfolds with his assertion that he has can rebuild the temple, once destroyed, in three days. Dodd writes, "In the words 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up', Jesus is not promising a significant event yet to come, but inviting His questioners to see in the actual occurrence of the Cleansing of the Temple the *semeion* [sign] they desire."[29] Dodd's definition is consistent with Dorothy Lee's more recent assessment that Johannine signs are defined less by their miraculous quality than by their Christological significance: "The 'signs' function as symbols, taking the reader from the material to the symbolic, from flesh to glory, transfiguring the *sarx* to radiate the presence and power of divine glory."[30] Although Lee does not number the temple incident

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[28] Brown, *Gospel according to John*, vol. 1, p. 528.

[29] C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 301. For a more recent assessment of the Temple incident as a sign, see Matson, "Temple Incident," p. 149.

[30] D. Lee, *Flesh and Glory: Symbol, Gender, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (New York: Crossroad, Herder and Herder, 2002), p. 37.

among Jesus' signs, Jesus' cryptic interpretation of his action provokes the reader to move from the material to the symbolic, from body to flesh, pointing to Jesus' body as the locus of divine glory.

Acknowledging the temple incident as a sign helps us situate the incident in the Gospel's unfolding history of violence. John reports that many in Jerusalem came to believe in Jesus because they witnessed his signs; that report immediately follows the temple incident, which I have argued should be considered a sign. Moreover, John details no other signs associated with Jesus' first foray to Jerusalem. What about the temple incident attracts followers? Perhaps these would-be followers share Jesus' implicit critique of the temple, whatever the nature of that critique might be. (Jesus' injunction not to treat his father's house as a house of trade provides a clue, however opaque, regarding John's understanding of that critique.) Perhaps they attach eschatological significance to his action. Or perhaps they are just following the man with a whip. Violence can be attractive. Jesus keeps a wary distance from these new followers. According to the Gospel, "Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people" (2:24). Not even the disciples are in a position to understand the Christological significance of the temple incident until after the resurrection. Perhaps what Jesus knows about the would-be Jerusalem disciples is that they are the kind of people for whom violence is a lure.

"Destroy this temple," Jesus says in Jerusalem, "And I will rebuild it" (2:19). John glosses: He was speaking of the temple of his own body. The readers of John know that the Jerusalem temple was destroyed in a martial conflagration. They proclaim that Jesus, executed in Jerusalem at the behest of religious authorities, was raised from the dead. The history of one space, the temple, ends violently; the history of another space, Jesus' body, is transformed.[31] Curiously and explicitly, John insists

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[31] In John, Jesus' resurrected body, which passes through walls but retains the mark of nails, possesses a curious spatiality. Karmen MacKendrick highlights the spatial oddness of Jesus' wounded post-Easter body in Johannine representation: Thomas "extends his hand *into* the wounds in that body, the gaps, the fissures, the spaces of absence around which that body is risen... As if this were not odd enough, we remind ourselves that this is the *risen* body—surely, we think, a body that could rise from the dead could also heal? Why that is, do these wounds remain at all ..." (*Word Made Skin: Figuring Language at the Surface of Flesh* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2004], p. 33).

later in the Gospel that these two histories are entwined. After the raising of Lazarus, the chief priests and Pharisees convene the Sanhedrin. They are panicked. "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation" (11:47-48). But why should the raising of Lazarus attract the attention of the Romans to the holy place, that is, the temple? The raising of Lazarus was only the most recent sign performed by Jesus in the Jerusalem vicinity. The first of those signs was Jesus' whip-wielding outburst at the temple. The actions set in place by the Sanhedrin are designed to make sure that Jesus cannot continue performing signs, but the Johannine audience knows that the Roman army nonetheless destroyed the temple.

Moore has drawn attention to the enigma implicit in Caiaphas' prophetic reply to the Sanhedrin, "You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed" (11:50). Moore comments, "[T]he 'nation', epitomized by its sacred city and 'holy place', *was* eventually destroyed by the Romans, notwithstanding the consignment of Jesus to the Romans by the local Judean leadership."[32] He goes on to note the Johannine spiritualization of Caphaias' prophecy: Jesus is to die for both the nation and the scattered children of God. But nonetheless, the fear expressed by the Sanhedrin precisely presages the events of the Jewish War, the destruction of the sacred place of Jewish cult and the resulting loss of a political center for the nation. This curious passage links the death of Jesus and the destruction of the temple. The violent sequence set in motion by Jesus' violent epiphany in the temple leads not only to his crucifixion but to the destruction of the holy place, the Jerusalem temple, two histories of violence that in John's telling teeter from human responsibility to prophesied and inevitable sequelae of Jesus' inaugural act of violence.

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[32] Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, p. 67.

Histories of Violence

The Gospel of John twins the history of Jesus' body with the history of the temple. On John's telling, intersections of those two violent histories are multiple. I have focused our attention first on spatial dimensions of Jesus' action at the temple, in particular, on his use of his body to reconfigure physical arrangements at the temple. I have argued that, in the Fourth Gospel, the violence directed against Jesus' body that unfolds in the passion narrative is catalyzed (on a narrative level) by Jesus' own physically enacted violence at the temple site. I have thus drawn attention to John's motif of Jesus' body as the replacement or completion of the temple, which had of course been destroyed by the time the Gospel was written.[33] I have argued against interpretations of the scene that minimize its violence, violence that, within the narrative structure of the Fourth Gospel, erupts without motivation. Finally, I have insisted on identification of Jesus' action at the temple, his use of a whip to drive out his fellow Jews, as a form of symbolic communication.[34] Jesus' appearance in the temple, whip in hand, functions as a violent epiphany, a moment of self-revelation akin to his self-revelation at Cana.

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[33] While an extended argument to address the important question of whether John treats Jesus' body as the replacement or completion of the temple falls outside the scope of the present essay, a few additional words about my own understanding are in order. I understand John 2:23 to suggest that Jesus is a replacement or substitution for the temple. I nonetheless believe that this reading is and should be theologically problematic for contemporary Christians who are rightly concerned that the theology of supersessionism has so long contributed to Christian prejudice and violence against Jews.

[34] Another major question outside the scope of the present essay is whether Jesus' action at the temple is precipitated by a socioeconomic critique, as Carter and Bredin aver. I find their interpretations attractive on ideological grounds. I would like to agree. However, in reading the Fourth Gospel I do not find evidence that the evangelist presents Jesus' conflict with the temple authorities as motivated by Jesus' concern for impoverished or otherwise exploited populations. Malina and Rohrbaugh write, "Whether temple trade was dishonest or not has often been debated by modern scholars, but the different terms used in Mark and John would have been synonymous in the minds of ancient peasants. For many peasants, *all* traders or merchants were dishonorable extortioners and presumed to be dishonest" (*Social-Science Commentary*, p. 74). Perhaps, but John provides no textual clues to suggest this is his point of view.

I agree with Matson, who argues that John's placement of the temple incident at the outset of Jesus' public ministry is critical for understanding Johannine narrative. Throughout the Fourth Gospel Jesus engenders suspicion and hostility from religious leaders. While there are many reasons for that suspicion and hostility, surely Jesus' initial appearance wielding a homemade flagellum is among those reasons. Recognition of the temple incident as a sign forces us to consider what, precisely, Jesus reveals about himself when he picks up a whip to clear men and goods from the space he calls his Father's house. I close by returning to the words of Friedland and Hecht: "Symbolic violence, profanation, is used by members of one community... in order to mobilize their own communities, to make their definition of reality the dominant one, to demonstrate the ultimate powerlessness of the other, and to redefine the other as... profane. By profaning the other's sacred place you make the other profane, an alien with no claim to possession of that space."[35] I am concerned here not with the question of whether Jesus' clearing of the temple was an act of profanation (or even whether we can ascribe that act to the lifetime of the historical Jesus, although I would argue we can). Rather, I am arguing that John's inscription of that episode as a momentous sign in Jesus' career is itself an act of profanation. By encoding violence as sign the Gospel of John not only records the history of violence but becomes an episode in that history.

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[35] Friedland and Hecht, "The Politics of Sacred Place," p. 56.

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