

‘A House of Prayer for all the Nations’:
Jesus’ Temple Saying, Mark’s Gospel, and the Jewish War

Chris Seeman
University of Missouri-Columbia

And they came into Jerusalem.

And having entered into the Temple, he began to cast out those who were selling and those who were buying in the Temple, and the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those selling doves he overturned, and he did not let anyone carry a vessel through the Temple.

And he was teaching and saying to them: “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a cave of brigands.”

And the chief priests and the scribes heard and were seeking how they might destroy him; for they feared him, for all the crowd was astonished by his teaching.

And when it became late, they went outside the city.¹

The Problem

The plot of the Synoptic Gospels reaches its climax in the Temple. Jesus’ disruption of commercial activity there brings him to the attention of its custodians, triggering the confrontation that will precipitate his arrest and execution.² Despite the episode’s pivotal significance, the underlying rationale for Jesus’ action remains opaque. That Jesus regarded economic transaction within the Temple compound as inappropriate is plain enough; why he objected to currency conversion and the selling of animals—activities that would have facilitated the Temple’s ostensible function as a place of sacrifice and collection point for the annual half-shekel donation—is less clear.³

A natural starting point for scholars has been Jesus’ own words on the matter. But just what did Jesus say? On this the Gospels are not in agreement. The Synoptic tradition, following Mark (see above), has Jesus juxtaposing portions of Isaiah 56.7 and Jeremiah 7.11.⁴ By contrast, the Johannine Jesus quotes no scripture and prescinds from defining the Temple’s proper function.⁵ Arguments abound over how to best to evaluate this conflicting testimony;⁶ yet any historical judgment about what Jesus said—much less what he meant by it—cannot hope to reach beyond the level of informed guesswork. A more attainable goal would be to explore how the

¹ Mk 11.15-19. All translations are my own.

² Dramatized by the parable of the wicked tenants: Mt 21.33-46; Mk 12.1-12; Lk 20.9-19.

³ For a survey and critique of recent proposals, see A. Y. Collins, “Jesus’ Action in Herod’s Temple,” in *Antiquity and Humanity: Essays on Ancient Religion and Philosophy Presented to Hans Dieter Betz on His 70th Birthday* (eds. A. Y. Collins and M. M. Mitchell; Tübingen: Mohr, 2001), 45-61. See also J. Ådna, *Jerusalem Tempel und Tempelmarkt im 1. Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999).

⁴ Is 56.7 is directly quoted in its LXX translation; Jer 7.11 is transformed from a rhetorical question into a declarative statement.

⁵ Jn 2.16: “Stop making my father’s house a house of trade.”

⁶ For discussion, see E. Haenchen, *John I* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 186-190.

evangelists used these words (whether inherited, redacted or invented) to construct a view of the Temple and its leadership as integral to their interpretation of Jesus' life and death.

In the case of the Synoptics, literary approaches turn out to be no less fraught with difficulty than quests for the historical Jesus, the reason being that the words the evangelists place on Jesus' lips bear no obvious relation to the substance of his action.⁷ The operation of the Temple as a sacred slaughterhouse, mandated by the Torah and presupposed by the Prophets (including the very oracles Jesus invokes) neither frustrates nor stands in any necessary tension with its vocation as a locus for prayer.⁸ It seems, then, that the genesis of this saying should be sought elsewhere. Yet attempting to make sense of the scriptural dyad on its own terms, independent of the action with which it has been associated, harbors its own challenges.

Both Isaiah 56 and Jeremiah 7 speak of the Temple in the context of covenant. For both prophets, fulfilling the obligations of covenant secures access to the Temple and the divine blessings mediated by it; violation of covenantal stipulations renders cultic action ineffectual and even threatens the Temple's continued existence. Isaiah conveys this message in positive terms by reassuring Torah-observant eunuchs and non-Israelites that they will partake of the Temple's blessings. Jeremiah delivers the same dictum in its negative formulation, namely as a threat to disobedient Israel. This is standard prophetic fare.

The interpretive problem arises when the rhetoric of these texts is combined, as it is in the Gospels.⁹ Jeremiah's provocative comparison of the Temple to a cave of brigands¹⁰ is not a comment about how the Temple operates or who has access to it; instead, it draws attention to the discrepancy between cultic observance inside the Temple and covenantal violation outside it.¹¹ Yet none of the transgressions enumerated by the prophet, any more than the commercial practices condemned by Jesus, would have prevented Isaiah's outsiders from praying or offering efficacious sacrifices there. Even when read with only minimal attention to context, then, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Jesus' Temple saying is an awkwardly mixed metaphor, resistant to easy elucidation.

Two objections might be raised to this verdict. First, it could be maintained that any alleged disconnect between the two halves of Jesus' indictment is negated by the overall coherence of its intent: to condemn the Temple leadership. This is a weak objection; one must still ask why Jesus (or Mark) chose *these* biblical texts out of all those available, especially in view of the fact that they appear so ill-suited to one another. If a blanket condemnation of bad leadership was all that was needed, more likely bedfellows than Isaiah and Jeremiah are not difficult to imagine.

⁷ So, rightly, Collins, "Jesus' Action," 526.

⁸ In addition to praying there, Isaiah 56 envisions proselytes offering (v. 7) and perhaps even officiating (v. 6) sacrifices in the Temple.

⁹ Marcus invokes the rabbinic hermeneutical principle of *gezerah shewah*, "by which two passages that contain identical or similar expressions are regarded as treating the same topic" (J. Marcus, *Mark 8-16* (New Haven: Yale University, 2009), 784, 1145), to explain the combination. This, however, is unpersuasive. Isaiah 56.7 and Jeremiah 7.11 are *manifestly* about the Temple; no exegetical gymnastics are required to establish this point. Moreover, the putative Stichwort (אָקראַ/καλέω) is not reproduced in Mark's citation of Jeremiah, and is not in any case the matter at issue. Even were one to accept Marcus' proposal, this would only establish how Mark *justified* the juxtaposition—not what *motivated* it in the first place.

¹⁰ MT: מַעֲרַת פְּרָצִים; LXX: σπήλαιον ληστῶν.

¹¹ Jer 7.8-10, 17-18.

A second, more viable rejoinder to my claim that a literary reading alone cannot account for the incongruity of these texts is that the Temple incident itself is too narrow a focus for assessing their cohesiveness. When the lens under which Jesus' words are scrutinized is broadened to include the accompanying pericope of the cursed fig tree, the mist begins to clear. In its Markan form,¹² this episode frames Jesus' Temple action:

And the next day, as they were going out from Bethany, he became hungry.

And seeing from a distance a fig tree that had leaves, he went [to see] whether perhaps he would find something on it, but having come to it, he found nothing but leaves; for it was not the season for figs.

And responding, he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again."

And his disciples heard.

[Jesus' Temple action]

And as they were passing by early in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots.

And having remembered, Peter said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree which you cursed has withered."

And responding, Jesus said to them:

"Have faith in God. Amen I say to you that whoever should say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he speaks comes to pass, it will be his. Therefore I say to you, everything—as many things as you pray and ask for—believe that you have received, and they will be yours. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against someone, so that your father in the heavens may also forgive you your transgressions."¹³

Irrespective of how one construes Mark's "sandwiching" technique, by which one episode encapsulates another in an A-B-A¹ sequence,¹⁴ it is undeniable that the evangelist paired his stories on the basis of shared lexical and thematic motifs.¹⁵ With this pattern in view, the appropriateness of Isaiah 56.7 becomes evident. Its emphasis on the Temple's function as a house of prayer causes the closing accent of the story to fall on Jesus' teaching concerning prayer.

¹² Matthew detaches the two pericopes (21.12-22) whereas Luke deletes the fig tree episode altogether (19.45-48). The fig tree story may well have pre-existed the Synoptics as an independent tradition. It can certainly be read independently of the Temple incident.

¹³ Mk 11.12-14, 20-25.

¹⁴ For a detailed study of this phenomenon in Mark's gospel, see T. Shepherd, *Markan Sandwich Stories: Narration, Definition, and Function* (Berrien Springs: Andrew University, 1993).

¹⁵ The classical example is Mk 5.22-43, where the story of the hemorrhaging woman (whose malady had persisted for twelve years) frames Jesus' healing of Jairus' daughter (who is twelve years old).

But what of Jeremiah 7.11? No overt leitmotif links this diatribe to its narrative envelope. A biblically literate audience might well connect the cursing of the fig tree to Jeremiah 8.13,¹⁶ but the basic disjuncture with Isaiah 56.7 would persist: how does the “brigand-like” behavior of the Temple leadership—whatever that is imagined to consist of—detract from Gentiles approaching Mount Zion to worship the God of Israel?

Recognition that a purely literary analysis will not yield a satisfactory solution has driven scholars to seek an answer in Mark’s audience.¹⁷ Unfortunately, given the dearth of clues as to the identity and situation of Mark’s readership, a lack of consensus, fueled by imaginative conjecture and strained argumentation, continues to characterize this discussion.¹⁸ For the approach I advocate here, the only important variable is when Mark wrote, the chronological threshold being the outbreak of the Jewish War in 66 CE.

Church tradition identifies Mark as the interpreter of Simon Peter, who allegedly perished during the Neronian persecution of 64.¹⁹ Patristic testimony does not agree on the timeframe of Mark’s compositional activity, but among the variant views is the assertion that the writing took place sometime after Peter’s death.²⁰ The historical value of these traditions is dubious and disputed, but their existence requires that a pre-66 dating for Mark be entertained as a possibility. The chronological window is a narrow one, but it is conceivable.

Since the mid-1950s, Jesus’ eschatological discourse (Mark 13) has been viewed as the crux for dating Mark’s gospel.²¹ Debate has focused on the issue of whether or not Jesus’ forecast of the Temple’s destruction is a *post eventum* prophecy, and thus whether Mark was written before or after 70 CE. The thesis of the present essay does not affect that question one way or the other; it does suggest, however, contrary to conventional wisdom, that Mark 13 is not the best place to begin an evaluation of the gospel’s historical setting.

My thesis is that Mark 11.17 provides firmer footing for dating the gospel and for appreciating the impact of the Jewish War upon the form, content and perspective of its narrative. I contend that Jesus’ Temple saying (at least in the form in which we have received it) reflects awareness—and constitutes a condemnation—of events connected with the outbreak of the

¹⁶ MT: “Gathering, I will end them (utterance of YHWH): no grapes on the vine and no figs on the fig trees; even the leaves have withered.” Following hard upon the Temple sermon, the prophet pronounces destruction on Israel by likening its impending doom to agricultural barrenness. For other Jeremian fig metaphors, see 24.1-10; 29.17-19.

¹⁷ Most extensively, W. R. Telford, *The Barren Temple and the Withered Fig Tree: A Redaction-critical Analysis of the Cursing of the Fig Tree Pericope in Mark’s Gospel and Its Relation to the Cleansing of the Temple Tradition* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1980) with discussion of earlier scholarship. See also Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 781-796.

¹⁸ For recent critical surveys of scholarly opinion, see J. Marcus, *Mark 1-8* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 25-39. and A. Y. Collins, *Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 96-102. Cf. J. R. Donahue, “The Quest for the Community of Mark’s Gospel,” in *The Four Gospels 1992: Festschrift Frans Neirynck*. Vol. 2 (eds. F. van Segbroeck, C. Tuckett, G. van Belle, and J. Verheyden; Leuven: Leuven University, 1992), 817-838.

¹⁹ For Mark as Peter’s ἐρμηνευτής, see Eusebius, *Ecc. Hist.*, 3.39.15. For traditions about Peter’s death, see Eusebius, *ibid.* 2.25.1-8.

²⁰ Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.1.1. Papias, the earliest authority (*apud* Eusebius, *op. cit.*), does not specify when Mark wrote.

²¹ Donahue, “The Quest,” 817-818. On the modern history of Mark 13’s interpretation, see G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days: The Interpretation of the Olivet Discourse* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993).

Jewish revolt against Rome in the summer of 66. The analysis that follows thus operates on the premise that Mark may have composed his gospel later than 66, but not before.

The Jewish War

The Jewish revolt of 66-73 CE had tragic consequences for Jews everywhere. Not only did it bring about the destruction of the Temple and, with it, the obsolescence of its priesthood; it also resulted in the transfer of the half-shekel donation—an important expression of religious loyalty and ethnic solidarity—to the imperial treasury under the aegis of Rome’s tutelary deity, Jupiter Capitolinus.²² The conflict coincided with serious upheaval in Rome itself, ushering in a new imperial order controlled by the Flavian dynasty, in whose claim to legitimacy the suppression of Judea loomed large.²³

Our sole surviving contemporary account of the Jewish War is the history of the same name composed by Josephus,²⁴ an aristocratic priest who commanded Jewish forces during the early stages of the revolt, and who subsequently witnessed the siege of Jerusalem as a Roman prisoner and collaborator.²⁵ Following the Flavian victory, he was awarded Roman citizenship and patronized by the imperial family as a member of the expatriate Jewish community in the capital, where he composed his *Bellum Judaicum* (hereafter, BJ).²⁶

Josephus’ shifting fortunes inevitably colored BJ, and the historiographical problems involved in extracting an “objective” narrative of causes and events are legion.²⁷ This essay will not venture into that thicket. Instead, I wish to compare Josephus’ account of the war’s outbreak *as a narrative* with Mark 11.17 *as a narrative*, arguing that the former can help make sense of the

²² On the origin of the donation, see J. Liver, “The Half-Shekel Offering in Biblical and Post-Biblical Literature,” *HTR* 56 (1963): 173-198. On its significance for Jewish identity, see E. S. Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2002), 243-247. For the impact of its transformation into the *fiscus Judaicus*, see M. Goodman, “Nerva, the *Fiscus Judaicus* and Jewish Identity,” *JRS* 79 (1989): 40-44.

²³ On the imperial context, see B. Levick, *Vespasian* (London: Routledge, 1999) and K. Wellesley, *The Year of the Four Emperors*. 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2000). On the significance of Judea’s defeat for Flavian propaganda, see D. R. Edwards, “Religion, Power and Politics: Jewish Defeats by the Romans in Iconography and Josephus” in *Diaspora Jews And Judaism: Essays in Honor of, and in Dialogue with, A. Thomas Kraabel* (eds. J. A. Overman and R. S. MacLennan; Atlanta: Scholars, 1992), 293-310 and J. A. Overman, “The First Revolt and Flavian politics” in *The First Jewish Revolt: Archaeology, History, and Ideology* (eds. A. M. Berlin and J. A. Overman; London: Routledge, 2002), 213-220.

²⁴ Josephus’ *Vita* provides a detailed account of his generalship in Galilee, but contributes little substantive information about the causes and outbreak of the war.

²⁵ For Josephus’ career in general, see T. Rajak, *Josephus: The Historian and His Society* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) and L. H. Feldman, “Josephus (CE 37-c. 100),” in *The Cambridge History of Judaism, Volume Three: The Early Roman Period* (eds. W. Horbury, W. D. Davies, and J. Sturdy; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999), 901-921.

²⁶ On the Roman context of BJ, see S. Mason, “Of Audience and Meaning: Reading Josephus’s *Judean War* in the Context of a Flavian Audience,” in *Josephus, Judea, and Christian Origins: Methods and Categories* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2009), 45-68.

²⁷ See especially J. S. McLaren, *Turbulent Times? Josephus and Scholarship on Judaea in the First Century CE* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), G. Mader, *Josephus & the Politics of Historiography: Apologetic & Impression Management in the Bellum Judaicum* (Leiden: Brill, 2000) and S. Mason, “Josephus as Authority for First-Century Judea,” in *Josephus, Judea, and Christian Origins: Methods and Categories* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2009), 7-44.

latter. Josephus is valuable to the study of Mark not only because BJ opens a window onto the earliest Gospel's probable *Sitz im Leben*, but more importantly because Mark and Josephus make use of the war for comparable literary and theological ends.

Josephus' explanation of the circumstances that precipitated the conflict is complex and many-faceted. It comes as the climax to a story of steadily escalating tensions between Roman rulers and Jewish subjects, in which rural banditry, urban terrorism, prophetic protest, and flawed administration all play a role.²⁸ The last Roman magistrate to govern Judea, Gessius Florus, receives the lion's share of the blame for provoking hostilities.²⁹ His unsuccessful attempt to access the Temple treasury in the face of an obdurate populace results in a general massacre, and King Agrippa's refusal to send a delegation to Rome to denounce Florus short-circuits efforts to defuse the situation.³⁰

It is at this juncture that Josephus narrates an incident, which he presents as a "foundation" (καταβολή) of the war:³¹

And simultaneously at the Temple, Eleazer, son of Ananias the high priest, a most bold youth, then serving as chief officer, persuaded those who were performing the Temple service to accept a gift or sacrifice from no foreigner. And this was a foundation for the war against the Romans; for they rejected the sacrifice offered on behalf of Caesar's affairs.³² And though both the chief priests and the notables pleaded earnestly that the custom on behalf of the rulers not be abandoned, they did not give in, putting confidence in their own great multitude—for the most vigorous part of the revolutionaries also collaborated with them—but above all looking to Eleazar because he was serving as chief officer.

Therefore the powerful, having assembled in the same place with the chief priests and the notables of the Pharisees, as against calamities that were already beyond repair, took counsel concerning the whole situation; and before the Bronze Gate which was within the Temple facing the sun's rising, they gathered the people together to make trial—by arguments—of the insurgents as regards their policy.

And firstly, being greatly angered at the recklessness of their revolt and by the fact that they were stirring up so great a war against the homeland, they proceeded to expose the baselessness of the alleged pretext, declaring that their ancestors had adorned the sanctuary in large part from foreigners, having always accepted gifts from the foreign nations, and that not only did they not block anyone's sacrifices—for this would have

²⁸ For a detailed exposition and critical analysis of this portrait, see McLaren, *Turbulent Times?*, 78-107.

²⁹ BJ 2.277-283.

³⁰ BJ 2.293-407.

³¹ Josephus collocates this with the capture of the fortress of Masada by unnamed insurgents (BJ 2.408). Though consequential for subsequent developments, the relevance of this event for the καταβολή is unclear, and in any case does not affect our reading of the latter. Earlier on, Josephus presents a civil disruption in Caesarea Maritima as the straw that broke the camel's back (BJ 2.284-296), but his efforts to establish a direct causal link between this and the onset of hostilities in Jerusalem seem strained.

³² Daily sacrifices on behalf of the emperor and Roman people had been instituted under Augustus (Philo, *Legat.* 157, 317; cf. BJ 2.197), an arrangement that enabled Jews to express their collective allegiance to Rome without compromising the monolatric demands of their faith. While Philo states that the emperor traditionally subsidized these offerings, Josephus claims the Jews themselves paid for them (CA 2.77). The latter view, however, seems to be belied by the present episode (so, rightly, J. M. G. Barclay, *Against Apion* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 210-211 n. 268).

been most sacrilegious—but that they had also set up their dedicatory offerings around the Temple, visible and enduring for so long a time.

But that now—provoking the Romans’ arms and courting war from them—they were introducing an alien cultic regulation, and were at risk of passing a vote of sacrilege against the city, if at the Jews’ Temple alone no foreigner should either sacrifice or pay reverence. Even if someone were to apply this law to a mere private individual, he would be angered at the inhumanity so ordained, but *they* overlook it when Romans and *Caesar* are excluded.

[The opponents of this policy declared] that they indeed feared lest, having rejected the sacrifices offered on their [the Romans’] behalf, they [the Jews] too should be prevented from sacrificing on their own behalf, and the city be excluded from the empire, unless, having come swiftly to their senses, they should restore the sacrifices and amend the insult before word of it reached those whom they had insulted.

While they were saying these things, they brought forward priests who were leading experts on the ancestral traditions, [who confirmed] that all their ancestors had accepted sacrifices from foreigners. But none of the revolutionaries would listen; instead, those performing the Temple service,³³ in preparing for themselves the foundation of the war, would not submit.

Since they saw, therefore, both that the present insurgency was already hard for them to overthrow and that the threat from the Romans would come upon them first, the powerful endeavored to absolve themselves of blame, and they were sending emissaries—some, whom Simon b. Ananias was leading, to Florus; others to Agrippa, notable among whom were Saulos, Antipas and Kostobaros, related to the king by birth.³⁴

In spite of his detailed paraphrase of the arguments launched against Eleazar and his allies, Josephus’ studied omission of basic facts about this controversy—its causal connection (or lack thereof) to other events associated with the deterioration of Roman-Judean relations, the ostensible motive prompting rejection of Gentile gifts and sacrifices, the arguments used to justify the policy, the precise identity of its supporters, etc.—renders the task of historical reconstruction extremely difficult.³⁵

Nonetheless, the material outcome of the incident is clear. Opponents of Eleazar’s policy publicized their own construal of its implications—first to the people of Jerusalem, then to the Roman establishment (Florus and Agrippa)—in order to disclaim responsibility for what might follow from it. The “foundation” of the war was not their doing; instead, it was neatly attributed to a revision of the Temple’s sacrificial and votive protocol over which they admitted no control. Since war did, in fact, break out soon after, leading to eventual Roman victory, survivors could continue to exploit this narrative (or others like it) in order to shield themselves from possible repercussions.

³³ A variant tradition reads ληστρικοί (“brigand-like ones”) in place of λειτουργοί (“those ministering”). In fact, both variants yield awkward readings. For the textual witnesses, see B. Niese, *Flavii Iosephi Opera, Vol. VI: De Bello Iudaico* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1895), 231.

³⁴ BJ 2.409-418.

³⁵ For a laundry list of obstacles, see McLaren, *Turbulent Times?*, 268-277.

But apologetics can also serve a constructive purpose. In a Flavian world, where official dynastic propaganda (reinforced by the diversion of the half-shekel donation to the Capitoline) advertised the Jewish defeat as a triumph of Rome's gods, Josephus' account of the war constituted a counter-narrative that re-read the tragedy in quasi-biblical terms: God had used the Romans (as he had used the Assyrians and Babylonians before them) as agents of chastisement because some Jews had violated the covenant.³⁶ A return to covenantal fidelity held out the possibility of rehabilitation.³⁷

Although overt covenantal phraseology is lacking from Josephus' depiction of the Eleazar incident, the emphatic charge of sacrilege (ἀσεβέστατον, ἀσέβεια) in the opposing speech, while thoroughly intelligible to a Greco-Roman milieu, also finds significant resonance in Deuteronomic discourse.³⁸ In its secular sense, covenantal logic is also implicit in Josephus' artful deployment of treaty language, juxtaposing the "exclusion" of Romans from the Temple with the threat of Jerusalem's own "exclusion" from the *Pax Romana*.³⁹ Josephus' account of Eleazar's Temple action contributes to his overarching scenario of covenant violation and divine retribution.

Jesus' Temple Saying and Eleazar's Temple Action

The thesis that events of the Jewish War have shaped Mark 11.17 is not new. For the most part, however, scholars have concentrated on the second half of Jesus' saying ("you have made it a cave of brigands").⁴⁰ The LXX rendering of Jeremiah's פִּרְצִים by ληστᾶί (a common Josephan branding for those who participated in the revolt⁴¹) lends itself to the insinuation that the conduct of the Temple leadership in Jesus' own day somehow prefigured (or was laying a foundation for?) the insurrection that would compromise their progeny a generation later. It is easy to imagine how a post-war (or even wartime) audience could have made sense of Mark 11.17 in this way, especially when read in the context of the passion narrative as a whole, as I shall argue in the next section.

While plausible, this line of reasoning leaves the problem of Isaiah 56.7 unresolved. The cave of brigands charge could have other referents besides the war. As an *ad hominem* attack it could have been used persuasively by any critic of the Temple leadership during any time in its history. By contrast, the deformation of Isaiah's house of prayer for all the nations requires a much more

³⁶ For Josephus, the decisive transgression that provoked divine wrath was the defilement of the sanctuary resulting from the rebels' internecine bloodshed during their occupation of the Temple precinct (BJ 4.388; 5.19).

³⁷ BJ 5.19 (addressing the personified Temple): "But might you be able to become well again, if ever you should in fact propitiate the God that destroyed [you]!"

³⁸ LXX, for example, uses ἀσέβεια to render Hebrew רִשְׁעָה in Dt 9.4-5, which alludes to the cultic deviance of the nations Israel has been ordained to supplant (cf. Dt 12.29-30).

³⁹ BJ 2.415-416. In both instances Josephus uses the adjective ἔκσπονδος, which derives from the association of libations to the gods with the consecration of peace treaties between warring polities. One might also note the correlative fear that the Jews "should be prevented from sacrificing on their own behalf" (415). The unexpressed agent of this obstruction could be understood to be the Romans, but it could also mean God, taking κολυθῶσι as a divine passive.

⁴⁰ E.g., J. Marcus, "The Jewish War and the *Sitz im Leben* of Mark," *JBL* 111(1992): 441-462.

⁴¹ For examples, see K. H. Rengstorff, *A Complete Concordance to Flavius Josephus, Volume III: Α—Π* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 29-30.

specific set of circumstances to be rhetorically effective as a counterpoint to Jeremiah 7.11. Neither Jesus' own context in the 30's nor the Jewish war in general satisfies those conditions.

Although the Eleazar incident makes no reference to prayer or the prevention of Gentiles from praying in the Temple, it must be acknowledged that the exact parameters of Eleazar's program are far from clear, due to Josephus' myopic reporting. The opposition's argumentation itself creates a degree of ambiguity, alternatively discussing sacrifice, dedicatory gifts, and (rather more nebulously) "reverence."⁴² Conversely, "prayer" in Isaiah 56.7 stands in parallelism with "their burnt offerings and sacrifices,"⁴³ indicating that the "house of prayer" trope should not be understood in a restrictive sense, but metonymically for a range of cultic activities.⁴⁴

Even if the dissimilarity of prayer and sacrifice is given full weight, two basic, structural parallels between Mark's gospel and BJ remain. First, both narratives allege that a deviation threatening the Temple's proper function has occurred, with negative ramifications for Gentile participation. Second, in both cases, failure to effect a return to normalcy forebodes violent catastrophe for the innovators, and for the Temple itself. In fact, if one were to take seriously the assertion of his critics (that a ban on foreign sacrifices and gifts was unprecedented), that would render Eleazar's action the only occasion during the entire six centuries of the Temple's existence when a situation compatible with the scenario implied by Mark 11.17 is actually known to have been present.

The unique circumstances of the Eleazar incident account for the Isaian as well as the Jeremian components of Jesus' Temple saying, and illuminate the dynamic of their combination. Mark has Jesus, in effect, indicting the Temple leaders for a crime they have not yet committed. By overlaying Jesus' Temple action with an allusion to Eleazar's exclusionary policy, Mark brings Jesus' prophetic voice to bear on the catastrophe of the evangelist's own time. Why Mark does this, and what effect it has on the shape of his theology and artistry, are questions to which I now turn.

Temple Saying and Passion Narrative

Jesus' Temple saying inaugurates two themes that thread their way through the final third of Mark's gospel. The first of these centers on the figure of the ληστής; the second, on the Temple's destruction. Both occupy prominent positions in Mark's passion narrative. By interweaving Jesus' fate with that of the Temple—and both with the conduct of the Temple leadership—Mark produces a narrative that would resonate with a wartime or post-war audience.

⁴² The verb, προσκυνέω, means to prostrate oneself with the implication of worship or reverence. For Josephus usage, see K. H. Rengstorff, *Concordance, Vol. III*, 563-564.

⁴³ MT: עולתיהם ובחיהם

⁴⁴ At least in its Isaian context. One could argue that Jesus' Temple saying deliberately suppresses the parallelism of prayer and sacrifice in order to reconfigure the citation's meaning. Such an hypothesis, however, would warrant attention only if a plausible motive could be established for the alleged limitation of Isaiah's original sense. The correlation of the Temple saying with Jesus' teaching on prayer (noted above) might serve as supporting evidence, but it would not account for Mark's emphasis on "all the nations"—a motif absent from the prayer teaching and, interestingly, deleted in the other Synoptic versions of the Temple saying (Mt 21.13; Lk 19.46).

Echoing Jeremiah, Jesus likens the Temple to a cave of λησται.⁴⁵ The implied characterization of the chief priests, scribes and elders as lawless and violent is reinforced by Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants, who murder the son of their landlord in order to assert possession over his vineyard.⁴⁶ This provocation results in redoubled efforts to do away with Jesus—thereby compounding the irony, since the leaders' reaction locks them into the very role they seek to disavow.⁴⁷ When they finally succeed in cornering him, Jesus queries his captors, “As against a ληστής have you come out with swords and clubs to seize me? Day after day I was right in front of you in the Temple teaching and you did not take hold of me.”⁴⁸ The quip cuts both ways. A mob armed with swords and clubs is the very image of a brigand band; by implication, this makes the chief priests (ἀρχιερείς) figuratively equivalent to brigand-chiefs (ἀρχιλησται).⁴⁹ Jesus' crucifixion between two λησται completes this ironic role reversal.⁵⁰

But the point of Mark's profiling is not simply to vilify the Temple leadership. No deployment of the term, ληστής, after 66 CE could remain insulated from the atmosphere of the Roman-Judean conflict. In Mark, this context surfaces with exceptional clarity in the Barabbas episode.⁵¹ Jesus, the authentic “Son of the Father,”⁵² is wrongfully condemned, while his counterfeit namesake, a στασιώτης⁵³ (another Josephan shorthand for the belligerents⁵⁴) is released by incitement of the chief priests, whose own descendants will take a leading role in the revolt. Like fathers, like sons.⁵⁵

Although Mark 11.17 does not mention the Temple's destruction, that eventuality is already encoded in the Jeremian excerpt. Moreover, the frame pericope about Jesus cursing the fig tree (“May no one ever eat fruit from you again!”), by its position and symbolism, compels the question: will the Temple continue? The answer comes two chapters later, while Jesus is departing the sacred compound for the last time: “Not a stone will be left upon a stone here that will not surely be thrown down.”⁵⁶ This verdict returns in a different form in the charge brought against Jesus at his arraignment before the Temple leaders: “We heard him saying ‘I will throw

⁴⁵ Mk 11.18. That the chief priests and their associates stand behind the Temple routine Jesus disrupts seems confirmed by the fact that it is they who challenge his presumption to alter those arrangements (Mk 11.21-33).

⁴⁶ Mk 12.1-9.

⁴⁷ Mk 12.12: “And they were seeking to seize him, and they feared the crowd, for they knew he spoke the parable against them.”

⁴⁸ Mk 14.48-49.

⁴⁹ ἀρχιλησται appear in BJ with some frequency (1.204; 2.56, 253, 275; 4.135; 5.30).

⁵⁰ Mk 15.27.

⁵¹ Mk 15.6-15.

⁵² This is the meaning of Barabbas' Aramaic name. Cf. Mk 14.36.

⁵³ Mk 14.7 describes Barabbas as one of those incarcerated “among the στασιώται who had committed murder in the στάσις.” Efforts to historicize this allusion (i.e., using it as evidence for an otherwise unattested insurrection during Pontius Pilate's tenure) are beside the point. Mark's comment would have connected Barabbas thematically with the insurgency in his own day. See, however, the cautionary remarks of Bond concerning Mark's association of Barabbas with the στασιώται (H. K. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1998), 111-112).

⁵⁴ In actuality, Josephus consistently uses the form, στασιαστής, in BJ. The variant, στασιώτης, appears only in his *Jewish Antiquities*. See K. H. Rengstorff, *A Complete Concordance to Flavius Josephus, Volume IV: P—Ω* (Leiden: Brill, 1983), 39-41.

⁵⁵ The irony is made doubly stark inasmuch as the punchline of Jesus' earlier parable forecasts annihilation for the tenants' crime: the demise of the Temple leadership resulting from the war is divine retribution for their execution of Jesus forty years earlier.

⁵⁶ Mk 13.2.

down this sanctuary made with hands and after three days I will build another not made with hands.”⁵⁷ Although Mark as narrator brands this report “false testimony,”⁵⁸ its verbal overlap with Jesus’ earlier pronouncement,⁵⁹ together with its chronological correspondence with the interval of Jesus’ death and resurrection,⁶⁰ alerts the audience to the fact that (like every other statement in the passion narrative) the charge is to be read ironically—that is, as pointing to some deeper truth.⁶¹ That intimation is confirmed by Mark’s repetition of the charge at Jesus’ crucifixion,⁶² and its proximity to the prodigy that occurs at the instant of Jesus’ expiration: “The curtain of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom.”⁶³

The ironic character of Mark’s passion narrative all but requires that the Temple’s status, and its connection to Jesus’ death, be addressed more through indirection than straightforward exposition. The cumulative impact of Mark’s story-telling is *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, not systematic theology. What links the destruction of the body with the destruction of the building most directly is not the parable of the wicked tenants, but the eschatological discourse introduced by Jesus’ Temple oracle. The framing motif of this discourse is “the hour” of the Temple’s destruction—and, by extension, “the hour” of the eschaton itself:

“Tell us: when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be fulfilled?”⁶⁴

“Amen I say to you that this generation will surely not pass away until all these things come to pass. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my oracles will not pass away. But concerning that day and that hour no one knows—neither the messengers in heaven nor the son; only the father. Watch out! Stay awake! For you do not know when the time is. [It is] as when a man goes abroad, having left his household and having given authority to his slaves—to each his work—and he commanded the doorkeeper that he stay awake. So stay awake! For you do not know when the master of the house is coming—whether at evening or midnight or cockcrow or early morning—lest, having come suddenly, he might find you sleeping. What I am saying to you I am saying to all: stay awake!”⁶⁵

⁵⁷ Mk 14.58.

⁵⁸ Mk 14.57: *τινες ἀναστάντες ἐψευδομαρτύρουν κατ’ αὐτοῦ.*

⁵⁹ Both oracles employ the verb, *καταλύειν*, “to throw down.” Note, however, that whereas 14.58 specifies a single structure (“this sanctuary”) as the object of destruction, 13.2 is directed against an unspecified plurality (“these great buildings”), which may or may not include the sanctuary. (The occasion of 13.2 is Jesus’ departure from the *ιερόν*, not the *ναός*. See the remarks of Y. Z. Eliav, *God’s Mountain: The Temple Mount in Time, Place, and Memory*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2005), 52-60.) The distinction is probably irrelevant to Mark as far as the theme of destruction is concerned, but may indicate two quite different settings for these sayings in their original, pre-Markan context.

⁶⁰ Already announced by Jesus’ passion predictions (Mk 8.31; 9.31; 10.34).

⁶¹ Note that in John’s gospel a permutation of this oracle is affirmed by Jesus himself (2.19).

⁶² Mk 15.29-30: “Ha! You who are throwing down the sanctuary and building [another] in three days! Save yourself by coming down from the cross!” Mark’s decision to convey this mockery with present indicative participles (*καταλύων, οἱ κοδομῶν*) intensifies the irony, suggesting that the action is progressively unfolding as these very words are being uttered.

⁶³ Mk 15.38. On the possible meaning(s) of this motif, see Marcus, “The Jewish War,” 1066-1068.

⁶⁴ Mk 13.4.

⁶⁵ Mk 13.30-37.

What is striking about Jesus' admonition to vigilance is the way its terminology intercalates the eschatological hour with the timeline of Jesus' own "handing over" in the very next chapter.⁶⁶ This mirroring reveals (in both the narrative and theological senses of that term) that Jesus' passion and the Temple's κατάλυσις are to be treated as related events. Mark's gospel therefore encourages a post-66 CE audience to engage the catastrophe of the Jewish War as integral—not incidental—to the (continued) unfolding of the "good news of Jesus Christ."⁶⁷ It is the Temple saying that sets this hermeneutical chain reaction in motion.

Temple Saying and Gospel

It is a truism that εὐαγγέλιον, for Mark, refers both to Jesus' declaration of the kingdom (with its attendant manifestations) as well as the report about God's vindication of Jesus from death (with its messianic implications). But what distinguishes the Markan kerygma most sharply from its Pauline antecedent is its involvement of Temple/ληστῆς imagery discussed above. Once it is recognized that allusions to the Jewish revolt are more than chronographic window-dressing to Mark's gospel, it must be asked how Mark co-opts that conflict in order to shape the consciousness of his hearers. How can the Temple's destruction be "good news?"

The simple answer is that it isn't—any more than are Jesus' own sufferings.⁶⁸ Nowhere does Mark's Jesus evince joy at the prospect of the Temple's demise or gloat over the impending doom of its leaders. Like Josephus, Mark frames the war as a tragedy. Yet, as noted earlier, Josephus reads that tragedy with a Deuteronomic grain of salt: Rome's triumphalism is misplaced. This was a demonstration of God's sovereignty, of which Flavian rule is only the by-product. This is good news, inasmuch as it affirms the possibility of rehabilitation and renewed blessing (as a victory of Rome's gods would not). The same seems to be true for Mark, if the "false" oracle attributed to Jesus concerning another Temple "not made with hands" is taken seriously.⁶⁹ Mark's collocation of destruction imagery with the revelation of Jesus as the anointed monarch neutralizes the Flavian triumph. For Mark, the Temple's downfall verifies Jesus' rule—not Vespasian's. That is why it is an essential ingredient to Mark's εὐαγγέλιον.

⁶⁶ At evening Jesus shares the Passover meal with his disciples (14.17); between evening and cockcrow (midnight) "the hour" of his handing over arrives (14.41); at cockcrow (pre-dawn) he is arraigned before the Temple leaders (14.68); at early morning the Temple leaders hand him over to Pilate for trial (15.1).

⁶⁷ Mk 1.1.

⁶⁸ Mk 14.34-36.

⁶⁹ On the possible valence of this expression, see Collins, *Mark*, 701-703.