

Into the Holy Place: exorcising the temple (Mark 11: 11-26)

Jesus enters the city

11 Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Jesus Curses the Fig Tree

12 On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. ¹³Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴He said to it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.' And his disciples heard it.

Jesus Cleanses the Temple

15 Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; ¹⁶and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. ¹⁷He was teaching and saying, 'Is it not written,

"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations"?

But you have made it a den of robbers.'

¹⁸And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. ¹⁹And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

The Lesson from the Withered Fig Tree

20 In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots.

²¹Then Peter remembered and said to him, 'Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.'²²Jesus answered them, 'Have faith in God. ²³Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, "Be taken up and thrown into the sea", and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you.

²⁴So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

25 'Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.'

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Commentary

Entry into Jerusalem: anticlimax? (11:11)

Far from a "triumphal entry", Mark tells us that Jesus entered Jerusalem, went to the temple and "looked around at everything"; he then returned to Bethany, because "the hour was late" (literally). Far from being an anticlimax, however, we need to see this as careful scene-setting by Mark: it is a deliberate and significant

reconnaissance by Jesus, shaping his actions for the drama that will begin to unfold on the following day. Jesus is beginning what Ched Myers has rightly termed his second “direct action campaign”. The scene of the first campaign was Capernaum (1: 21-3:25), which culminated in the Be’elzebul controversy: what is the source of Jesus’ power as an exorcist? You will recall that this leads to Jesus’ statement about “ransacking the Strong Man’s house” (3: 23-27). In this second campaign, Jesus will “exorcise” the temple – the House of God – leading to the question of the source of his authority (11: 27-28). Jesus has come to confront the temple authorities. He is bringing the fight to Jerusalem. Look at the elements of scene setting:

1. Jesus *goes directly to the temple* – the scene and focus of the confrontation to come.
2. He *looks around and sees everything*. This is reconnaissance, not tourism. The verb, “to look around” (*periblempsamenos*) is a term unique to Mark in the New Testament. It means, “to assess”. He has used it in 3:5, when Jesus looks around and sees the hard-heartedness of the Pharisees, who are using his Sabbath healing as a trap to accuse him of law breaking. He uses it again in 3:34, 5:32, 9:8 and 10:23. In his hands, it signifies Jesus taking everything in – seeing and reading things as they really are. Nothing is hidden from Jesus’ gaze. This assessment determines Jesus’ responses and actions. We ought to understand Mark as telling us that Jesus spent time observing and evaluating the workings of the temple (he “saw everything”) in order to formulate his strategy. The events of the following day will unfold directly on the basis of his observations and assessment.
3. Jesus then *withdraws to Bethany* because *the hour was late*. Bethany is the centre of Jesus’ operations. This is where he can live safely in hiding from the Jerusalem authorities (which is why they will need Judas to sell Jesus’ whereabouts and movements out). The reconnaissance has been meticulous and detailed; it is now too late to begin to act on what he has observed. But there is also a play here on the difference between *hora* (hour) in 11:11 and *kairos* (time for action), which Mark is about to introduce (11:13).

Mark has set the scene for confrontation that Jesus is deliberately engineering (hence the aptness of Myers’ term, “campaign”). As Palm Sunday draws to a close, we are standing on the threshold of Jesus “denying himself and taking up his cross”.

The sign of the fig tree (11: 12-14/20-24)

Mark sandwiches his account of the exorcism between two encounters with a fig tree. In the first (11: 12-14), Jesus and the disciples are en route from Bethany to the temple. Jesus, who is hungry, sees a fig tree in leaf, and goes to see whether he can find any figs to relieve his hunger. Finding none, he curses the fig tree. On the following morning (11: 20-24), the disciples encounter the same fig tree, now withered to its roots.

This is not a “hangry” Jesus in a fit of divine pique! The cursing of the fig tree is a prophetic symbolic act that summarises and reveals the significance and meaning of the series of encounters Jesus is about to have with the temple authorities (11:15-

12:44), culminating in Jesus prophesying the complete destruction of the temple (13:2).

The fig tree is a central symbolic biblical motif – a metaphor for Israel as a temple-based nation under Yahweh’s rule. It figures prominently in the prophetic books of the Old Testament as an emblem of peace, security and prosperity. Its fruit is a sign of Yahweh’s blessing, as well as Israel’s faithfulness. Its withering is an image of Yahweh’s judgement on Israel or its enemies. (cf Jeremiah 8:13; Isaiah 28:3f; Hosea 9:10,16; Micah 7:1; Joel 1: 7,12). Frequently, the cause of God’s judgement is given as a corrupt temple cult and sacrificial system, linked to injustice and oppression of the poor. This is how Mark intends us to read this incident. Jesus is en route to exorcise the temple. The “barren” fig tree symbolizes the corruption of the temple in its oppression of the poor, collusion with Rome and opposition to Jesus.

The key is his use of *kairos* (translated as “season”) in 11:13. There are no figs because it is not yet fig season. That is hardly blameworthy, however inconvenient it is to a hungry Jesus. Mark’s point, however, is that the absence of figs is a symbol of Israel’s unreadiness for God’s presence and mission in Jesus – a resistance centred on the temple. *Kairos* is “God-time” (cf Luke 19:44, who has Jesus weep over Jerusalem and prophesy its destruction “because you did not recognize *the time of your visitation from God!*” [*kairos*]).

The incident of the fig tree is a mini-sermon on Hosea 9:16. What Jesus has experienced and observed during his reconnaissance has confirmed that the temple system is terminally corrupt. It cannot be reformed or repaired. God will destroy it – it will be “withered away to its roots”. The cursing of the fig tree is Jesus-as-prophet, pronouncing Yahweh’s judgement on the temple system that operates in God’s name, but has become “a den of robbers”. In chapter 13, at the conclusion of his campaign, he will announce the end of the world – not of human history, but the end of the world symbolized by the temple-state.

Exorcising the temple (11: 15-18)

Mark presents the “cleansing of the temple” as an exorcism. The first of Jesus’ actions is to “cast out/drive out” those buying and selling in the temple market place. The verb, *ekballein*, is a technical exorcism term – the same word Mark uses of Jesus’ exorcisms of demons. As we will see in a moment, reading this incident is an exorcism is not dependent solely on his use of the term here; we need to read this alongside the story of the first exorcism in the Capernaum synagogue (1:21-28) and the resulting Be’elzebul controversy (3:20-27). Mark intends us to see the exorcism of the temple as Jesus “ransacking the Strong Man’s house” (3:27). Mark’s point is that, according to Jesus, the temple – God’s house – has been occupied by the Strong Man. This is the beginning of the unmasking of the powers ranged against the Kingdom: the temple, Rome and Satan. What is shocking and unthinkable is the inclusion of the temple in that unholy trinity. How can that be possible?

We will return to this in a moment. Firstly, we need to look at Jesus’ four actions in response to his assessment the previous day. The net effect of his first three actions

is to bring the economic and cultic operations of the temple that day to a grinding halt. Mark tells us that he:

- 1) *Began to drive out those buying and selling:* Jesus' first target is the temple marketplace, located probably in the outer Court of the Gentiles. Vincent Taylor (*The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, 1963), points out that "those who sold" traded in the birds and animals used for sacrifices, and in wine, oil and salt. "Those who bought" are the pilgrims who required these for the cultus. Jesus' target, however, is not the buyers and sellers, but the controlling interests of the temple economy itself. We need to be clear: Jesus' primary objection is not to the commercial enterprises of the temple economy per se, but to the ways in which they had been pressed into service *for the benefit* of the ruling classes and *as a means of exploiting* the poorest and most vulnerable. This will be unpacked in the series of confrontations that follow the initial exorcism of the temple.

We must not miss the echoes of Hosea 9 in Mark's shaping of the incident. Hosea prophesies against a nation whose temple worship has been corrupted:

- a) Israel's initial favour with Yahweh is described by the prophet: "Like the first fruit on the fig tree, in its first season, I saw your ancestors" (Hosea 9:10b).
- b) The corruption of the cult is then described: "But they came to Ba'al-peor, and consecrated themselves to a thing of shame, and became detestable, like the thing they loved" (9:10c).
- c) God's judgement is announced: "I will drive them out (*ekballein*) of my house ... all their rulers (*archontes*) are disobedient!" (9:15).

Hosea's prophecy is directed against Israel's rulers (cf Hosea 8:4). Jesus' purpose is to unmask the ruling class interests in control of the commercial enterprises of the temple, and the way in which cultic practice, theology, and the vulnerability of the poor is used by the temple authorities to amass wealth, as we shall see in as events unfold.

- 2) *Overtured the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those selling doves:* The moneychangers represented the first century equivalent of the major banking interests. They changed Greek or Roman money into the Jewish or Tyrian coinage in which alone temple duties could be paid. In the massively cosmopolitan Jerusalem of the day, massive revenues from all over the Mediterranean poured into the temple during the great feasts. This is no "local church offering" equivalent, but a sophisticated international economy.

Doves were the staple temple commodity relied upon by the poor. They were used primarily for the "purification of women" (Leviticus 14:22) and "cleansing of lepers" (Leviticus 15:14, 29). We have already seen how Jesus had repudiated the purity and debt systems – in particular, the marginalization of women and lepers (!:41ff/5:25ff).

In "overturning/destroying" (*katastrepsen*) the tables and seats, Jesus is calling

for an end to the entire cultic system that first marginalises and then exploits the most vulnerable and needy.

There is a deeper question here: to what extent is Jesus repudiating the entire money system itself? Is it enough to note only that Jesus objects to the flow of money from the poor to the already-wealthy? Kevin Snyman makes the point that the *nature of Empire* pushes us towards seeing Jesus engaging in a prophetic overturning of the entire monetary system. Empire, he argues, is sustained by an unholy alliance of state, market and religion. He points to the *nature of money itself* to argue that Jesus could never be advocating merely a *reform* of the monetary system, but must necessarily demand its *overthrow*.

We must not miss the force of the argument. The nature of money is *to create scarcity and therefore debt*. It is a limited resource that continually forces us to make choices about spending priorities. Money is power, so that its possession and use is a gospel question: if there is not enough to go round, we must ask whose interests it serves, and at whose expense. Money is not neutral: there are always beneficiaries and victims (those who do not have enough). The connection between the conspicuous wealth of the “haves” at the expense of the “have-nots” – the poor – is inescapable. If the Kingdom is for the least first, then its coming will entail not only the redistribution of wealth, but the abolition of scarcity/debt-creation itself.

What evidence is there in the narrative that Jesus himself held this view? For those of us who belong to “rich” churches - churches whose membership is *not* drawn from people whose daily existence is precarious because of their economic circumstances - the evidence is as disturbing as it is compelling:

- a) Jesus tells the rich would-be disciple to divest himself of money: “sell all your possessions, give the money to the poor and follow me” (10:21). He equates money with “treasures” that compete directly with Kingdom priorities (10:21), and goes on to tell his disciples that wealth makes it almost impossible to enter the Kingdom (10:24).
- b) Earlier, in the Feeding of the 5,000, Jesus’ compassion for the crowd’s hunger is contrasted with the disciples’ lack of money to buy bread (6:34-37). The interchange is significant: Jesus instructs the disciples to *give* them something to eat; the disciples respond that they do not have enough money to *buy* them bread. God’s Kingdom economy of abundance, grace and gift is contrasted with the Empire’s economy of scarcity, desert and money. The point of the miraculous feeding is clear: money prevents giving people what they need to live (“daily bread”). This is at the root of an economy of wealth and poverty, in sharp contrast with the over-abundance of gift that not only feeds the crowd, but also produces 12 baskets of leftovers.
- c) Jesus does not carry money. He will shortly be challenged by the temple authorities over the Poll Tax (12:13-17) and does not have the denarius on

him.

- d) Judas betrays Jesus for money.
- e) In the Synoptic tradition as a whole (which is based on Mark), 11 out of Jesus' 39 parables involve money. Money is the subject on which Jesus speaks most frequently (after the Kingdom of God), and almost always overwhelmingly negatively. He speaks of "wealth" rather than money, or refers to it as "Mammon" – ie a god that people worship – to emphasise the addictive, destructive hold it exercises over people.

It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that Jesus is not only alive to the destructive, corrupting influence of money, but appears to regard its very possession as polluting and spiritually dangerous. It is a form of power that creates advantage for those who have it, because they are able to live at the expense of the poor. Like religious ideology and military power, it will be swept away by the Great Reversal of the Kingdom, which is for the poor, the marginalized and the dispossessed first. The new world of the Kingdom will be constructed on God's entirely different "economy" of abundance, grace and gift, in which money, scarcity and debt have no place.

- 3) *Prevented anyone from carrying any vessel through the temple*: finally, Jesus acts to prevent anyone carrying cultic implements through the temple. What Mark describes is an effective complete shutdown of temple operations for the day.
- 4) *Teaches, "You have made it a den of robbers!"*: Jesus' condemnation of the temple weaves together two prophetic denunciations that would have been thoroughly familiar to his hearers - both the crowds, that are "spellbound by his teaching" and the chief priests and scribes, whose response is to "look for a way to kill him".

The first is Isaiah 56:7, the climax to the fullest Old Testament of an inclusive Israel. Israel is envisioned as "the temple for the whole world". The "house of prayer" on the "holy mountain" is to be a place of joy and welcome – particularly for the outcasts of Israel and for foreigners. That is what Jesus expects from the temple. Instead, the "pilgrimage of the nations" and the outcasts to the temple for the Passover feast has become an exceptional opportunity for exploitation and record profit!

The second part of the quotation is from Jeremiah 7:11 – what Ched Myers characterizes as "one of the bitterest attacks upon the temple state in the Hebrew Bible"!

- a) The oracle begins with the warning, "Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord ...'" (Jeremiah 7:4).

- b) Jeremiah announces that the covenant is conditional: Yahweh grants Israel a dwelling only insofar as justice toward the alien, the orphan, the widow and the innocent is maintained (Jeremiah 7: 5-7).
- c) If idolatry and exploitation become the norm, the temple will be destroyed, in the same manner as the first shrine at Shiloh (Jeremiah 7: 9-15).
- d) God is watching and notices the “abominations” (cf Jesus “looking around and seeing everything”), which have turned the temple into a “den of robbers” (7: 10-11).

In citing Jeremiah 7:11, Jesus is making his judgement on the temple unequivocal: Torah, temple and sacrifice – like the Sabbath – are “made by Yahweh for humanity”. When it is corrupted to serve the interests of the “rulers”, it is robbed of its purpose and no longer serves Yahweh, despite all outward appearances. That corruption is seen most clearly in the exploitation of the poor and vulnerable. The confrontation that begins here climaxes with Jesus witnessing the exploitation of a destitute widow (12:41ff), at which point he withdraws and pronounces the total destruction of the temple (13:2).

Exorcising the temple/the exorcism in Capernaum

In reading this incident as an exorcism of the temple, I want to return to Myer’s insight that this is a second “direct action campaign” by looking at the unmistakable parallels with Jesus’ first exorcism in Capernaum and its aftermath (1: 21-3:25):

Incident	Capernaum (1:21ff/3:1-6)	Temple (11: 11-26)
Demonic presence	Man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue	Buyers, sellers, moneychangers, dove-sellers
Jesus’ exorcistic actions	Rebuked, muzzled, “Come out!”	Cast out, overturned
Response of the crowds	Astounded	Astonished/spellbound
Jesus’ teaching	House of the Strong Man	House of prayer
Response of the Jerusalem leaders	Plot to kill Jesus (3:6)	Plot to kill Jesus
Challenge of the Jerusalem leaders	By whose power? Be’elzebul?	By what authority?

Mark wants us to read these events alongside one another. The exorcism of the temple gives the meaning of Jesus’ strange earlier pronouncement about “ransacking the house of the Strong Man” (3:27). Jesus’ exorcisms are a “ransacking of his house”; here, he goes to the powerbase – the “house” itself – and “ransacks” it. The “house of prayer” (the temple) has become the “house of the Strong Man”. That, at least, is what Mark wants us to understand.

But how can this be? In what possible sense can we think of the temple as the stronghold of Satan? Mark, you will remember, tells the story of the Gerasene demoniac (“Legion”) in a way that equates demon possession with the Roman Occupation. Jesus will make clear that the Roman presence in Jerusalem is an

“abomination” – a “desolating sacrilege” (13:14). Empire is the satanic alternative to a world ruled by God. In that sense, Jesus makes no distinction between demonic power manifested in possession, power politics, religious cloaking or exploitative economics. All of these are the mechanisms of oppression, subjection and slavery. All are demonic, and need exorcising.

What he will expose in the forthcoming encounters – particularly in the dispute over the Poll Tax (12:13ff) is the collusion between the temple and Rome. The temple *ought* to be the living alternative to Empire – the centre of resistance in Yahweh’s name. The Jewish temple state is to operate with the politics of God’s compassion and the economics of God’s generosity. It is to manifest God’s priority for “the least first”. Instead, it is exploitative and corrupt. It has sold its soul for Roman power, wealth, privilege and influence. It now serves a different god of a different kingdom, while retaining the trappings and appearance of being “God’s house of prayer”. That is why it is demonic and needs to be exorcised – and ultimately “overturned/destroyed”.

Spellbound crowds/murderous priests (11:18-19)

Mark concludes the incident by reiterating the astonishment and the delight of the crowds that frustrates the murderous fury and intentions of the chief priests and the scribes. It is fear of the “whole crowd” that determines the way in which they will secure Jesus’ death.

We should read “the crowd” as comprising “the last” – poor people, widows with no income, menstruating women, lepers – whose visit to the temple will only exacerbate their misery and destitution. Mark is reiterating a theme that has been constant and consistent since Jesus’ appearance in Capernaum in the first chapter: his gospel of the Kingdom is very Good News to the poor and the marginalized, and very Bad News to the rich and powerful.

We need also to note that Jesus and the disciples then leave Jerusalem and return to Bethany under cover of darkness. Bethany is a location that is kept secret from the plotters. Mark’s account of Jesus’ time in Jerusalem makes perfect sense when we see Jesus as having gone underground. This is why the Sanhedrin needs Judas to betray him, and why Jesus will make such elaborate and careful preparations for the Passover. His strategy is to use Bethany as a secret base from which to make forays into the city, where his public visibility protects him from being taken by the authorities. It will not protect him from betrayal by one of his closest friends.

The practice of faith without the temple (11:20-25)

The following morning, en route back to the temple, Jesus and his disciples discover that the fig tree that Jesus had cursed is now withered to its roots. This is a prophetic symbol: the temple that Jesus had brought to a halt by his actions the previous day will be destroyed (cf 13:2).

How, then, will faith be practiced without the temple? Jesus’ answer to the disciples seems a non sequiter to Peter’s observation (“Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you

cursed has withered!"): "Have faith in God! Have no doubt! Ask and believe! Forgive!" However, it begins to make narrative sense when we recognize that Jesus will go on to replace the temple with his body at the Last Supper. He will be the sacrifice that ushers in the New Covenant. Read as a sharing in Jesus' own sacrifice and faith, his words give content to a temple-less faith:

1. *Have faith in God*: it was imaginatively impossible for the disciples *not* to equate the temple with God's presence. The temple, with its sacrifices and Holy of Holies, guaranteed God's presence with Israel and was the visible manifestation of the Covenant. Jesus' own faith was "temple-free": he addressed God directly as "Abba". At the Last Supper, the broken bread/body and poured out wine/blood *are* the replacement for all that the temple represents, symbolizes and guarantees. As president at the Passover, he will not recount the meaning of the meal in terms of the sacrificial feast they are commemorating, but announce the New Covenant. Jesus invites his disciples to share in his own temple-free faith in God.
2. *"Say to this mountain ..."*: Jesus has miraculously demonstrated his lordship over creation in stilling a storm. Jesus *said* to the wind, "Be muzzled!" He believed it, and it happened. The disciples' response had confirmed the truth of what Jesus is telling them: "The winds and the waves obey him!" Here, though, Jesus chooses a different example of faith: "Say to this mountain ..." We ought to assume that he is talking about the temple mount, which would have been visible to them as they approached the city. This is intentionally ironic: Jesus will go on to prophesy that the temple will be razed to the ground (13:2). Again, he is inviting them to share in his own faith and practice.
3. *"Ask and believe ..."*: Similarly, Jesus invites them to discover and share his own practice of faithful prayer. Mark does not have the Lord's Prayer, but the tradition is clear in Jesus' concluding response.
4. *"Forgive others so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you"*: The phrase, "Father in heaven/trespases" are not Markan. He is quoting a liturgical form of the Lord's Prayer tradition of forgiveness. Jesus' point is that the messianic community of the New Covenant has unconditional forgiveness as its lifeblood. Forgiveness must be unconditional precisely because God's forgiveness is conditional upon our own offer of forgiveness!

This is as close as Mark's Jesus gets to talking about the church. Jesus nowhere uses the word, *ekklesia*, which literally means, "called out". He nevertheless makes it clear what "being the church" means: it means to be "called out of the-world-as-Empire into the-world-as-Kingdom. To live in the world as Kingdom means to share Jesus' own practice of faith, which sustains his relationship with the God whom he calls Abba and nourishes him in his mission of transforming the world of Empire into the Kingdom of God. The church, like the temple, is to be a sign of the reality of the Kingdom whose coming Jesus announces and promises. Yet, like the temple, the church is only authentically the church to the extent that it is recognizably like Jesus, mirroring his priorities and faith, and making a Jesus-shaped difference in the world. Unless it is, it will be part of that from which the world needs saving.