

Theological Interpretation of Jesus' Temple-Action in the Gospel According to Mark

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Introduction

The purpose of these pages, and of this seminar, is to give a global theological interpretation of the person and mission of Jesus according to Mark the Evangelist, taking as a starting point Jesus' famous "action" in the temple, usually called "the cleansing of the temple."¹ We cannot here call it thus, since an important part of our thesis is that, in Mark, what Jesus does and symbolizes in Mark 11:15-16 is the *opposite* of a cleansing: it is rather a portent of the total destruction of the temple, explicitly announced in Mark 13:2. So that we must then speak either of Jesus' "action" in the temple, or of the "so-called temple-cleansing." I do not deny that in Luke or John what is portrayed may well be considered to be a cleansing, or a (mere) protest against commerce in the temple, but it is not so in Mark; what is more, I think I have shown, in my doctoral dissertation, that, if the Marcan account is compared with a true and explicitly so-described cleansing or purification (*katharismós*) of the temple, as occurs in the books of the Maccabees, we find some seven elements common to Mark and 1-2 Macc, only *inversely* related. That is, these seven elements in the books of the Maccabees are part of a purification and restoration of the holy place, while in Mark they are part of a destructive, apocalyptic, profanatory scenario, in which the Jewish temple will no longer have a place.

What we want to do here is, in effect, give a global theological interpretation of the "second" gospel. I, along with most scholars, believe that "Mark" is the first gospel, something which presents an interesting situation in which to deal with two questions: do the other canonical gospels simply follow Mark, perhaps without understanding the significance of what is being narrated in Mark 11:15-17 (or, more broadly, 11:11-26)? And what could Jesus have really done, as far as that type of thing is concerned (protest

¹ Note of caution: this presentation may seem very dense (or complicated) in the beginning, but there will be lots of repetition of the topics and points which will be made. So please follow the class presentations with patience: all will be better understood as we go along. It is very important that the reader look up all the Scripture cites given here, or, at least, as many as possible! Otherwise, a lot of what is being presented will be lost.

against commerce, etc.), in the temple; that is, how historical is Mark's account, or that of the other evangelists? Mark presents a very symbolic and stylized action, literally impossible to carry out, even for the "Son of God": to throw out *everyone* from the temple and not allow anyone to transport vessels (that is, anything) through the temple. Since nothing of this sort is mentioned in any other ancient source, or even as an issue in the trials against Jesus, my conclusion is that if something did take place, its magnitude is inversely proportional to its historicity. That is to say, only something which basically went unnoticed, some minor event, could have happened, and then, what "real" (as opposed to "symbolic") importance did what Jesus is said to do in the temple have?

We hope to see all this more carefully in the chapters which follow. For now, in this introduction, our plan is to proceed from an analysis of the "temple action" (first chapter) on to the topic of what "Mark's Gospel" (Mark) intends to portray regarding Jesus' person and mission.

The title for Jesus which is most operative in Mark, to begin with, is "Son of man," with its unique quality. This term comes from Dan 7:13-14, which depicts an important scenario in the Bible for "advanced circles" in the Judaism of the time. This "son of man" is given, in Greek, *exousía*, what is usually translated "authority" (as in Mark 1:22), but which is better translated "dominion," which better corresponds to the Aramaic *šaltan*. In Aramaic, as in the Greek translation of the LXX, this word "dominion" appears three times in Dan 7:14; it is important. So that in chapter two we will treat of the Son of man and of his "dominion."

This now places us in eschatology, for the whole second part of Daniel, chapters 7-12 (leaving aside what is deuterocanonical, as are chapters 13-14), is eschatological and apocalyptic. That is, Dan 7 speaks of the Kingdom of God, which, together with "the Son of man," are among Jesus' key expressions. Here we also find the "apocalyptic-eschatological" vision concerning the beasts that come out of the Sea (the empires), and from whom dominion is taken away, precisely in order to give it to "one like a son of man," that is, the human being, or, especially, the good Jew, who had maintained faithfulness in trial and had been purified; these are called the "saints of the Most High," or the "people of the saints of the Most High," in Dan 7:18, 27. All this is pregnant with soteriological symbolism, and we wish to show that this is part of the religious world of

Jesus, and of his ideas, and, more specifically, of the picture of the Savior which Mark presents.

We shall also see that the world of Dan 7-12 is not so far removed from that of Second Isaiah (Dt-Isa), chapters 40-55 (or even up to and including chapter 66, at the end of the book). We shall see a link between the “Daniel group” and the “Servant” of Dt-Isa, and perhaps also with the “servants” of Third Isaiah (Tr-Isa, chapters 56-66). Certainly Dt-Isa is the prophet of the “Good News” (Isa 40:9; 52:7; 61:1 in Tr-Isa), and Mark begins his gospel (in Greek, *euangelion*) quoting him. Rikki Watts has a book almost 500 pages long on the topic of “Isaiah’s New Exodus in Mark” (the announcement of the “new exodus” is the “good news,” which is what the word “gospel” means).² These concepts are extremely important, and will be part of our exposition of Mark’s portrait of Jesus, which we shall discuss in the third chapter.

Then, in chapter four, we shall treat of Jesus as Son of God, which is Mark’s highest title for him. This title indicates something mysterious, unknown to all human beings until the moment of Jesus’ death. Rather than it being a matter of a “Messianic Secret” (William Wrede, 1901), the real secret in Mark is about who Jesus really is. Jesus is the one who finally, eschatologically, defeats evil, thus bringing salvation. What must be pondered is what is asked in Mark 4:41: “Who is this who even wind and Sea obey?” Jesus had just then “rebuked” the storm using the same “exorcism formula” (literally, “muzzle yourself”) that he had used in his first exorcism in Mark 1:25, when the demoniac had declared that Jesus, the “holy one of God,” had come to destroy evil.

Finally, we shall discuss other Christological and soteriological issues related to what has preceded, placing Jesus and his interpreters (probably including Mark himself and, if not, us ourselves as Mark’s interpreters) in a broader context, which includes Qumran and the first Book of Enoch, and the “Enochian group” (Sacchi, Boccaccini). Here we shall adduce elements which help us to understand Jesus and his movement within dissident Judaism, “advanced” circles which followed a different sacred calendar, who calculated the time of the end (like Daniel), who combined redeemer-figures into one (Enoch), who awaited final salvation through Melchizedek, in the tenth

² *Isaiah’s New Exodus in Mark* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1997; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, reprinted 2000).

eschatological jubilee (Qumran). In this way, exploring the topic “Jesus as high priest” in Mark, we shall complete our presentation regarding what Mark wants to tell us about Jesus as eschatological savior, after having taken the temple “incident” as our starting point. We shall end with a brief conclusion.