

John 2:13-25 Jesus and the Cleansing of the Temple

¹³ When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. ¹⁵ So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me."

¹⁸ The Jews then responded to him, "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?"

¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

²⁰ They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" ²¹ But the temple he had spoken of was his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

²³ Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name. ²⁴ But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. ²⁵ He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person.

**A Survey and Analysis of Scholarly Views Regarding
Jesus' Objections and Intent in the Temple Action**

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
MA Degree in
Aspects and Implications of Biblical Interpretation

London School of Theology
An Associated College of Middlesex University

March 2023

1. Introduction

Jesus' Temple Action has perplexed scholars for centuries. Behind the actions which are straightforwardly described in the Gospels, stand the questions of offence and intention. What exactly was it that offended Jesus? Was it an issue of purity? Was it about the location of the commerce? Was he offended by the use of Tyrian coinage? And who was behind the offence? Was his issue with the merchants, the priests, the temple establishment or the Jewish religious leadership as a whole including the Pharisees? And what was Jesus' intention? Though most Bibles and commentaries entitle this action "The Cleansing of the Temple," was Jesus actually trying to "cleanse" the Temple or symbolically prophesy its doom or both? In terms of eschatology, has the Temple, in Jesus' view, already failed to be the long-awaited eschatological Temple, and it is against that he rails? Or are his portents of destruction a preparation for this eschatological Temple?

It will be argued that Jesus' protest was primarily against the commercialization of the Temple, not only as offensive in itself, but because of its disproportionately negative effect on the poor. Not only that, but his actions and warnings, taken in context, and as presented by the Gospel writers, do indeed portend the coming destruction of the Temple as Jesus will soon replace many of its functions.

The options regarding the possible interpretations of offence and intention will be examined in detail below, but first must be considered Jewish popular opinion regarding the Temple. Was Jesus' Action a reflection of an opinion regarding the Temple that was widely held by the Jewish population at large, or is he idiosyncratic in his protest?

2. Jewish Popular Opinion Concerning the Temple

Some scholars think the people saw the Temple as corrupt, and others do not. How should we respond? In view of the evidence, it seems likely that the attitude to the Temple was somewhat mixed. While valued as an institution, various priesthoods during its history had come under condemnation and question of their fitness for office. This is perhaps a situation akin to the view of democracy in the United States. While there will always be corrupt politicians and controversy over election procedures, and special interest financing, still democracy is valued as a political system. The existence of a few 'bad apples' does not necessarily bring the whole structure into question. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find a time when the priesthood of the Temple was not under criticism from one group or another. It seems the fate of those in power that there will always be mumblings of discontent against

them. Jesus' protest is a particularly sharp one, but still it is within the general category of the typical Jewish 'critique from within.' Unlike the other prophets, he perhaps has a clearer sense of the limited life remaining to the Temple, but this is not due to failures any greater than those of the past, but more connected with eschatological obsolescence.

3. The Temple in the Primary Literature (Gospels)

The following tentative conclusions can be drawn from how the Gospel writers present the Temple:

- (i) The Temple at the time of Jesus' birth is viewed as sufficiently legitimate that his parents follow the usual protocol of presenting him there, where the pious (Anna and Simeon) are still to be found
- (ii) Jesus teaches and heals, apparently often, at the Temple, which implies he does not see it as so terribly compromised and corrupt that he would not grace it with his presence, though it should be said that Jesus evinces incredible tolerance and grace in the midst of the sinful and corrupt so this may not be a clinching argument.
- (iii) Jesus and his disciples pay the Temple tax, and so are compliant with this aspect, at least, of the Temple's requirements, and prepared to justify this action.¹
- (iv) The Temple is still viewed as a place where God's presence can be experienced, where oaths can be legitimated, and where someone can get right with God.

However, there are hints of dissatisfaction and a foreshadowing of the Temple Action:

- i) Jesus says that "something greater than the Temple is here" (Mt 12:5-7)
- ii) Jesus conflicts frequently with the chief priests, teachers of the law and Pharisees at the Temple
- iii) Jesus makes some statements that the Temple will be destroyed, and apparently, in some cases, that he will be the one doing the destroying

4. The Temple Action

The Temple Action by Jesus is one of the most confusing to understand. Not only is it open to debate what he was trying to achieve through the action, but also what exactly he was protesting against. Snodgrass helpfully summarizes the main possibilities:

¹ Though with the caveat that the true "children" should be exempt (Mt 17:24-26a), and note comments below in Section 5.6.2 about the widow giving her last money to the temple. Jesus does not prevent it, but neither does he necessarily praise it.

1. Jesus' act was an over-confident attempt to start a revolution, but people did not follow him. He failed as a world deliverer, and the Gospels have de-emphasized his violence and his goal.
2. With this act Jesus objected to any distinction between profane and holy.
3. This was a symbolic act pointing to the coming destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. Usually assumed with this position is that destruction is preparation for rebuilding.
4. Jesus' act was an attack on the sacrificial system itself and, therefore, meant the cessation of sacrifice.
5. Jesus' act was an objection to Herod's turning the extended Temple Mount into a Civic Center. Jesus sought to extend the holiness of the inner court to the outer court.
6. The incident is a cleansing of commercialism and corruption. This could include reaction against the offensive Tyrian coins. For some the cleansing is so that the Gentiles may have a proper place to worship, but most scholars holding this view would not emphasize Gentile worship.
7. The action was a prophetic protest that pointed to future eschatological hope. Often this approach emphasizes the expectation that the Messiah would be a Temple builder.²

Items 1 and 2 are very minority view interpretations and few commentators give them serious consideration.³ Items 3 to 7 are more serious contenders and will be discussed in detail in the relevant sections below. Since Mark is likely the source for both Matthew and Luke's accounts, assuming Markan priority, the commentary on Mark will be more substantial.

4.1 Mark (11:15-17)

In the Gospel of Mark, the story of the Temple Action (Mark 11:15-17)⁴ is located in the centre of a two-part story where Jesus curses a fig tree (11:12-14; 20:21). Commentators view this as deliberate redaction by Mark to give an interpretive frame to the Temple Action, (this will be discussed more fully below) usually with the implication that Mark intends the reader to understand that just as the fig tree was destroyed in judgment, the same fate will

² Klyne Snodgrass, "The Temple Incident," pp. 429-480 in Darrell Bock & Robert Webb (ed.), *Key Events in the life of the historical Jesus: a collaborative exploration of context and coherence* (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 463-464.

³ For Snodgrass' assessment of these two options, see Snodgrass, "The Temple Incident," 443-444.

⁴ For perspectives on whether the Temple Action and Jesus' saying in v17 should be viewed as one unit, see Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20, Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville, Nelson, 2008) 164-165.

befall the Temple.⁵ The historicity of the Temple Action has also been questioned with doubts raised about whether Jesus could have successfully carried out such an action with the presence of Temple police and Roman authorities.⁶ This scepticism can be largely allayed by understanding the action as limited in scope, and primarily symbolic in nature, rather than massively disruptive.⁷ The criterion of multiple attestation is relevant here, since the Temple Action appears in all four Gospels, albeit on a different timeline in John.

¹⁵ On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the Temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves,

Of note is the fact that Jesus drove out both those who were selling *and* buying. If he were simply upset at price gouging by the sellers, we would expect his wrath to be so directed, but he drives out those who intend to buy also, seeming to imply that the whole commercial enterprise is abhorrent to him, which is also borne out by v16. The tables of the money changers and dove sellers are overturned. Money changing was necessary because only certain coins (Tyrian) were acceptable for payment of the Temple tax,⁸ and dove sellers provided an essential service for those needing to sacrifice, as these doves would have been certified as unblemished, which the Temple authorities required. If one possessed doves at home, common practice would be to sell the doves locally, and buy new ones at the Temple, where one could be confident that they met the required standard.

¹⁶ and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the Temple courts.

The Greek word here used for “merchandise” is more accurately translated as vessel, but the reasons behind Jesus’ prohibition are unclear. It could be that Jesus is looking forward to the time of an ideal Temple prophesied by Zechariah 14:20-21 when traders will no longer be

⁵ Not all commentators view the cursing of the fig tree as historical. Meier sees it as the construction of a pre-Markan source. See John Paul Meier, *A Marginal Jew -Volume 2*, (New York/New Haven, Doubleday, 1993), 891-892.

⁶ Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20, Word Biblical Commentary*, 165-166, mentioning Haenchen, Lohmeyer, Grundmann, Schmitals *et al*, who have doubts about the historicity of this event. See also Jostein Ådna, “Jesus and the Temple,” in Tom Holmen, Stanley E. Porter (ed.) *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, Volume 3 (Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2011); 2639 FN9 for a more extensive list.

⁷ A view also held by Ådna, “Jesus and the Temple,” 2640 and 2643 where he advocates for a “literary-critical and a tradition-critical analysis” to establish historicity.

⁸ Though it is possible that the moneychangers were charging exorbitant exchange rates which could partly explain the “den of robbers” comment. Walter Wessell, “Mark”, in ed. Frank Gæbelein, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Vol 8 Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1984) 727.

present in the Temple.⁹ Josephus comments, “Nothing of the nature of food or drink is brought within the Temple; objects of this kind may not even be offered on the altar, save for those which are prepared for the sacrifices.” (*Ag. Ap.* 2.8 §§106, 109).¹⁰ A definitive answer is elusive. What is clear is that certain types of behavior in the Temple offended Jesus, and the commercial activities bore the brunt of his anger.

¹⁷ And as he taught them, he said, “Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”

Jesus is here combining two Old Testament quotations, the first from the last part of Isaiah 56:7, and the second from the first part of Jeremiah 7:11. For context, here is the complete passage from Isaiah:

And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD
to minister to him,
to love the name of the LORD,
and to be his servants,
all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it
and who hold fast to my covenant—
⁷ these I will bring to my holy mountain
and give them joy in my house of prayer.
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house will be called
a house of prayer for all nations.” (Isa 56:6-7)

The emphasis of the passage in Isaiah is that foreigners (Gentiles) will be included in worship of the Lord, in his Temple, and this no doubt is what prompts many commentators to believe that the use of the Outer Court for commerce, hindering the worship of Gentiles (the only place they could access in the Temple) is the cause of Jesus’ ire. The passage from Jeremiah 7:11 reads thus:

¹¹ Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD.

The ‘den of robbers’ comment could be addressing the price inflation of the money changers and animal sellers, or it might, more poetically, imply that the Gentiles were being ‘robbed’ of a place of worship with the Outer Court being usurped for trade rather than worship.¹¹ Even if the price inflation were minimal, it might still be offensive to Jesus, that anyone would try to profit from the worshipful activities of others.

⁹ Though the word for “traders” can be translated differently as will be discussed below.

¹⁰ Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20, Word Biblical Commentary*, 173.

¹¹ Wessell, “Mark” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Vol 8 Matthew, Mark, Luke*, 728.

4.2 *Matthew (21:12-13)*

See main document

4.3 *Luke (19:45-46)*

See main document

4.4 *John (2:13-17)*

The key difference between John's account, and that of the Synoptics, concerns the chronology. For John, Jesus' Temple Action occurs early in the Gospel and is Jesus' second public action whereas in the Synoptics, it occurs towards the end of Jesus' public ministry after the triumphal entry. In John's version, Jesus used a whip, and cattle and sheep are driven out in addition to the merchants. John does not use the Isaiah quote, nor the quote from Jeremiah, but does allude to Zechariah 14:21, with his comment that the people should not make "the house of my Father a house of business." John adds a comment that the disciples later associated his action with Psalm 69:9, "Zeal for your house will consume me."¹²

The difference in the chronology of the event can be explained either as Jesus cleansing the Temple twice (which most commentators think unlikely),¹³ or as an editorial decision on the part of either the Synoptic writers, primarily Mark, or John.¹⁴ In the Synoptics, the Temple Action being located where it is suggests that this deed was the proximate cause of Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion. In John, it seems to be the public appearance of the "resurrected" Lazarus that causes the authorities to seek to kill Jesus. Wherever the incident is placed, it occasions the ire of the authorities ("chief priests and teachers of the law" in the Synoptics, and "the Jews" (John's shorthand for those opposed to Jesus) in the Gospel of John and is almost certainly a strong part of the reason for their desire to be rid of Jesus.

5 To what is Jesus objecting?

As Snodgrass' seven possibilities are considered,¹⁵ two key questions will be asked:

- 1) Against what or whom, exactly, is Jesus protesting?
- 2) What is he hoping to achieve through this protest, if this the issue?

¹² Snodgrass, "The Temple Incident," 443-444.

¹³ As a typical example, Snodgrass, "The Temple Incident," 445.

¹⁴ Arguments for preferring the Johannine chronology are summarized here: Snodgrass, "The Temple Incident," pp. 446f, though he still favours the Synoptic chronology.

¹⁵ Though in a different order than Snodgrass, with the less convincing options presented first.

5.1 Revolution (Snodgrass #1)

No.

5.2 Removing the distinction between profane and holy (Snodgrass #2)

No.

5.3 Herodian Rule and Protest against his Innovation (#5)

(abbreviated) It seems more likely that rather than Jesus' protest being against the attempt by Herod to legitimate his rule through the Temple, it was his recent reconstruction "turning the extended temple mount into a civic center and an attempt to extend the holiness of the inner court to the outer court,"¹⁶ and the concomitant commercialism and corruption it enabled that was more of an issue.

5.4 An Action of Cleansing against the Corruption of the Priesthood (Snodgrass #6)

Sanders, in *Jesus and Judaism*,¹⁷ makes a strong case for interpreting the Temple Action as nothing less than a portent of destruction. However, he seems to have made a hermeneutical decision, along the lines of confirmation bias, to ignore any data that might point towards a "cleansing." Sanders argues that we do not find criticism of the priesthood elsewhere in the gospels to which Evans retorts:

I think that Sander's conclusion that there is no authentic tradition that suggests Jesus was critical of the priesthood has not fairly taken into account passages that give indications, usually indirect, of controversy and animosity between Jesus and the priests. This evidence would suggest that Jesus' attack on the integrity of the priesthood as seen in the Temple cleansing is not without reasonable context.¹⁸

In Evan's view, Sanders has taken a too-binary view of the event, concluding that it must be one or the other, either a portent of destruction or a cleansing. Sanders' hermeneutical decision, for traditional-critical reasons, is to suggest that the gospel writers, out of embarrassment, have reinterpreted Jesus' action as a cleansing to de-emphasize a possibly militant interpretation of Jesus' behaviour. Evans points out that if they truly wished to do this, they could have omitted Jesus' prophecy concerning the Temple's destruction also.¹⁹ For Evans, the action has components of both cleansing and destruction. The Temple Action can serve both as a cleansing and a warning, that if the corruption is not addressed,

¹⁶ Snodgrass, "The Temple Incident," 468.

¹⁷ Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, particularly ch. 1 (61-76) "Jesus and the Temple."

¹⁸ Craig A. Evans, "Jesus' Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?", *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51:2 (April 1989) 237-270; 248.

¹⁹ Evans, "Jesus' Action..." 238.

judgment and destruction will follow.²⁰ Evans does acknowledge that the Temple destruction theme is present in other places, for example, in the parable of the wicked vineyard tenants (Mark 12:1-12), Jesus' prophecies concerning the destruction of the Temple and adjacent buildings, and more.²¹

5.4.1 The Exclusion of the Gentiles

One of the more traditional arguments in favour of 'cleansing' is that the siting of the marketplace inhibited those who would otherwise be able to use it for devotional purposes (part of Snodgrass' #6 possibility). Gentiles were only permitted to pray in the Outer Court, and if that court was a cacophony of marketplace trading, it would have a deleterious effect on the attempted piety of the gathered Gentile worshippers. The Synoptic Gospels all cite Jesus quoting Isaiah 56:7: "My house will be called a house of prayer" suggesting possibly that the spiritual tone and purpose of the whole Temple was being compromised but Mark completes the quote with the addition of "for all nations" perhaps precisely because it was the Gentiles who were being most affected by the trade in the outer courts.²² Lupieri comments, "...the sin of Israel in our present context is the exclusion of the Gentiles"²³ whose ability to worship is "torpedoed."²⁴

It seems as though this trade in the Outer Courts was a recent development resulting from Herod's remodeling of the Temple, which expanded the use of the Outer Courtyard to a civic space resembling a Greek marketplace or Roman forum. According to Lane, this permission for commerce to be allowed within the Temple was an innovation by Caiaphas in AD 30, in preference to markets outside on the Mount of Olives.²⁵ So, a combination of Herod's remodeling, and Caiaphas' permission, allowed commercial activities previously prohibited to take place in this area. Rather than being a space devoted to prayer, instead its purpose has been subverted for less spiritual activities such as trade, money changing and the selling of doves.²⁶

²⁰ Evans, "Jesus' Action..." 249.

²¹ For a comprehensive list, see Evans, "Jesus' Action..." 240-241.

²² William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publ., 1974) 406.

²³ Edmondo Lupieri, "Fragments of the Historical Jesus? A Reading of Mark 11, 11-[26]", *Annali di storia dell'esegesi (ASE)* 28/1 (2011) 289-311; 294. See also, Wessell, "Mark", *Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol 8 Matthew, Mark, Luke, 728*, and William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 406.

²⁴ Andreas Kostenberger, *Encountering John: the Gospel in historical, literary and theological perspective* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1999), 75-76. Jeremias has a slight variant on this position, claiming that as part of the "eschatological moment" Jesus is preparing a place of worship for the Gentiles. Joachim Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations*, (London, SCM, 1958) 65-66.

²⁵ Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 404

²⁶ Adela Yarbro Collins, Harold W. Attridge *Mark: A Commentary*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2007), 527-8.

Against this though, stands the fact that Matthew and Luke do not add the phrase “for all nations” which, if the exclusion of the Gentiles was the primary offence, would be important. Also, during this time period, this area of the Temple was not known as “The Court of the Gentiles”²⁷ so the concept of Gentile exclusion would not have been so stark even if it were present. It is true that archeologists have found two tablets from the Roman era warning Gentiles not to proceed further on pain of death,²⁸ but this ban does not prove that there was discrete alternative area designated for their use, although many commentators assume this to be the case. In the Book of Acts, where one might expect this designation to be used, for example in 3:1-3 and 21:28-29, it is not. There is otherwise little evidence of concern for Gentile piety in the Gospels²⁹ and Snodgrass claims that most people in the Outer Court would not have been Gentiles.³⁰

5.4.2 The Corruption of the Priesthood

It is clear from a few examples that the Qumran community assessed the priesthood in Jerusalem as corrupt and associated it with violence and plundering the wealth of the people. Regev agrees that it was the corruption of wealth that had a polluting effect on the Jerusalem Temple: “The corrupted wealth is morally impure, in a metaphorical sense, and had a blemishing effect on the sacrificial rite.”³¹

Whether the depth of corruption required destruction or cleansing from the perspective of the Qumran community is open to debate. Lupieri holds a similar view to Evans, seeing Jesus’ action as a purification rather than portent of destruction. He appeals to two Old Testament passages, Nehemiah 13:15-22, and Zechariah 14:20-21. In the first, Nehemiah’s purification of the city and enforcement of prohibited activities on the Sabbath is initiated *by the expulsion of merchants!* Zechariah describes the perfect state of the eschatological

²⁷ Thus Bauckham, “The title ‘Court of the Gentiles’ is a modern one, and there is no evidence that the outer court was thought of positively as the place where Gentiles could worship, rather than negatively as the limit beyond which Gentiles could not go.” Richard Bauckham, “Jesus’ Demonstration in the Temple,” in ed. Barnabas Lindars SSF, *Law and Religion: essays on the place of the law in Israel and early Christianity* (Cambridge, James Clarke & Co., 1988) 72-89: 85. See also Klyne Snodgrass, “The Temple Incident,” 469.

²⁸ Elias J. Bickerman “The Warning Inscriptions of Herod’s Temple,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 37, no. 4, 1947, 387–405.

²⁹ E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1985), 68-69.

³⁰ Klyne Snodgrass, “The Temple Incident,” 469. This may be true, but since most Jews would have had to traverse this outer court to get to the inner court, this is less notable.

³¹ Eyal Regev, “Moral Impurity and the Temple in Early Christianity in Light of Ancient Greek Practice and Qumranic Ideology,” pp. 383-411, *Harvard Theological Review* 97:4, 2004; 399-400 and see Cecilia Wassen, “The Use of Dead Sea Scrolls for Interpreting Jesus’s Action,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 23 (2016) 280-303; 294-296 in particular.

Temple, which is characterized by only holy vessels being carried within it (echoes of Mark 11:16) and the expulsion of Canaanites (merchants).³²

5.4.3 The Use of Tyrian Coinage

No.

5.5 Symbolic act pointing towards the Destruction of the Temple (Snodgrass #3)

Within this section, it will be argued that Jesus' Temple Action was forecasting the destruction of the Temple. What is at stake is whether this was, without judgment, simply in preparation for the eschatological temple long foretold, or whether it implied a judgment upon the Temple so severe that it merited destruction. The two possibilities will now be considered.

5.5.1 As Non-Judgmental Preparation for the Eschatological Temple

E.P. Sanders has been the scholar most strongly associated with the interpretation that Jesus' action should be understood as a portent of destruction, but without any element of judgment on Jesus' part. In Sanders' reading of the event, the portent of destruction is merely preparation for the eschatological Temple, rather than being a criticism of current practice. He dismisses concerns about money changing and trade in doves being problematic arguing that these were essential to the normal functioning of the Temple.³³ He examines the most common interpretations of the event and concludes:

Thus far we have seen reason to doubt many of the prevalent views about the event in the Temple area: that the action was that of a religious reformer, bent on purifying current practice; that the locale, the court of the Gentiles, indicates that the action primarily had to do with opening the worship of the Temple to non-Jews; that the action was, and was perceived to be primarily against the Temple officers and the Sadducean party.³⁴

Sanders dismisses the idea that Jesus chose the Court of the Gentiles for his action deliberately, considering it merely coincidental, and the concept of Jesus as religious reformer claiming that "If Jesus were a religious reformer... bent on correcting 'abuse' and 'present practice', we should hear charges of immorality, dishonesty and corruption directed against the priests. But such charges are absent from the gospels (except for Mark 11:17) ..."³⁵ which Sanders considers to be a later addition rather than genuine. This is a serious

³² Lupieri, "Fragments of the Historical Jesus?..." 296-97, who also highlights similar prohibitions in the Qumran documents. 297-98.

³³ Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 65.

³⁴ Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 69.

³⁵ Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 66.

hermeneutical decision by Sanders to remove as inauthentic a statement from Jesus that would undermine his (Sanders') position.

Sanders then reaches the conclusion that Jesus is indeed protesting against the (necessary) trade in the Temple, and that the only logical interpretation is that it is a symbolic act representing the destruction of the Temple, a point which would have been easily understood by onlookers witnessing the overturning of the tables.³⁶ Against Sanders, one could argue that prior to the Herodian innovations, such trade took place outside of this area, without apparently compromising the effective functioning of the Temple.

Sanders bolsters his case by appealing to the sayings in the gospel about the destruction of the Temple (Mark 13:1; 14:57f; 15:29; Matt 26:60f; 27:40; John 2:18-22). He concludes, "that Jesus publicly predicted or threatened the destruction of the Temple, that the statement was shaped by his expectation of the eschaton, that he probably also expected a new Temple to be given by God from heaven, and that he made a demonstration which prophetically symbolized the coming event."³⁷

At first glance, it is surprising that Sanders does not appeal to the cursing of the fig tree as an interpretive frame for his destruction motif. This event, recorded in both Mark and Matthew, for many commentators is seen as a deliberate framing by the gospel writers to aid in interpreting the Temple Action. However, since Sanders is keen to interpret the destruction of the Temple as disconnected to any sort of judgment on the part of Jesus, his hermeneutical decision to ignore the fig tree makes sense, as the judgment motif undermines his thesis of destruction/replacement *without* judgment.

5.5.2 As Judgment

This section will examine the concept that Jesus was indeed judging the Temple, and by implication, the chief priests, and that the inevitable outcome of his negative judgment would be its destruction.

5.5.3 Failure to Become the Eschatological Temple (Bryan)

Centuries earlier, the prophets of Israel had written in expectation of a future eschatological temple. A major interpretation in favour of cleansing to be considered therefore, is the possibility that Jesus' action was intended to move the Temple towards its

³⁶ Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 70.

³⁷ Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 75.

ideal state anticipated in the eschatological age, and foretold by Ezekiel (40-44), Isaiah 56:7, Zechariah 14:21 and the Temple Scroll. These passages will be examined:

Zechariah 14:21 states:

²¹ Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the LORD Almighty, and all who come to sacrifice will take some of the pots and cook in them. And on that day there will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the LORD Almighty. (NIV)

“Canaanite” in this context, according to Bryan, refers to traders i.e. “there will no longer be traders in the house of the Lord.”³⁸ Scholars are divided however, in view of the wider context of Zechariah 14, and while some agree with Bryan, others interpret it along the lines of “ungodly or unworthy person.”

Isaiah 56: 7 requires the previous verse for context as follows:

And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD
to minister to him,
to love the name of the LORD,
and to be his servants,
all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it
and who hold fast to my covenant—
⁷ these I will bring to my holy mountain
and give them joy in my house of prayer.
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house will be called
a house of prayer for all nations.”

This looks forward to a time when Gentiles (foreigners) will be drawn to God’s holy mountain (Temple) and their sacrifices will be acceptable to him, with his house (Temple) being a house of prayer for all nations (including the Gentile nations).

Ezekiel’s vision in chapters 40-44 contains the concepts of an impressively large Temple that is filled with God’s glory.

It is debatable whether this eschatological state of affairs would ensue as a result of the Temple being renewed (cleansed) or replaced (current Temple destroyed), and even whether this new Temple would be earthly or spiritual.³⁹ Whether the Messiah would be a part of the construction of this new Temple is also open to question.⁴⁰ Collins argues that the expansion

³⁸ As Bryan points out, enacting it was a safer choice than quoting it, since the original “Canaanites” if interpreted literally, would have meant an exclusion of a Gentile group – the opposite of what Jesus saw as the eschatological future of the Temple. His action enables “Canaanites” to be correctly interpreted as traders with Zech 14:21 in mind. Steven M. Bryan, *Jesus and Israel’s Traditions of Judgement and Restoration* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002), 223.

³⁹ Bryan, *Jesus and Israel’s Traditions...* 189-92 for a survey of these questions.

⁴⁰ Bryan, *Jesus and Israel’s Traditions...* 193-194.

of the marketplace activities to the outer courts violates the concept of the eschatological Temple described in Ezekiel and the Temple Scroll, where every part of the Temple should be holy.⁴¹ Bryan, in agreement with Sanders, argues against the view that commerce itself within the Temple would have been seen as inherently defiling (rather as necessary and essential) so it must be some other failure that caused Jesus' reaction.⁴² As we will see below, he has strong arguments to justify this position.

The Temple is failing to be the eschatological Temple in the following ways:

- a) It has become an unintended symbol (functioning almost as an idol) which the nation believed guaranteed their election and inviolability.⁴³
- b) It was failing to gather in the nations. Though provision was made for Gentiles and proselytes to worship, this was hardly the large-scale ingathering foretold in Isaiah 56:6-7.⁴⁴
- c) With reference to Zechariah 14:21 "every cooking pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the Lord of hosts", the future era when distinctions between pure and impure are eradicated, has clearly not arrived. The need for the verification of "pure" sacrificial animals, and money-changers to change money into acceptably pure coinage illustrates this.⁴⁵
- d) The nation (and Temple) were not fruitful. The eschatological era was supposed to be a time of perpetual fruitfulness. Jesus' cursing of the fig tree illustrates this point. It "not being the season for figs" (Mark 11:13) is irrelevant when, in the eschaton, fresh fruit should be produced year-round (Ezekiel 47:12).⁴⁶
- e) The requirement of payment of the Temple tax conflicts with the expectation that during the eschatological era, the Temple would not require the financial support of God's people. This is a further indication that such an era has not yet arrived.⁴⁷

In summary, Jesus' action in the Temple is to be understood as a judgment upon the Temple for not already becoming the eschatological Temple, and his destruction-rebuilding sayings are to be understood as his promise to create a non-physical Temple, "not made with human hands" (Mark 14:58 and parallels) that would satisfy these expectations.

It appears the Temple as an institution, even with its faults, was still viewed as legitimate by the common people, with the exception of the Qumran community who were in self-

⁴¹ Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, 527.

⁴² Bryan, *Jesus and Israel's Traditions...* 209-210; Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 63-65.

⁴³ Bryan, *Jesus and Israel's Traditions...* 218.

⁴⁴ Bryan, *Jesus and Israel's Traditions...* 222.

⁴⁵ Bryan, *Jesus and Israel's Traditions...* 223.

⁴⁶ Bryan, *Jesus and Israel's Traditions...* 224.

⁴⁷ Bryan, *Jesus and Israel's Traditions...* 227.

imposed 'exile.' Jesus, through his Temple Action and other sayings, shows himself painfully conscious of the Temple's failings, but does not directly condemn it as an institution. His protest seems directed at the Temple authorities who are compromising the Temple's calling through their innovation of trade within the Temple precincts. The place of the Temple Action in the narratives does lend itself towards an understanding more as a 'portent of destruction' than a cleansing. The practice of his disciples, both during Jesus' lifetime, and after his resurrection and ascension, is to continue to worship and attend the Temple. The Temple's days are numbered, not because of irredeemable corruption, but because the key functions of the Temple are being superseded by Jesus himself. A faulty Temple is not the same as a Temple inaccessible through exile corrupted by pagan invaders. The claim of N.T. Wright and others, that this sorry state of the Temple created a sense of exile in the populace, seems exaggerated and unlikely.

This hermeneutic of Bryan, and Wright clearly lends itself more towards an understanding of destruction rather than cleansing. Wright points out that almost all of the time, when the Gospels speak of Jesus and the Temple, destruction is the theme.⁴⁸ Mark's intercalation of the Cursing of the Fig Tree story is strongly suggestive of this interpretation, and it is to this we now turn.

5.5.5 The Cursing of the Fig Tree

¹¹ Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

Jesus Curses a Fig Tree and Clears the Temple Courts

¹² The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. ¹³ Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴ Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it...

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⁴⁸ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 416.

²⁰In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. ²¹Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"

The cursing of the fig tree (Mark 11:11-14; 20-21; Matthew 21:18-20) deserves special attention due to both its literary, and apparently chronological, proximity to the Temple Action in both Mark and Matthew. Many commentators believe that Jesus' actions towards the fig tree illuminate the meaning of the Temple Action, and vice versa, particularly with Mark who brackets the Temple Action with this story:

Mark intends the reader to keep the story of the fig tree in mind while reading the story of the cleansing. The interpretation is rather obvious. The cleansing of the Temple must in some sense imply the rejection of the official representatives of Israel, the leaders of the Temple establishment. Some care is necessary at this point. It is perhaps inaccurate to suggest that the events point to the rejection of Israel... At this point it is at least possible to say that the cleansing, interpreted by the cursing of the fig tree, points to the rejection of a particular group within Israel. Those in charge of the Temple have borne no fruit; they have perverted God's intentions and will thus be rejected. This interpretation is confirmed by the account of the cleansing itself as well as the parable of the wicked husbandmen (12:1-12).⁴⁹

With this interpretation, obviously the Temple and the official representatives of Israel are to be identified as one. For Craig Evans, the withering of the fig tree symbolizes not just a rejection, but also an impending destruction of the Temple:

Mark took the fig-tree story which served in his tradition as the basis for Jesus' teaching on faith and prayer (11:12-14, 20-25), and used it as a framing device for the Temple demonstration in 11:15-19. Through this intercalation, which may have been inherited from an earlier tradent, Mark shifts the accent of the episode that this combination has created. Instead of being simply a nature miracle that illustrates the power of God through faith (see 11:22-25), the fig-tree story presents a curse miracle that is a symbolic or prophetic action pointing to the coming destruction of the Temple, which is confirmed by the narrative that is intercalated between the two halves of the fig-tree story.⁵⁰

The lack of productivity of the fig tree mirrors the lack of fruitfulness of the Temple.⁵¹ Though there are outward signs of activity in that the fig tree has leaves, there is no fruit. This could parallel the assessment of Jesus that despite the unquestionable bustling activity in the Temple, there was little of the fruit that God desired. The general consensus, though there are naysayers,⁵² appears to concur with the assessment that the cursing of the fig tree and the Temple Action are linked, both in Jesus' mind, and in terms of Mark's narrative

⁴⁹ Donald Juel, *Messiah and Temple*, 130-31.

⁵⁰ Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20, Word Biblical Commentary*, 160 though for Evans, an insufficient response to Jesus' attempt at "cleansing" is the reason for destruction, not inevitable in itself.

⁵¹ Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 160-61.

⁵² Oakman, apparently without agreement from other scholars, interprets the cursing of the fig tree to be a condemnation of the social system which has produced tenancy agriculture enforced by the elite classes. Douglas E. Oakman, 'Cursing Fig Trees and Robbers' Dens: Pronouncement Stories within Social-Systemic Perspective, *Mark 11:12-15 and Parallels*, *Semeia* 64, (1994) 253-272 citing 261-2). I think this unlikely.

purpose. One is intended to see the fig tree as representative of a Temple, and/or its leaders, that is failing in terms of the fruitfulness that is expected of it. The penalty for such a failure will be severe, involving the loss of ruling privileges by the Temple's leaders (implied by the wicked tenants parable which follows) and the censure, or possibly the destruction, of the Temple itself.

Watty calls this a 'reactivation of prophecy which foretold destruction,'⁵³ and notes that if one connects the fig tree incident with this action, then one can only fairly say that the fig tree was destroyed, not cleansed, and that *its* destruction, inasmuch as it informs the interpretation of this passage, points towards the destruction of the Temple.⁵⁴

That the fig tree incident is used by Mark to inform the understanding of the Temple Action is a given for most scholars. Mark's redactional activity, his use of a "Markan sandwich" is experienced elsewhere in his gospel with a similar purpose of illuminating the interpretation of an event.

5.6 The Oppression of the Poor (Snodgrass #6 part 2) – a specific consequence of the corruption

One of the potential consequences of corruption is that certain sectors of society may suffer more as a result than others. If in fact the Temple had become commercialized, it is the poor who would suffer more than others who were in a better financial situation.

Bauckham's perspectives on the impact on the poor, and a re-examination of the significance of the Widow's Mite story, will shed further light on this possibility.

5.6.1 The Oppression of the Poor (Bauckham)

Richard Bauckham, in his chapter on "Jesus' Demonstration in the Temple"⁵⁵ makes a compelling case that Jesus' objection was not only to commercialism *per se*, but to the way in which the commercial aspects of the Temple were having a disproportionately negative impact upon the poor. His starting point, and lens through which he assesses this action, is the pericope of Jesus and the Temple tax (Matt 17:24-27). Jesus' pointed question, "From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes – from their own children or from others?" is met with his own reply that "the children are exempt." Bauckham's argument then starts from the same premise, that since the Israelites are God's children, they should not be subject to

⁵³ W.W. Watty, 'Jesus and the Temple – Cleansing or Cursing,' *Expository Times* 93:8 (1992) 238.

⁵⁴ Watty, 'Jesus and the Temple' 237.

⁵⁵ Bauckham, "Jesus' Demonstration in the Temple," 72-89.

the tax, which is more appropriate and fitting for a king-subject relationship. “Theocratic taxation, levied in God’s name, is inappropriate in view of God’s fatherhood.”⁵⁶ He goes on to examine the four key components of Jesus’ action as follows:

a) Turning over the tables of the moneychangers

Bauckham argues that it was not the location of the moneychanging, or swindling customers that was the issue: “His was a radical objection to the tax itself, and whereas in Capernaum Jesus had been concerned not to offend the local tax collectors (Matt 17:27), who were no doubt motivated by piety towards the Temple and could have understood refusal to pay as a criticism of the sacrificial cult which the tax financed, he now confronted the machinery of tax collecting operated by the Temple officials themselves in the Temple.”⁵⁷

b) Overturning the chairs of those selling doves

He notes that the primary group who would offer doves, as an alternative cheaper sacrifice, would be the poor, and “if the Temple monopoly in the sale of doves operated to keep the price high, it would make the sacrificial system a burden to the poor in the same way that the Temple tax did. Jesus would object, as he did to the Temple tax, that the God in whose name the Temple authorities acted does not burden his people with oppressive financial demands.”⁵⁸

He emphasizes that this is particularly heinous since the provision of doves was provided to lighten the burden of expensive sacrifices from the shoulders of the poor, but in its current application was providing an additional financial strain.⁵⁹

The strength of these two points seems to validate Bauckham’s conclusion:

“Jesus’ protest was primarily against commercialism rather than corruption. But we should also consider, as adding fuel to the fire, the evidence that the priestly aristocracy who controlled the Temple’s hierarchy were believed to support a conspicuously expensive lifestyle by corruption and violence...Jesus’ demonstration in the Temple can therefore be understood as a principled religious protest not against some minor abuses of the sacred

⁵⁶ Bauckham, “Jesus’ Demonstration...” 74.

⁵⁷ Bauckham, “Jesus’ Demonstration...” 75.

⁵⁸ Bauckham, “Jesus’ Demonstration...” 77.

⁵⁹ Bauckham, “Jesus’ Demonstration...” 77.

precincts but against what Jesus must have seen as serious misconduct by the nation's religious leaders."⁶⁰

5.6.2 The Mighty Mite (Mark 12:41-44) – an oppressive system

⁴¹ Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. ⁴² But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.

⁴³ Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. ⁴⁴ They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."

Though traditionally the widow's actions in this pericope have been held to be a praiseworthy demonstration of generosity and radical trust in God to provide for her needs,⁶¹ commentators such as Fitzmyer, Wright and Malbon consider it a lament over a religious establishment that takes money from the poor, and to which the poor feel obligated to contribute, at the expense of the bare minimum they have to live on.⁶² It may be that this story, rather than the cursing of the fig tree, should provide the key interpretive lens for understanding the Temple Action, if indeed the commercialism of the cultus and enrichment of the priests is in view as Jesus' main objection. This story, as an interpretive key to the Temple Action, is one that has been mostly neglected by scholars in that regard and is worthy of deeper inquiry. It is one of those stories that functions ambiguously in regard to the question of "cleansing or destruction?" If indeed it represents reprehensible behaviour by the priests and teachers of the law, then it could be seen as a rebuke and attempt at cleansing from such behaviour. However, the context, which includes doom-laden comments about the Temple, immediately following the story at the beginning of chapter 13, could lead the reader in the direction of a destruction interpretation.

Just as the fig tree incident, understood as the redaction of Mark, indicates an authorial intention, so the placement of the Widow's Mite story adds context to the comments about the Temple that follow. Indeed the verses prior to the story are suggestive:

⁶⁰ Bauckham, "Jesus' Demonstration..." 79, 81.

⁶¹ See A.G. Wright, "The Widow's Mites: Praise or Lament?," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44 (1982) 256-66; 257-58 for a list of commentators who trend in this direction.

⁶² Evans, "Jesus' Action..." 245 cites Fitzmyer, Luke X-XXIV, 1321, Wright, "The Widow's Mites..." 256-66 and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "The Poor Widow in Mark and Her Poor Rich Readers," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53 (1991) 589-604 who hold a similar view.

³⁸ As he taught, Jesus said, “Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹ and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. ⁴⁰ They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.” (Mark 12:38-40)

Immediately following this comment about widow’s houses being devoured, Jesus highlights the actions of a widow who puts in “everything she had to live on.” (Mark 12:44). It has been assumed this Jesus’ words are a commendation of the widow, but this is far from certain. It could as well be understood as a critique of the priesthood⁶³ and a religious system that pressures a poor widow to make the unwise choice to spend her very living expenses to satisfy the demands of the cultus. Earlier in the chapter Mark records Jesus saying that loving God and your neighbor “is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” (Mark 12:32). A few verses after the widow’s mite incident, Jesus says, in response to the disciples’ admiration of the Temple, “Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down. Within 15 verses (Mark 12:33-13:2) we encounter the following sequence:

- a relativizing of the importance of offerings and sacrifices (12:32)
- a criticism of the rapacity and religious showiness of the teachers of the law (38-40)
- a questionable offering from a poor widow (41-44), without any invitation from Jesus to imitate her actions
- a prediction of the Temple’s doom (13:2)

In Luke’s gospel also (21:45-22:6), we find this same sequence, excluding the first. Either Luke has preserved Mark’s order (assuming Markan priority and Mark being a source for Luke) or he created it himself. In either case, the close proximity of criticism of teachers of the law, widow’s action and prediction of Temple doom can hardly be accidental.

As A.G. Wright points out, if we were to witness such an event, “would we not judge the act to be repulsive and to be based on misguided piety because she would be neglecting her own needs?”⁶⁴ He points out that if Jesus is simply pointing out that even the poor can be generous, this saying verges on trite, and has similar parallels in other literature (Aristotle for example) and so would hardly be worth Mark recording.⁶⁵ Further, his statements on Corban (Mark 7:10-13) trend in the opposite direction, criticising those who make offerings to God

⁶³ Though potentially less so, since the teachers of the law are not directly connected to the Temple, but operative in the synagogue setting. This again might point to a wider dissatisfaction with Jewish leadership beyond the priests and Temple context.

⁶⁴ Wright, “The Widow’s Mites...” 256.

⁶⁵ Wright, “The Widow’s Mites...” 260.

while neglecting important human needs. Clearly the subsistence needs of the widow would qualify under this same rubric.⁶⁶ In the end, it is a lament:

“She had been taught and encouraged by religious leaders to donate as she does, and Jesus condemns the value system that motivates her action, and he condemns the people who conditioned her to do it... her contribution was totally misguided, thanks to the encouragement of official religion, but the final irony of it all [in light of the impending destruction of the Temple] was that it was also a waste.”⁶⁷

5.7 Replacement of Temple with himself (Snodgrass #4)

It is worth considering the possibility that whatever the state of the Temple, its useful life was coming to an end, either because Jesus himself would replace many of its functions, becoming the ultimate locus of God’s dwelling place, or indeed because it was only ever intended as an imperfect precursor pointing forward to Jesus in the first place, much as the sacrificial system itself.

5.7.1 As a Portent of Replacement, not with Eschatological Temple, but himself

Was Jesus’ action intended as an attack on the sacrificial system? Did Jesus see himself as superior to the Temple? Did he, through his words and ministry, undermine the sacrificial system and the Temple? Were his actions consciously Messianic or Maccabean? Was Jesus ushering in an eschatological era within which the Temple, whether functioning correctly or not, would become obsolescent? Is Jesus not actually intending that the Temple be replaced with himself, but rather with the nascent Christian community that is forming?

It is true that certain pronouncements in the gospel records seem to imply that Jesus did see himself as, in some sense, superior to the Temple: “I tell you that one greater than the Temple is here” (Matt 12:6). This is a bold claim indeed since the Temple was believed to be the primary locus of God’s activity, and Jesus is arrogating this function to himself. It is likely that such a statement would have been seen as, at the very least, arrogant, and most probably blasphemous by his hearers

Also, unlike the fate of the Jerusalem Temple, Jesus claimed that if ‘his’ Temple was destroyed that he could raise it to life again:

‘Jesus answered them, “Destroy this Temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”

The Jews replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this Temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?”

But the Temple he had spoken of was his body.’ (Jn 2:19-21)

⁶⁶ Wright, “The Widow’s Mites...” 260, though again Jesus’ comment is directed against Pharisees not priests.

⁶⁷ Wright, “The Widow’s Mites...” 262, 263.

Walton, building on Harold W. Turner's work, *From Temple to Meeting House: The Phenomenology and Theology of Places of Worship*⁶⁸ suggests that Jesus was indeed replacing the major functions of the Temple with his own being.⁶⁹ According to Turner, a sacred place 'acts as centre, as meeting-point, as microcosm, and as a transcendent immanent presence.'⁷⁰ He further explains these functions as follows:

a) The Temple as centre.

The Temple serves as a locus point, an anchor of security in an uncertain, chaotic world. All [forms and structures] become completely reliable and receive the protection they need only when linked to or organized from some secure centre of power that is unassailable, permanent and immutable. Such a centre of reference is found in the sacred place where contact may be made with a much more real and solid world than that of everyday uncertain and changing experience.⁷¹

b) The Temple as meeting point.

The Temple is the place where the god(s) and humankind can engage with one another, where rituals and sacrifices are properly offered and received.

c) It is a place of immanent transcendent presence where the presence of the divine is manifested.⁷² Even though Jews no doubt understood Yahweh's transcendence, he was believed to also "dwell" in the Temple.⁷³ 'The very setting aside of a special sacred area or precinct is the first recognition that the gods are not equally present at all places, that their presence at the sanctuary transcends, as it were, their immanent presence elsewhere.'⁷⁴

d) The Temple as a microcosm of the heavenly world.

'It is part of the world which shares most fully in the heavenly realm and must be fit for the gods' presence. It is, as it were, a little piece of heaven on earth, or at least it corresponds to the heavenly original as an earthly replica, a mirror of its model or a microcosm of the cosmos as a whole.'⁷⁵

The relevance of these functions is seen in how the early Christians speak of and relate to Jesus in the years following his death and resurrection. It is true that Jesus never taught directly that his disciples should abandon the Temple, but it is also the case that they

⁶⁸ Harold W. Turner, *From Temple to Meeting House: The Phenomenology and Theology of Places of Worship*, Religion and Society 16 (The Hague/Paris/New York: Mouton, 1979).

⁶⁹ Steve Walton, "A Tale of Two Perspectives? The Temple in Acts" in ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Simon Gathercole, *Heaven on Earth: The Temple in Biblical Theology* (Carlisle, Paternoster, 2004) 135-49.

⁷⁰ Turner, *From Temple to Meeting House*, 18.

⁷¹ Turner, *From Temple to Meeting House*, 19.

⁷² Turner, *From Temple to Meeting House*, 22.

⁷³ cf. Mt 23:21: And he who swears by the Temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it.

⁷⁴ Turner, *From Temple to Meeting House*, 32.

⁷⁵ Turner, *From Temple to Meeting House*, 26.

often spoke about him in ways that bring to mind those functions which formerly belonged to the Temple.

However, even if only partially convincing, this list demonstrates how many of the functions traditionally performed by the Temple are now attributed to Jesus. Bertil Gärtner holds substantially the same view: ‘Instead he [Jesus] did as had been done in Qumran: he transferred the activities of the Temple from Jerusalem to another entity. This entity was Jesus himself and the group around him as Messiah.’⁷⁶ Wright claims that the early Christians were abandoning the cherished symbols of Judaism: Temple, Torah, Land and ethnic identity: “Their initially ambiguous attitude to the Temple... gave birth to a use of Temple-language as a rich source of metaphor through which they lent depth to their beliefs both about Jesus and the church itself.”⁷⁷

What seems to be happening, even prior to the Temple’s physical destruction, is that it is moving in the direction of obsolescence. It is to this consideration that we now turn.

5.7.2 Shaky Beginnings, Destruction and Eschatological Obsolescence

It is possible that Jesus’ action in the Temple was not concerned either with Temple purity or opposing the sacrificial system as such. It could be that the era of the Temple was drawing to a close, and that the prophecies of its destruction were simply a precursor to Jesus taking over its functions. Thus Sanders:

... we conclude that Jesus publicly predicted or threatened the destruction of the Temple, that the statement was shaped by his expectation of the arrival of the eschaton, that he probably also expected a new Temple to be given by God from heaven, and that he made a demonstration which prophetically symbolized the coming event.⁷⁸

The exchange between Jesus and the scribe in Mark 12 also seems to hint strongly in this direction:

The scribe said, ‘You are right, teacher: you have said truly that he is one, and that there is none beside him; and that to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbour as oneself, is more than all burnt-offerings and sacrifices.’ And when Jesus saw that he had answered intelligently, he said to him: ‘You are not far from the kingdom of god.’ [Mk. 12.32-4]

To say that *anything* is better than “burnt-offerings and sacrifices” certainly brings into question the sufficiency of the sacrificial system of the Temple.⁷⁹ Other rituals such as the

⁷⁶ Bertil Gärtner, *The Temple and The Community* 114.

⁷⁷ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1992) 365-66.

⁷⁸ E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* 75

⁷⁹ Wright comments on this exchange: ‘It indicates that, for Jesus, part of the point of the kingdom he was claiming to inaugurate would be that it would bring with it all that the Temple offered, thereby replacing, and

Last Supper also provide a contrast between Jesus and the Temple.⁸⁰ Even his death was a form of sacrifice, outside of the ambit of the Temple.⁸¹ His pronouncements of individual forgiveness, without reference to the Temple system or sacrifice, also point in this direction.⁸² Gärtner claims that this Temple Action is in view of the ‘better worship of the eschatological Temple (cf. Isa. lvi and Jer. vii)... The Temple building was soon to go and to be replaced by better fellowship with God.’⁸³

Turner poses the intriguing suggestion that the existence of an earthly Temple in any state, whether corrupt or not, fell short of God’s original purposes, and that, like the monarchy, building the original Temple was a concession. He cites as evidence two prophetic figures speaking against the Temple, both at the beginning and within sight of its end. Nathan initially responds enthusiastically to David’s proposal to build a Temple, but after consulting with the LORD he withdraws his approval and expresses both the divine rejection of the Temple plan, and the adequacy of the tabernacle as a centre for worship (2 Sam 7:4-10, 17). The ‘house’ that David *is* permitted to build is a dynasty that will be permanent; ‘...the subject changed from a sacred place to a holy people.’⁸⁴

At the other end of the Temple’s lifetime, approximately thirty-five years before its final and permanent destruction, Stephen, the first Christian martyr, is also critical of the Temple. He is accused of ‘speaking against this holy place’ (Acts 6:13), affirms the former adequacy of the tabernacle (Acts 7:44,45) and then asserts that ‘the Most High does not live in houses made by men’ (Acts 7:48). Turner is surely right when he claims, ‘In spite of all that we have been able to say about the spiritual values and insights supported by the Temple type of sacred place, these two dissentient figures standing at the beginning and the end of the Jerusalem Temple’s history cannot be ignored.’⁸⁵

In summary then, one is able to conclude that even if evidence of corruption within the Temple was not forthcoming, given the advent of Jesus, the Temple’s usefulness was coming to an end. In view of the coming eschaton, and the functions of the Temple that Jesus was apparently arrogating to himself, the Temple was moving in the direction of eschatological

making redundant, Israel’s greatest symbol...’ *Jesus and the Victory of God* 434-5, cf. 277 ‘his movement was in some sense a replacement of it [the Temple]’.

⁸⁰ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 558.

⁸¹ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 604.

⁸² cf. Mt 9:2/Mk 2:5/Lk 5:20; Lk 7:47-8.

⁸³ Gärtner, “The Temple and The Community” 110 and cf. 120-21 and see John Paul Heil, ‘The Narrative Strategy and Pragmatics of the Temple in Mark,’ *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 59 Jan 1997, 76-100 citing 96: ‘By Dying and Rising Jesus Builds a New Sanctuary (Mark 14:47-49, 58; 15:29; 15:38-16:8)’.

⁸⁴ Turner, *From Temple to Meeting House*, 75.

⁸⁵ Turner, *From Temple to Meeting House*, 75.

obsolescence. Its failures were probably no greater than in the past, but a new era is dawning when the Temple, the place of ‘tabernacling’ with God, is overshadowed by the new tabernacle and the new ‘high priest,’ Jesus himself.⁸⁶

6. Conclusion

Just as the story of the cursing of the fig tree, in line with Mark’s editorial intention, has been an interpretive key for understanding Jesus’ actions, portending destruction, it is plausible, to argue that another key for interpretation is the story of the Widow’s mite.⁸⁷ Far from being an exemplary act intended as an example for future believers, the story is told immediately prior to the disciples’ comments on how impressive the Temple is. Either Jesus drawing attention to the widow is another in the sequence of “things that are impressive” or more likely, he is showing what the cost of such grandeur has been, within a cultic apparatus that persuades a widow to part with all that she has to live on.

It is the commercial aspect of the Temple, and how it lines the pockets of the ruling families at the literal expense of the poor that most offends Jesus. This money-making machine, which further solidifies the predominant social stratification, falls far short of the ideal Temple envisaged in Ezekiel and the Qumran War Scroll, where pure worship would take place, and people from everywhere would stream to the Temple.

Jesus understands that despite his rebukes, the Temple will not reform, and will be destroyed. In its place, an understanding of himself as the true Temple, replacing almost all of the Temple’s functions will grow among his followers, and it is this reality, together with the Temple’s failures, that ensure its doom.

⁸⁶ cf. Hebrews 4:18-19.

⁸⁷ Though, due to Mark’s deliberate intercalation of the Fig Tree story, it should still function as the dominant key.

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