

Jesus' Cleansing of The Temple in Mark 11:15-17: A Call for Socio-Religious Transformation in Nigeria

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Abstract- *The print and electronic media are ablaze daily on the vulnerable state of the Nigerian socio-religious spheres. The Nigerian society is characterized with myriads of activities which regard less on the dignity and value of human existence. Activities such as hostage taking, human trafficking and ritual killing, intimidation and oppression by the elites and government officials and injustice are some among the woes witnessed in the Nigerian society. In the religious spheres, there are overt cases of fraud, ethical misconduct, commercialization of the gospel and exploitation of the hard-earned resources of religious worshippers by their religious leaders through well-orchestrated means. The continuous occurrence of these inhuman activities in the Nigerian socio-religious space results in chaos, jeopardy and anarchy in the socio-religious strata. How can the Nigerian socio-religious strata regain their respect, value and dignity from the enumerated man's inhumanity to man? Were there indices of the aforementioned in the New Testament time? What are the various ways through which religious leaders exploit their worshippers in the modern time? What proactive steps should be taken to salvage the deplorable state of the Nigerian socio-religious spheres? It is within this context that this paper examines Jesus' cleansing of the temple in Mark 11:15-17. The paper employs the phenomenological and historical-critical methods and maintains that the Nigerian socio-religious space can be a receptive ground for all walks of life if those who live and work in them respect the dignity and value of every human being, love themselves and their neighbour and keep to social and religious ethos and also adhere to moral and spiritual etiquette. The paper recommends equal treatment of all human beings irrespective of tribe, gender or religion.*

Indexed Terms- *Ethical Misconduct, Exploitation, Gender, Temple cleansing, Transformation*

I. INTRODUCTION

There is no society or religion which operates in a vacuum. Every society and religion have their ethics, creeds and theology which is believed to be the guiding principle of such society or religion in matters of morality, spirituality and liturgy. Nigeria as a nation constitutionally recognizes three religions which are namely Christianity, Islam and African traditional religion. Each of these religions teaches and promotes values and dignity for human existence. However, in recent times the Nigerian socio-religious space is daily threatened on the electronic and print media on some social and religious activities which are contrary to the norm of the society and established religion. Activities such as hostage taking, human trafficking and killing for ritual purposes, intimidation and oppression of the poor by the elites and government officials, injustice, commercialization of the gospel, fraud and economic exploitation are few among the deeds which describes the Nigerian socio-religious circle. Thus, the need to purge the socio-religious spheres of these activities against humanity in recent times are germane. Consequently, this paper examines Jesus' cleansing of the temple which is expressed in the synoptic gospels (Mark 11: 15-17; Matthew 21:12-17; Luke 19:45-48) and fourth gospel (John 2:13-22) but with emphasis from the Markan perspective. The paper answers questions such as; What was the motive behind Jesus' action for cleansing the temple? Did the temple in the time of Jesus serve and achieve the purpose for which it was established? Were the aforementioned activities against humanity in recent times prevalent in the New Testament times of Jesus? If the answer is in the affirmative, how were they addressed by Jesus? Contextually, how can Jesus' action in the temple be appropriated in the Nigerian socio-religious strata by Christians and national leaders for a better Nigeria? This issues are germane to this paper. The paper employs the phenomenological and historical-critical methods. Phenomenology is a composite word from

two Greek nouns; *phenomenon* meaning something seen and *logos* meaning word/study/enquiry. Hence, phenomenology refers primarily to the study of that which is seen (Christopher I. Ejizu and Julia F. Awajiusuk 33). Thus, examples in the Nigerian socio-religious spheres which conforms to the attitudes of the Jews in Jesus' time will be expressed in this paper. On the other hand, historical-critical method of biblical exegesis involves asking and answering the following historically based questions: Who is the author of the text? What is his historical background? Is the attributed author the actual author; or is the work pseudepigraphic? When, where, and under what historical circumstances was the work written? Who were the original recipients? Where did they live? (Jacob K. Ayantayo 121). The Historical-Critical method is necessary to understand the historical setting, the cultural environment, the literary forms, and the specific language of a text if the interpretation and application of such biblical text must be done accurately.

II. THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE TEMPLE

The temple in Jerusalem was the central point for the worship of God by the Jews in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament period. The first temple in Jerusalem known as Solomon's temple which is believed to be magnificent was built by Solomon's son of King David a thousand years before the inauguration of the Christian era (1 Kings 6:1) but was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 B.C when Nebuchadnezzar and his army captured the city and took captives the Jewish inhabitants and their treasuries to Babylon. After their return from Babylonian exile in 537 B.C, the second temple (also known as Zerubbabel Temple) erection commenced under Zerubbabel leadership by the decree of Cyrus the King (Ezra 6:2-5) and was completed in 515 B.C., the restored temple was far less resplendent than Solomon's temple (Ezra 3:12). The second century witnessed the desecration of the second temple by Antiochus Epiphanes who gaining possession of the city by treachery sacked and burned it, plundered the temple and massacred many of the inhabitants. Emmanuel Alana remarks that Antiochus Epiphanes set up an altar to the Greek god Zeus, where the Jewish altar of burnt offering stood. He also went further to

sacrifice swine on the altar thereby defiling the temple. Antiochus Epiphanes action led Judas Maccabeus to constitute his people in revolt and by 165 B.C the temple was recovered, cleansed and restored to normal worship (263). In order to gain favour with the Jews, King Herod the Great decided to undertake the rebuilding of the Jewish temple. This third temple also known as Herod's Temple was a remodelling and beautifying of the second temple built by Zerubbabel. The third temple commenced in 20 A.D and was finished in 65 A.D, a period of about forty years though the Roman authority destroyed it by 70 A.D. Herod's Temple was a multifaceted building which is made up of four courts namely: the court of the priest, court of the men of Israel, court of women and court of the gentiles. The court of the priest held the altar upon which burnt offerings were sacrificed. The court of the men of Israel accommodated the Jews while their burnt offerings were being consumed on the Altar. Similarly, the temple worshippers gathered here on great events, and from it, offerings were handed by the worshippers to the priest. The court of women held the chests for the receiving of offerings and was often known as treasury (Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:4). The court of the gentiles or non-Jews provided access to all peoples including women. Non-Jews and women could walk within it but they were prohibited to go any further than the outer court. They were excluded from entering into any of the inner courts, and warning signs in Greek and Latin languages were placed around the temple that gave warning that the penalty for such trespass was death. In the court of the gentile provisions were made for folds containing cattle, sheep, lamb and birds for the purpose of sacrifice. In addition, provision was made for money changers in this part of the court to supply Jewish coins' exchange for foreign money so that worshippers and pilgrims to the temple might pay their temple taxes. It was at this part of the temple Jesus drove out the sheep and oxen, those that bought and sold and overthrew the table of the money changers and seats of them that sold doves (Chukwuma C. Oparah 90-91).

The Old Testament account reveals that after king Josiah reformed the religion of the Israelites in 623 BC, it was established and maintained that sacrifices were always offered only at the Jerusalem temple (2 Kings 23; 22:8-13; 2 Chron. 34:14-20). This practices and requirements of offering sacrifices were equally

carried over into the New Testament age. Thus, worshippers who came from all walks of life and from different countries to Jerusalem to observe the Jewish religious feasts such as feast of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacle were required to obtain their sacrificial victims in Jerusalem. Besides, the worshippers were required to pay their taxes (Exodus 30:11-16) as they come to Jerusalem in a particular kind of coin known as the Jewish currency in return for the Greek and Roman money which could only be accessed in the Jerusalem temple, this was to avoid profaning the temple with currencies with idolatrous images. As a result of these rule, those who sold doves and other animals used for sacrifices were always seen around the temple premise especially within the court of the Gentiles. N.C. Ogbochie remarks that because the sacrificial animals must be without blemish, the temple inspectors must always find reasons to eliminate the sacrificial victims of the people which were purchased outside the temple. Thus, the temple worshippers were compelled to purchase from the temple stores even twice the cost price of the sacrificial animals. This boom in business and exploitation resulted in the Sons of Anna's and Caiaphas the high priest to establish for themselves shops for money changers and sales of birds and animals in the court of the Gentiles (11). Murray Janson attesting to this view remarks that because Anna the high priest and those from the priestly family had a fat share in the temple revenue, people who sold in the temple operated under the aegis of the high priest thus, they allowed the booths for money changers, doves, birds, sheep and oxen to be displayed even inside the temple (23). This attitude of the high priest and all others who sold at the temple led to Jesus' reaction of cleansing of the temple with whip which forms the main thrust of the next sub-theme.

III. JESUS' PURPOSE OF CLEANSING THE TEMPLE

As stated earlier, the temple was the focal point for the worship of God by the Jews. Jews from the land of Roman empire and beyond who went to Jerusalem temple to observe the annual feasts of the Jews were required to pay half a shekel temple tax per annum at the feast of Passover (Exodus 30:11-16). Janson avers that it was not a large amount imposed for the work of the Lord in a year since it was less than two day's

wages. But in the Roman era there was a sting in the stipulation that the money had to be in the temple shekel since heathen coinage bearing heathen engravings and images which was in general distribution in Jerusalem was not permitted as votive offering. This of course, posed a problem for the people, so the temple authorities obliged in a special way by providing booths with money changers to enable temple worshipper exchange their local currencies to the Jerusalem money also known as Tyrian coins and also purchase their sacrificial victims from the temple (22-23). These exercises which were profitable to the money changers and all those including the then high priest Anna who secured business ventures at the court of the Gentiles brought about huge commercialization, much confusion, noise, contention and enabled exploitation to the detriment of the poor which was exceedingly improper in the temple. Alana notes that the temple was considered as the house of God and as a house of prayers and meditation. The temple harboured the priests and there the priests offered sacrifices upon the altar and prayers for the good of the citizens, for the remission of their sins and blessings of the land and people, individually and corporately were made (266). Jesus having access into this temple area swiftly denounced the buying and selling and exploitative activities witnessed in the court of the Gentiles. The Markan narrative opines Jesus saying "... is it not written, my house shall be called a house of prayer? A reference to the prophecy of Isaiah 56:17 which reveals that the temple of God shall be a place where people from every race including non-Jews could come and have access for the true worship of God. "But you have made it a den for robbers" (Mk. 11:17). Victor Babajide Cole asserts that in calling it a den of robbers, Jesus was quoting Jeremiah 7:11, where God denounced insincere worship which had lost sight of its original intention. He maintains that those who had endorsed the temple to be used in such way were no better than robbers (1191). Jostein Adna remarks that the interpretation of Jesus' temple Act falls between two schools of thought namely the non-eschatological and eschatological interpretations. While in the non-eschatological interpretation, Adna states that some scholars have related the accusation that the temple has been made a den of robbers to allege deplorable conditions of mismanagement in the temple; the reason why Jesus attacked the dove sellers and the money changers is

supposed to be exploitative prices and charges to the detriment of the poor citizens in particular. Another thought assumed is that Jesus reacted against the usage of the Tyrian coins, with images of the head of Melkart on the obverse and of an eagle on the reverse, as a desecration of the holy temple. The eschatological interpretation holds that Jesus's temple act was an urgent call for the people to repent and become his disciples. Symbolically, by his presence the kingdom of God has been established denoting the end of traditional sacrifices for the atonement of sins in the temple. Moreover, Jesus's temple act expresses his conviction that the end of the traditional temple cult had come, both individual offerings, typified by the doves, and the collective cult on behalf of the whole Jewish people, financed by the temple tax (949-950). Cletus C. Orgu recounting the views of most New Testament scholars such as Leon Morris and C.S. Kenner on Jesus' temple act remarks that a good number of New Testament experts argue that Jesus' attack was directed at the buying and selling in the temple which was bent on distracting the Gentiles worshippers and not creating for them an enabling environment for worship and meditation. Citing C.S. Kenner, he notes that the issue is not whether there should have been money changers; it is whether it was valid to turn much of the temple court into a place emphasizing commerce rather than worship (380-381). Ogbochie remarks that since the Jews and temple attendants did not treat their co-worshippers as fellow human beings thereby excluding them from temple courts and building walls of barriers, Jesus wished to remind them by his action that God loved not only the Jews, but the world (12-14). In other words, the essence of building the temple was for the true worship of God by people of every race and tribe coming into Jerusalem but the temple had been turned into a market arena, and worse when Jesus came therein. The Jewish authorities and temple attendants used the opportunity of the Passover and other feasts to enrich themselves. Animals for sacrifices would only be bought in the temple otherwise it would be condemned by the authorities in the temple. Besides, money used in the temple must be in their local currency thereby making exchange rate to be high for the poor to meet up and the people had no choice but to pay. Whereas the temple was built for worship, the Jews and their leaders went there not for worship but to make money and those who came for sincere worship were made to

suffer. It is against this background Jesus drove out all those who sold at the temple court of the Gentiles.

IV. THE NIGERIAN SOCIO-RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

The activities which prevailed in the Jerusalem temple in the days of Jesus which also resonated the cleansing of the court of the Gentiles are very significant in relation to the happenings in the socio-religious space in Nigeria. Nigeria is a country abundantly blessed by God with natural and human resources but having misplaced priorities. Chimakonam O. Jonathan quoting Dike asserts that "Nigeria is a society where national priorities are turned upside down; hard work is not rewarded; but rogues are often glorified" (307). Thus, a lot of social vices abound in the Nigerian society. There are cases of sexual abuse such as rape, homosexuality, lesbianism, paedophiles and cult related activities in secondary and tertiary institutions. Though one of the richest oil countries of the world, Nigeria is hitherto battling with cases of poverty. The statistics released by the National Bureau of Statistics on the 4th May 2020 reveals that 40.1% of Nigerians are poor and four in ten Nigerians or over 82.9 million Nigerians live in poverty (Segun Adams 1). This reason for this could be associated to the high level of taxation in all the basic amenities levied on the poor masses. Nigeria is a society where nepotism, robbery, kidnapping, tribalism and gross injustice reigns supreme. Celestina O. Isiramen rightly observes that "Nigeria is a stark reality of a nation on the brink of collapse or disintegration with ignoble manifestations like embezzlement, nepotism, tribalism, greed, indolence, bribery and corruption, murder, robbery, kidnappings, militancy, drug addictions, incessant closure of citadels of learning, political violence and thuggery, electoral fraud and religious violence" (xx, 67). Rotimi Omotoye corroborating Isiramen idea maintains that "apart from corruption at the top, there are obvious cases of corruption at the lowest rung of the social ladder. Police ranting on roadblocks collecting bribes, civil servant insisting on being oiled before moving the file, bank attendants winking at customer, so that the client could drop from savings cashed from the counter, medical officials anticipating tips before attending to a dying patient and lecturers who insisting on tips from their students to award marks seems to be on the increase in the Nigeria

society” (35). Timothy Agboluaje adds that “Nigeria is a society with a notable feature of affluence, exploitation and profit motive with moral standard sinking into disrepute. Nigeria is a society plagued with social malaise of injustice, economic oppression, culminating in economic disparity between the rich and the poor masses with discontentment and destitution” (181). Friday J. Imaekai submits that “in Nigeria, material acquisition has virtually become the ultimate goal and the society does not appear to be concerned with how one makes it. All that is important is that one has arrived” (103). This attitude has necessitated an increase in embezzlement of both public and private funds, offering and acceptance of bribe, internet fraudsters, electoral malpractices, examination malpractices and sales of hard drugs in the Nigerian society. Ayodele A. Atowoju quoting Sam Aluko opines that there is hardly a country in the world where there is no corruption. He noted that America as one of the most corrupt countries in the world, steal a lot from Europe, Nigeria and other countries but they retain the money in America, to develop America economy. Unfortunately, when Nigerians steal money from their country, they take it overseas to further develop foreign nations economy Religiously, some ordained church leaders and workers are not there because of what they will do to enhance the propagation of the gospel but what they will gain. While some religious leaders charge consultation fees (huge sum of money) before prayers are offered to their congregation or those who come to them soliciting for such request. Others compel their workers preparing for ordination into priesthood to pay heavily in order to be ordained in the same denomination and oftentimes the huge sum of money goes into the treasury of the general overseer or bishop who has the prerogative to ordain other church workers. Similarly, some religious leaders sell holy waters, holy oil, handkerchief, wrist bang, aprons, creams and writing materials for examination and interviews, rings and so many other items which are unbiblical to their adherents just to make money from their congregations at exorbitant prices negating the biblical injunction “Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment” (Matt. 10:8). It is not an exaggeration to opine that there are churches built by merchants as commercial ventures whereby the owners employ pastors or contract the

churches to pastors to make returns. In some churches, investiture of knights is now traded for money whereby the highest bidder is invested with kingship and recognition as against the original intention for kingship investiture. Some church leaders have even carried out this kingship investiture in hotels rather than churches. An act which negates the original intention. Alana corroborating this view opines that today some places of worship have become a beehive of commercial activities, with the milieu suggesting that salvation is probably for sale. He adds that ephemeral such as building projects, tithes, offerings to religious leaders, and leadership contest for offices and positions are now celebrated relegating the sincere yearn for the true gospel and kingdom (281). Thus, this attitude witnessed on a daily basis in the socio-religious space in Nigeria calls for a quick transformation of those who occupy this spheres for a better Nigerian society and religious entity. This implies a call for a change of perspective, thought and attitude by those who are found wanting. Like John the Baptist who advocated for social and political change in his time, it is fitting for citizens in the Nigerian socio-religious and political domains to embrace behavioural change towards every sector which they occupy effectively playing their roles with maximum consciousness of heart. The implication is that those who oppress the poor masses with their religion, tribe and gender are called to show love, hospitality and cooperation with one another. Besides, those who threaten with their position, power, connections and uniforms and even rig electoral processes are charged to desist from such act and repent. John the Baptist like Jesus in the Jerusalem temple emphasized baptism of repentance which is a clarion call to a change of heart, turning around from evil to doing the right things; developing a right attitude towards God and humanity. John the Baptist like Jesus denounced the religious and socio-political machination, oppression and corruption and inhumane treatments in his time and warned the people of God’s impending judgment. He called the people to repent from their sins and turn to God. for the socio-religious spheres in Nigeria to be reckoned with in the present time, the people who live in it which includes politicians, civil and public servants, traders, students, military and paramilitary men and women, traditional leaders and even religious leaders must have a change of heart toward God and humanity. They must repent, that is turnaround from

wrong and resolve to doing the right things always (Church-Hill Amadi-Nche 180).

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

The church in their teaching should emphasize more on the salvation of the lost souls rather than seeking to exploit and enrich herself with the hard earn resources of the poor worshippers. Besides, class system, oppression, avarice politicization, race, gender, ethnicity and schisms must be discouraged in the church of God and everybody seen as one for the smooth functioning of the church. The reason adduced to this is that all these vices are unchristian and will lead the church nowhere.

The church through the activities of her theologians, educators and disciples should effectively and efficiently decipher and communicate God's Law and His love, principles and precepts to the world today (Mal. 2:7-9). Until the souls of men in the society is positively affected within, there will be no appreciable change without. Moreover, since Jesus denounced the corrupt activities which prevailed in the Jerusalem temple, the church and her theologians and leaders must follow suit, always denouncing, rebuking, correcting, reprimanding evil where necessary even when it is at their own detriment.

The Nigerian government must discourage all kinds of ethnic, social and religious discriminations in allocation of offices and appointments both in the Federal, State and Local levels. Equality in all opportunities, rights and privileges must be ensured in policy formulation to avoid protest or conflict of various kinds.

The three main constitutionally recognized religions in Nigerian namely Christianity, Islam and African Traditional religion must advocate and teach equal treatment of all human beings irrespective of tribe, gender or religion.

The family, church, government, schools and society must emphasize the need for virtues such as Love, humility, hard work, respect, integrity, honesty, transparency, trustworthiness, servanthood, straight forwardness and service in her day to day activities with follow human beings.

CONCLUSION

This concise paper titled "Jesus' cleansing of the temple in Mark 11:15-17: A call for socio-religious transformation" centred on the action of Jesus in restoring the temple to its original intention. Having considered the socio-historical context and importance of the temple to the Jews, the paper revealed the various reasons and schools of thought for the action of Jesus in the temple particularly in the court of the Gentiles. Contextually, the paper chronicled some unpleasant activities prevalent in today's Nigerian socio-religious spheres similar to the activities witnessed by Jesus which led to His cleansing of the temple. The paper recommended that for a better Nigerian socio-religious space, activities which regard less on the dignity of human beings irrespective of tribe, gender, language and stratification must be discouraged and every one accepted as one. Moreover, religious teachers must emphasize the true gospel which is devoid of self.

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