Any historical treatment of Jesus of Nazareth must include a discussion of his relationship to the temple in Jerusalem, in view of its position as the religious centre for almost all Jews both in the land of the fathers and throughout the wide Diaspora in the first century CE. Irrespective of how one categorises the historical figure of Jesus—i.e., as a charismatic miracle worker, an itinerant sage, a teacher, a prophet, a messianic claimant, or otherwise—he must be assumed to have consciously and deliberately positioned himself in regard to the temple. In fact, both the gospels and other New Testament writings contain a great number of references to the temple. Hence, there seems to be plenty of evidence accessible for a discussion of Jesus’ attitude to the temple. However, an investigation committed to the limited as well as ambitious goal of clarifying how the historical figure Jesus of Nazareth related to the temple in Jerusalem, must critically scrutinise the evidence in order to distinguish between what actually portrays and reflects Jesus within the historical context prior to Easter, and what represents a post-Easter perspective. Consequently, our first task must be to identify the material that might serve our objective of describing Jesus’ relationship to the temple in Jerusalem.

* Thanks to John Goldie MA for helpful suggestions for linguistic corrections and improvements.
2 Cf. the book by Ed P. Sanders with the corresponding title: The Historical Figure of Jesus (London: Penguin, 1993).

New Testament writings whose contents explicitly and unequivocally belong to the post-Easter period, like the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles, might, notwithstanding their late date, still be of some indirect relevance with regard to the historical Jesus. According to Acts the Christian community in Jerusalem regularly assembled in the temple precincts and porticoes (2:46; 5:12, 42) and, in spite of some obvious tensions and conflicts with the temple authorities (cf. 4:1–3; 5:19–21, 25–26), members of the Christian community also participated in the service of the temple congregation and in sacrificial rites (cf. 3:1; 21:23–24). Of course, a number of varying factors might have influenced Jewish Christians in Jerusalem to act in regard to the temple in these ways. It is likely that one decisive formative element has been Jesus’ relationship to it; hence, the more easily the post-Easter Christian practice and theology relating to the temple can be drawn from or at least be put in some causal connection to our reconstructed picture of Jesus’ attitude to the temple, the more plausible this reconstruction turns out to be.

Turning to the gospels, the Gospel of John stands out as a particular case which raises a number of specific challenges not unique to the theme of Jesus and the temple, but of a more general kind relating to all research on the historical Jesus. As a matter of fact, the temple, both

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4 Or, to put this with greater historical caution, a number of factors might have brought Luke or the authors of his sources to conceive of such a practice among early Christians in Jerusalem.

5 Personally, I include here also theological expositions on Christ or the church as the new sanctuary (e.g. 1 Cor 3:16–17; 2 Cor 6:16; Rev 21:22) and on the death of Christ as the ultimate atoning sacrifice surpassing and substituting the sacrificial cult (e.g. Rom 3:25–26; 1 Pet 3:18; Heb 9:26–28) as parts of early Christian theology assumed to have been influenced by Jesus’ position towards the temple. Many scholars are more hesitant with regard to such an a priori assumption of a causal link between Jesus and this kind of post-Easter theology, because they consider Easter to be such a radical break that much theological reasoning in the early church was developed on the basis of the belief in and the experience of the resurrected Lord without any traceable continuity to the pre-Easter situation.