

Chapter One: Mark 11:15-17

Literal interpretation of the verses in their context. Mark relates that, after his “messianic entry” into Jerusalem, Jesus’ immediate object, his goal, was the temple, 11:11. But, unlike the other gospels, Jesus, after having observed everything, leaves the temple. That is, only Mark tells us that Jesus interrupted his visit to the temple, that he went out shortly after he first went in.

The reason for this is that Mark wants to “sandwich” the temple incident in between the fig tree episode (divided into the two “breads” of the sandwich, the temple incident being the “meat”). Only Mark has made such a composition. His “sandwiching” or “dovetailing” technique is well-known; he forms a whole out of two separate things or events, like a dovetail. Thus one episode is interpreted through another, mutually; each is reinforced, and the key to the whole is brought out more strongly.³

The unity of the passage is thus: Jesus, the day after leaving the temple, goes out of Bethany and, from afar, sees a fig tree with leaves; each word is important, and has a meaning. Jesus wants to find some fruit on it, but finds only leaves, for it was not the *kairós* for figs. The *kairós* (time, season, moment, period) of the Kingdom brings new things: see Mark 1:15. Leaves only (just appearances) are not enough; cf. Mic 7:1-7. Jesus then says “may no one ever again eat fruit from you.” The disciples heard this: that is, we should be prepared for the sequel, for what follows.

³ A good example is found in Mark 5:21-43, composed of the “breads” of Jairus’ daughter and the “meat” of the woman with the blood flow. Jairus prays that Jesus go and lay his hands on his daughter in order to heal her—she’s about to die—so that she may be saved and live. The girl is twelve, and has already died. What is necessary is faith, and Jesus will take her by the hand and will give her life, that is, he saves her. In the middle, we are told about a woman who had suffered from a chronic blood flow; menstruation is a typical subject in the Bible and in Jewish tradition (the Mishnah devotes a whole tractate to it, Niddah). It is the subject matter of Lev 15, which includes the case of abnormally prolonged menstrual bleeding, 15:25-27. The husband could not have relations with her, for it would bring the most horrific type of impurity, the kind that made the Land vomit its inhabitants (exile), Lev 18:19, 24-30. But Mark 5:29 seems rather to quote LXX 12:7, regarding the woman who has given birth. This indicates that both Jairus’ daughter (whom Jesus touches) and the bleeding woman (who touches Jesus) are really dead, more because of the fact that they had had no children than because of actual death: sterility was death for the Hebrew woman (see Judg 11:37). By quoting Lev 12:7, Mark 5:29 seems to be hinting that the healed woman would give birth, would be alive, just like Jairus’ daughter. The version in Luke 8:42 has been interpreted to mean that the woman had been bleeding *from* twelve years (of age), that is, had never borne children, like Jairus’ daughter. In both cases, faith “saved” (from all forms of death). The “sandwich” enables this mutual interpretation.

It is then that they arrive again in Jerusalem and that Jesus enters the temple.⁴ “He began to cast out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple.” “Began” is a peculiar Marcan usage, pleonastic (redundant): it does not affect the meaning.⁵ What is important is the expression “cast out;” this is the verb used for exorcisms (as in Mark 3:22). We owe Burton Mack, a scholar with whom I agree but little, the merit of having shown the link between Jesus’ temple action and his first exorcism with “dominion” in Mark 1:21-27.⁶ This we will develop later on.

To cast out sellers and buyers is a “hendiadys,” a totality symbolized by its principal components, or by two extremes (literally, hendiadys means “one thing through/by means of two”). In the temple one was either buying or selling. We may tend to think that the temple should have been a place of prayer, and that animal sacrifices represented an inferior form of worship; at least, the animals should not have been sold in the sacred precincts. But the principal function of the Jewish temple *was to offer such sacrifices*: one need look no further than to the central book of the Torah, Leviticus! The offered animals must be without blemish. We might entertain the speculation that at one time these animals were sold in another place, perhaps across the Kidron Valley (in “Hanuth” = marketplace).⁷ Nothing supports the idea that Jesus was opposed merely to commerce in the holy place, at least according to Mark, albeit that at the level of a more superficial reading one could consider it thus. But let us continue with our exposition of the narrative.

The second element of Jesus’ action is the overturning of the tables of the moneychangers and of the seats of the dove sellers. To “overturn” corresponds to the

⁴ WERNER H. KELBER, in *The Kingdom in Mark. A New Place and a New Time* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 100, has shown that in Mark 11:15-16 we have three prepositions that indicate the totality of Jesus’ action in the temple (it involves the whole of the sacred precincts): Jesus enters *into* the temple, casts out those who were *in* the temple, and allows no transportation of (sacred) vessels *through* the temple.

⁵ See BLASS-DEBRUNNER § 392 (2); J.W. HUNKIN, “Pleonastic ἀρχομαι [to begin] in the New Testament,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 25 (1924) 390-402. But this may also indicate that the End Time and its return-to-Eden state has only begun.

⁶ See Mack’s unbelieving (or at least, iconoclastic) book *A Myth of Innocence. Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

⁷ See VICTOR EPPSTEIN, “The Historicity of the Gospel Account of the Cleansing of the Temple,” *ZNW* 55 (1964), 49. E.P. SANDERS, in *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia – London: Fortress, 1985), 63, harshly ridicules what he calls the nineteenth-century notion (liberal Protestant) that the temple was for prayer and not animal sacrifice. There was never a time when animals were not being bought or sacrificed right there for that purpose, changing currency if necessary. He concludes by saying: “Here as often as [*sic*] we see a failure to think concretely and a preference for vague religious abstractions.”

Greek verb which gives us the word “catastrophe;” it is a verb which is almost a hapax in the New Testament, that is, it appears only here (“hapax legomenon” = “said only once”); Matt borrows it from Mark.⁸ It is the verb *par excellence* applied to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in the LXX, e.g., in Gen 19:25, and to divine threats which seek to evoke that great destruction, “mother of all destructions.”⁹ Now, the tables of the moneychangers were to be found specially during Passover (the Mishnah allowed thirteen of them), for it was then that every Israelite had to pay the “rescue price” (in Hebrew, *kōpher*) for his entry into the Promised Land, Exod 30:12-13, and this was only payable in “sanctuary sheqels,” that is, in Tyrian coinage, from Tyre, in the north of Palestine; it was the silver currency which contained the acceptable level of purity. We shall see that it is Jesus who definitively pays the ransom, Mark 10:45. The doves were what the poor offered (as did Jesus’ parents in Luke 2:24) when they could not afford to buy an animal from the flock (see Lev 12:8; the wretchedly poor could even offer cereal, Lev 5:7, 11). Jesus had healed a leper and a woman with a blood flow; if these were like so many in Israel, they were too poor to offer an animal from the flock, and would have purchased pigeons (see Lev 14 for the case of the leper, and Lev 15 for bleeding women), regarding which, by the way, there are complaints in the Mishnah that they were being sold for twenty-five times their fair price.¹⁰

What follows is very much Mark’s own. He says that Jesus would not allow anyone to transport any *vessels* through the temple. Many translations betray us by translating “anything,” but this *interpretation* is wrong: the Greek word used means

⁸ Other forms of the verb are found in 1 Cor 10:5; the reading in 2 Pet 2:6 is not certain, but in any case refers to Sodom and Gomorrah; see also 2 Tim 2:14, and a variant in Acts 15:16.

⁹ See the interesting use in LXX Job 12:19, in parallelism with the destitution of priests and overthrow of the “powerful” (Hebrew: “those who are firmly in their posts”). See also LXX Job 9:5 (mountains), Job 28:9 (a mountain “from its roots,” like the fig tree in Mark 11:20). In the valuable study by JAMES W. THOMPSON, *The Beginnings of Christian Philosophy: The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series, 13; Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1982), 125, it is stated that a major difference between Christ’s priesthood and the levitical priesthood is that the latter is transitory, while Christ’s *paraménein*, “a strengthened form of [the Greek verb “to remain”], and is used here to mean “abide in office” [footnote reference to Otto Michel’s *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (KEKNT; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 12. Auflage, 1966), 276]. Josephus, *Antiquities* 11. 309, used *paraménein* to claim that the Jewish high priesthood did remain!

¹⁰ See CRAIG A. EVANS, “Jesus’ Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?,” *CBQ* 51 (1989), 259, who argues that it is indeed a “cleansing” (against Sanders).

vessel, and we should think of sacred vessels used in the temple worship.¹¹ This verse 16, unique to Mark, was omitted by the other evangelists, who do not follow (or perhaps, even understand) this gospel's (theological) presentation.

Now comes Jesus' teaching, which also takes us back to Mark 1:21-27, his first exorcism (Mack). First, Jesus says that the eschatological name of the temple will be "house of prayer" (Lohmeyer), quoting a significant passage from Third Isaiah, Isa 56:7. This passage is found in an astonishingly inclusive context, regarding eunuchs and foreigners (compare Deut 23:2-7), which forms a set of bookends (inclusion) with the end of Isaiah, where foreigners are admitted to the Jewish priesthood (which had become rigorously exclusive). And Isa 56:8, in a rather veiled manner, speaks of the inclusion of 'yet others' in addition to those already gathered.

The second part of Jesus' teaching is taken from Jer 7:11, in the chapter which predicts the total destruction of the first temple (built by Solomon). Jeremiah denounces the misguided trust placed on the temple, while worshippers kill and exploit and shed blood. The prophet well remembered—he came from a family of priests expelled to Anathoth, that is, Levitical as opposed to Zadokite priests, descendants of Abiathar, the northern rival of Zadok, whom Solomon preferred for having supported his election as king, 1 Kgs 2:26-27—¹² God's destruction of the venerable Shiloh shrine, due to the delinquencies of its priests, the sons of Eli. Thus Jeremiah fears that the House called by Yahweh's Name has become a cave of "bandits," in Hebrew *parîtsîm*, in Greek *lēstaií*. These are not mere thieves or exploiters; the *parîts* sheds blood (see Ezek 18:10), just as the *lēstēs* will become the name of the robbers (who exert physical violence) and of the violent insurgents so despised by Flavius Josephus; this designation appears in Mark 15:27; Luke 10:30; Matt 25:55; John 18:40; 2 Cor 11:26. But who could Jesus have had in mind in Mark 11:17? The "chief priests and scribes" that are mentioned immediately after the temple act (Mark 11:18) want to kill him, but they fear the "people," that is, the

¹¹ Those who argue that Jesus was prohibiting the carrying of anything through the temple think he was following the Mishnah prohibition against using the temple as a shortcut; in other words, he was defending the use of the temple only for sacred purposes. See EMILIO G. CHÁVEZ, *The Theological Interpretation of Jesus' Temple Action in Mark's Gospel* (Lewiston, NY – Queenston, Ontario: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 140-142.

¹² Jesus' "mistake" in Mark 2:26 may not be such: Abiathar's name was unmentionable for certain official circles, as can be deduced from 1 Chr 24:3 (the Chronicler, like Jesus, makes a "mistake" and mentions Ahimelek, Abiathar's father, instead of Abiathar, whom he should have named alongside Zadok).

common folk, who favors Jesus. Let us not forget that Jesus would have never been executed by the Romans at the instigation of the Jewish authorities (responsible for keeping the peace, see John 11:47-54) if he had not in some way represented a real threat to the status quo; this is most clearly shown by John 12:12-15, where not just the disciples, but “a great crowd” (NRSV)¹³ acclaims him as king (see already John 6:14-15). This is the “messianic entry” which fulfills the reading of Gen 49:8-12 made by Zech 9:9-10. Only in John do we hear mention of the “palm branches” which were a symbol of political independence (and it was Passover!). And the Romans are in on Jesus’ arrest, John 18:3, 12. For these reasons, the Jewish leaders do not want to arrest him during the feast, fearing the “crowd’s” reaction, Mark 14:1-2.¹⁴ The parable of the “murderous vintners” in Mark 12, which we will see in a moment, illustrates who these “bandits” are, situating them in the history of Israel, which, in Mark’s theological presentation, has reached its end.

And now comes the second half of the fig tree episode; we are now ready for the full sandwich. “Very early” (as in the resurrection, Mark 16:2), the fig tree is seen to have dried up “from the roots.” This evokes total destruction (see LXX Isa 34:1-4). Now we are told (through Peter) that what Jesus had done was to *curse* the fig tree. The drying up of the fig tree symbolizes, represents, the “infarct” that Jesus caused the temple to have when he paralyzed all its activities, casting out the worshippers, “catastrophizing” its providers, and stopping the blood-flow which its vessels made possible. This is how the otherwise unexplainable fig tree episode is mutually-interpreted alongside the temple act.

What follows has to do with the new Christian cult, which consists of having faith (so as to uproot mountains), prayer and mutual forgiveness (on which God’s forgiveness is conditioned, as in the Lord’s Prayer).

¹³ NRSV = *New Revised Standard Version*.

¹⁴ The hypothesis made years ago by Annie Jaubert, that Jesus, like the priestly Qumranites, followed a solar calendar, of very ancient priestly origin, seems to me more and more likely. This could explain how Jesus could have celebrated a Passover “last supper” on Tuesday night, before being arrested and spending a couple of days in jail. Pope Benedict XVI, in his Mass of the Last Supper, Holy Thursday 2007, at St. Peter’s Basilica, adopted this hypothesis of a dissident, solar calendar followed by Jesus, which explains why the official, mainstream Jewish Passover would take place after his death (John 18:28; 19:14, 31); Jesus then ate a lambless Passover, while he died on Friday at the same time that the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in the temple (see the article by Marco Politi, “Quella Pasqua misteriosa,” in the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*, Saturday April, 7, 2007, page 45). Mark is the gospel most allergic to linking Jesus and kingship; compare Mark 10:37 with Matt 11:9-10, and Mark 11:9-10 with Matt 21:4-11 (note the echoes of Matt 2:1-3 here).

Now they return to Jerusalem, and the Jewish leaders ask Jesus with what “dominion” he does “this,” and who gave it to him. To what does “this” refer? If we see a hint in Jesus’ reply, “this” must refer to everything that he has done since his baptism by John. Everything depends on whether what John was doing—which initiated Jesus’ eschatological activity—came from heaven (God) or not. God is the one who gives dominion, Dan 4:14, 22-23 (more obvious in LXX 4:17, 31; compare Mark 2:10). John had inaugurated an eschatological mode of forgiveness, which evidently had nothing to do with the temple (see Mark 1:4-8; cf. Matt 3:7-12; 21:31-32). Jesus had been thus initiated into his End Time ministry, one empowered by God, who had granted dominion to his “plenipotentiary” Son of man, Dan 7:14. If the Jewish leaders could not recognize this, too bad, they will have to wait for Jesus’ response. If they do not answer Jesus, neither will he answer them, for the time being. We here have a clear link with the story of the paralytic in Mark 2. There, hearing Jesus forgive sins, the leaders “dialog” (thus is it in Greek, hyperliterally) in their hearts; in Mark 11:31, they “dialog” with each other regarding the origin of Jesus’ *exousía* (linked to his baptism by John). But already, on the basis of Mark 2:10, they should know that Jesus is the Son of man with *exousía* to forgive sins upon the earth, having demonstrated this by healing the paralytic. We must then deepen our discussion of this Danielic *exousía* at work in Jesus, how he could “deserve” it (or how he attained it) and bring it to efficacious perfection (‘the Son of man has to suffer’). This is how Mark 10:45 will be fulfilled.

Now, in order to complete our glance at the context of Jesus’ action in the temple, we will say something about the “bookends,” the *inclusio*, surrounding this context which is delimited precisely by this inclusion (“way of closing in” something). The context begins with Mark 11:1-10, the famous messianic entry into Jerusalem. Note the colt (or young donkey), to which much space is devoted to its being tied and untied. This humble animal that the “Lord” (*kúrios*, also “owner”) needs, is the mount of the humble and peaceful messianic king of Zech 9:9, who enters Jerusalem “just and saved” (this last word has caused perplexity, and the LXX “translate” “saving;” the RSV renders the Hebrew for “just and saved” “triumphant and victorious”); he will have dominion from sea to sea (see Psa 89). But the originating passage is the “oracle of Judah” in Gen 49:8-12—we have here one of the instances where Torah is reread by Prophets and

definitively reread for Christians as being fulfilled in the New Testament. Jacob, blessing his sons before dying, says that Judah is a lion who will rule over the nations. Judah binds his *purebred jackass* (cf. *NAB*) to the vine: in the eschatological age, the abundance of wine (and of all the products of the earth, see Psa 72) removes any concern that the animal will eat the grapes; what is more, one will even be able to wash clothes in wine! This is the “donkey” that is unleashed in Jesus’ messianic entry: it is the unleashing of the eschatological events. And Jesus is acclaimed with the words of Psa 118, a victory psalm that closes the Hallel, the series of psalms (113-118) that each begins with “hallelu-yah,” that is, they are victory songs which were sung during Passover (see Mark 14:26).

The final section of our context is the parable of the homicidal vinedressers. Jesus here gives his most extended Scripture quote, from Isa 5:1-7, in order to present the history of Israel as one of infidelity. The symbol is the vineyard, cared for by the Lord so that it would give fruit, but it did not; what is more, the “servants” (= prophets) who were sent were mistreated or killed by those who were mere tenants of the Lord’s property (again, *kúrios* in Mark 12:9 means both “owner” and “lord;” cf. Luke 25:23). But in the End (*éschaton*, Mark 12:9), the Lord of the vineyard still had a “beloved son” to send. This is Jesus, the “beloved Son” of the baptism, Mark 1:11, and of the Transfiguration, Mark 9:7 (he is also the “prophet like Moses” who must be listened to, Deut 18:15-19; Acts 3:22-23). “Beloved” (in Greek *agapētós*) is the same word used in the “sacrifice of Isaac,” Gen 22:2, 16, where it translates the Hebrew *yadid*, “only.” Jesus is killed by those who want to usurp the vineyard of the Lord; these are the “bandits” (*lēstai*) alluded to in the Jeremiah quotation in Mark 11:17. Now the ignorance of the authorities (see also Mark 12:24, 27 regarding the Sadducees; cf. Mark 15:35 —the parable follows on the question regarding Jesus’ “authority” in Mark 11:27-33) is interpreted by returning to Psa 118: Jesus is the stone rejected by the builders (of the temple?) which has become the chief stone (of the construction of a new temple, of the Christian community?). The authorities would have arrested him then and there, but they feared the common people (*óchlos*).

