

Excerpt from Emilio G. Chávez, *The Theological Significance of Jesus' Temple Action in Mark's Gospel* (Toronto Studies in Theology; v. 87; New York – Queenston, Ontario: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 106-109.

Still, we may simply allow the possibility that there may have been some expectation in Judaism that the messiah would cleanse the temple. It is clear, however, that such a notion is extremely difficult to adduce as a factor in Jesus' trial. And, short of entering now into the discussion to take place in chaps. four and five, it is clear that Mark could not ultimately have had a cleansing, messianic or otherwise, in mind when he redacted his gospel. The clearest accounts of an actual temple cleansing —1 Macc 4:36-58; 2 Macc 10:1-8— involve elements totally at odds with the Second Gospel. In the first account, Judas Maccabeus proposes that the sanctuary (τὰ ἅγια) be cleansed (καθαρίσαι) and dedicated (or “renewed”). The people see that the sanctuary (τὸ ἅγιασμα) was desolated (ἡρηλωμένον) and the altar profaned (βεβηλωμένον). After disposing of the profaned altar stones in a suitable place, to await the word of a prophet on what to do with them (1 Macc 4:46), they built a new altar and sanctuary, made new vessels (σκεύη), and brought the lampstand, the incense altar and the table (τράπεζαν) into the sanctuary (νάον). They proceeded to burn incense and light up the temple (4:50), and the temple curtains (τὰ καταπετάσμα) were spread out. There was gladness among the people because the reproach of the nations was turned away (ἀπεστράφη ὄνειδος ἐθνῶν, 4:58), and they therefore celebrated with branches and palm fronds and sang hymns (i.e., psalms, 2 Macc 10:7).

In Mark 11:15-17, the action takes place in τὸ ἱερόν [in the temple]. Any celebration with branches and psalms took place *prior to* (11:8-10), not after, a purported “cleansing.” τὰς τραπέζας [the tables] are overturned. σκεῦος [vessels] are not permitted to be carried through the temple. The nations are mentioned as beneficiaries (τοῖς ἔθνεσιν [for the nations]), not as enemies who reproach (cf. 15:32). No altar is mentioned.¹ There is a reference to prayer (προσευχή) not explicitly found in the Maccabean accounts,² and a

¹ Though it may be the place where the abomination of desolation will stand in 13:14.

² Though the people worshiped and blessed (προσεκύνησαν καὶ εὐλόγησαν), 1 Macc 4:55, and petitioned (ἤξιωσαν) God, 2 Macc 10:4.

portent of destruction in the citation of the verse from Jer 7.³ In Mark 13, not only is the temple to be destroyed (by God, 13:2); it is to be made desolate and profaned (that is, by τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως [the abomination of the desolation], 13:14), precisely the reverse of what Judas Maccabeus purified the temple from! Finally, when Jesus is about to die on the cross, there is darkness (15:33), not light, and τὸ καταπέτασμα [the veil] is completely rent. Mark could not have had a cleansing in mind in 11:15-17. We may thus conclude with the words of E.P. Sanders:

The assumption seems to be that Jesus made, and wanted his contemporaries to accept, a distinction between this sort of ‘practice’ [the selling of animals and the changing of money] and the ‘real purpose’ of the temple. This seems to owe more to the nineteenth-century view that what is external is bad than to a first-century Jewish view. [fn. omitted] Those who write about Jesus’ desire to return the temple to its ‘original’, ‘true’ purpose, the ‘pure’ worship of God,⁴ seem to forget that the principal function of any temple is to serve as a place for sacrifice, and that sacrifices *require* the supply of suitable animals. This had always been true of the temple in Jerusalem. In the time of Jesus, the temple had long been the only place in Israel at which sacrifices could be offered, and this means that suitable animals and birds must have been in supply at the temple site.⁵ There was not an ‘original’ time when worship at the temple had been ‘pure’ from the business which the requirement of unblemished sacrifices creates. Further, no one remembered a time when pilgrims, carrying various coinages, had not come. In the view of Jesus and his contemporaries, the requirement to sacrifice must always have involved the supply of sacrificial animals, their inspection, and the changing of money. Thus one may wonder what scholars have in mind who talk about Jesus’ desire to stop this ‘particular’ use of the temple. Just what would be left of the service if the supposedly corrupting externalism of sacrifices, and the trade necessary to them, were purged? Here as often as [*sic*] we see a failure to think concretely and a preference for vague religious abstractions.⁶

³ Jer 7:11; 7:30 in fact accuses the “sons of Judah” of profaning the house called by God’s name by putting their “abominations” (בְּזִימָתָם, τὰ βδελύγματα) in it; they are then threatened in 7:34 with the punishment that the earth will become a desolation (εἰς ἐρήμωσιν ἔσται). Whence the language in Dan 9:27; 11:31; 12:11; HOOKER, *Son of Man*, 154.

⁴ Fn.: “Most explicitly, Bornkamm speaks of the action as ‘more than an act of reform to restore the temple service to its original purity’ (*Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 158f.), which means that it was also that.”

⁵ Note that the problem with transporting one’s own animals was that they could become blemished and thus unacceptable as an offering (Lev 22:18), the risk increasing with the distance. See SANDERS, *Jesus and Judaism*, 64-65; cf. the diatribe against defective offerings in Mal 1:6-8.

⁶ SANDERS, *Jesus and Judaism*, 63.