

DEFENSE OF THE THESIS OF EMILIO G. CHÁVEZ
JAN. 13, 2000

**TITLE: ‘EXORCISM, *EXOUSIA*, THE WIDOW AND THE TEMPLE.
THE MEANING OF JESUS’ ACTION AND TEACHING
IN THE TEMPLE (MARK 11:15-17)**

FR. JOSEPH AGIUS, O.P., DEAN OF THE THEOLOGY FACULTY
MODERATOR: FR. RICHARD TAYLOR
SECOND READER: FR. STIPE JURIČ, O.P.

THESIS: Jesus’ action and teaching in the temple, as narrated in Mark 11:15-17, is a symbolic cessation of the Jewish sacrificial system, and a prelude to the destruction of the temple that he predicts in 13:2. Mark subtly but carefully prepares the knowing reader for this understanding of the action from the first verses of his gospel, and symbolically depicts the destruction of the temple, rendered obsolete by Jesus’ sacrificial death, by the rending of the temple curtain in 15:38, simultaneously with Jesus’ death.

ARGUMENT:

1. Mark’s first verses (1:1-4) subtly announce the eschatological, purifying visit of the Lord to his temple (Mal 3:1-5).

2. Jesus’ first act in his public ministry is a teaching and an exorcism (Mark 1:21-27). The teaching is said to be based on *exousia*, and is contrasted with that of the scribes (1:22). The unclean spirit announces that Jesus has come to destroy evil spirits (1:24). Finally, the exorcism itself is described as “a new teaching according to *exousia*” (1:27). Jesus’ ministry is thus a victory over evil accomplished through a new (eschatological) teaching indistinguishable from “exorcism.” The basis for it is his *exousia*. See no. 4 below.

3. Jesus cures a leper (1:40-45), something only God could do (2 Kgs 5:7), and certainly not the Jewish priests, who could only confirm that such a cure had already taken place (Lev 14:3). The purpose of the ritual prescribed was the leper’s readmission into the cultic community. Jesus tells the ex-leper to do what Moses prescribed (1:44), “as a sign against them,”¹ but the leper does not do this (1:45): he starts to preach Jesus, so that they start coming to Jesus from everywhere.

4. In 2:1-12, Jesus does two related things: he forgives the sins of a paralytic based on faith (2:5) and demonstrates his *exousia* as Son of man to do this “upon the earth” by restoring the paralytic (2:10-11). *Exousia* (= “dominion,” the Aramaic *shaltan*) is taken from LXX Dan 7:14, where it appears thrice: it is the plenipotentiary authority of the “one like a son of man.” “Upon the earth” alludes to LXX Dan 4:17 (the Lord of heaven has *exousia* over everything that is in heaven and upon the earth).

5. In 5:25-34, Jesus heals a woman with a blood flow. It is her faith which heals her, also described as salvation (5:34). Lev 15 has the prescriptions for “expiation” (Hebrew

¹ Such is the accusatory meaning of this expression, which also occurs in 6:11 and 13:9.

verb *kapar*) after such a woman is found to be healed; as in the case of a poor leper, the poor Israelite offers doves for his or her “expiation.” Since Jesus has saved the woman, any reference to what the temple may have to offer her seems superfluous.

6. Near the center of Mark’s gospel is Jesus’ great diatribe against the Pharisees and some scribes who had come from Jerusalem (7:1-13). Jesus accuses them of abandoning God’s law in favor of their tradition. This results in death: depriving one’s parents of what they need to live by claiming “(temple) offer” (*korban*, 7:10-12) is the “curse” prohibited in Exod 21:17, part of the homicide legislation. Jesus goes on to completely redefine the purity laws, making (or declaring) all foods clean (7:15, 19). This has far-reaching consequences for the whole temple sacrificial system, based on, and aiming at, ritual purity.²

7. Jesus predicts the passion and death of the Son of man, 8:31; 9:12, 31; 10:33. In 10:45, the Son of man is identified with the Isaianic Servant, who came to give his life as a ransom (*lutron*) for “many” (Isa 53). *Lutron* is the LXX word for Hebrew “expiation, atonement” (*kippur*) and “redemption” (*g^eullah*). Mark is saying that it is Jesus who truly effects these (14:24). Another feature of the Jewish law which is thus obviated is the temple tax prescribed by Exod 30:12-16, called an “atonement price” (*ha-kippurîm*) in 30:16. It had to be paid near Passover time, and only in “sanctuary sheqels,” (30:13). This was the principal reason for the money-changers in the temple, to change the coins brought by the pilgrims into the prescribed currency.

8. With the foregoing elements, we can now approach the temple act and teaching. Jesus enters Jerusalem and the temple (11:11), but Mark, alone among the evangelists, “sandwiches” the “cleansing” with the cursing of the fig tree. Jesus curses a leafy but fruitless fig tree; it is not the *kairos* for figs, for the *kairos* (= time) is fulfilled and the kingdom has arrived (1:15). Never again shall anyone avail himself of the fruits of this tree. This means that the time of the temple is over, as will become clearer.

9. The act itself is symbolic. Jesus throws (using the exorcism verb *ekballo*) everyone (“sellers and buyers”) out of the temple, and “catastrophizes” (using the LXX verb applied to Sodom and Gomorrah) the now-obsolete tables of the money-changers and dove-sellers (11:15). Mark alone (11:16) notes that he permitted no one to transport sacred vessels through the temple: the temple system is suspended. And then Jesus *teaches* (see no. 2 above): he announces the Isaianic eschatological name for God’s house, “a house of *prayer* for all nations” (Isa 56:7), and denounces what it has become, “a cave of violent persons,” borrowing a phrase from Jeremiah’s speech against the temple (Jer 7), where the temple’s destruction is prophesied (7:14). Who the “violent persons” are (not “thieves”) will be illustrated by the parable to follow (Mark 12:1-12).³

² A related opposition of human convention and divine precept is found in 3:1-6, where Jesus asks if it is licit to do good on the Sabbath or to kill. This healing results in the decision to kill Jesus.

³ That Mark does not portray Jesus’ act as a “cleansing” is borne out by comparing the role of the elements in his gospel (branches, tables, sacred vessels, the nations, the temple curtain, etc.) with their contrary role in what is truly described as a temple cleansing in 1 Macc 4:36-58; 2 Macc 10:1-8.

10. Now Jesus' *exousia* is challenged (11:27-33). Jesus harkens back to John the Baptist, who began the eschatological period as Elijah (9:12-13; Matt 17:13) preaching forgiveness of sins apart from the temple (Mark 1:4-5) and announcing Jesus (1:7-8). The leaders' "pondering among themselves" (11:31) links up with the scribes' "pondering" in 2:6 against Jesus' ability to forgive sins, and also with his *exousia* as Son of man.

11. Jesus then replies to the leaders with the parable of the violent vinedressers, who kill the "servants" (prophets) diligently sent by the Lord of the vineyard (Isa 5), terms also evocative of Jer 7:21-28. In the *eschaton*, the "beloved Son" is sent (cf. Mark 1:11, with Passion-overtones, and 9:7, a prophetic commissioning), and he is killed. Therefore these leaders will have God's vineyard taken away from them (12:9); "others" will be given the "vineyard." The vinedressers' actions make them the sort of bloodshedders that *paritsim* indicates in Jer 7:11 (cf. Ezek 18:10). Then Jesus speaks of a new construction of which he is the cap- or cornerstone, 12:10. Can we know who the "others" are? See no. 13 below.

12. Jesus teaches in the temple, but his last words there (12:38-44) condemn the scribes, who devour widows' houses under the pretext of piety, and he praises a poor widow who puts her whole *bios* ("life, means of subsistence") into the temple treasury. Jesus then *leaves* the temple, and predicts that not one stone will remain upon another (13:2). He is sitting on the eschatological Mount of Olives (cf. Zech 14), opposite (and perhaps looking *down* on the temple), Mark 13:3, as he delivers his "eschatological discourse." A desecration of the temple (13:14) plays a role in the events of the End.

13. In Jesus' "trial before the whole Sanhedrin," "false witnesses" (reminiscent of the "false prophets" in Jeremiah's own temple-speech trial in LXX Jer 33 [MT Jer 26]) state that they heard Jesus say he would destroy the man-made (a LXX term for idols) temple and build *another* not man-made *in three days* (Mark 14:58). This "other" temple may be the "others" to whom the vineyard is to be given (12:9), and who seem to be related to the construction of which the "builders" rejected the chief stone, 12:10. And the Isaianic citation (Isa 56:7) in Mark 11:17 is followed by an oracle (56:8) that YHWH will yet gather "others" to the dispersed of Israel which He has already gathered.⁴

14. As Jesus dies, Mark sees fit to repeat the "accusation" (15:29), using present participles which may indicate that Jesus is destroying the old temple and building the new one then and there as he gives up his life. Then when he dies, the temple curtain is completely rent (15:39), symbolizing the disappearance of the edifice made obsolete by Jesus' expiatory and redemptive death.

⁴ Although "others" does not appear in the Hebrew or LXX, it needs to be provided in any translation in order to make sense of the text. In any case, the inclusion of Gentiles is clearly intimated.