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## Fragments of the Historical Jesus: A Reading of Mark 11,11-[26]

Edmondo Lupieri

Loyola University Chicago, [elupier@luc.edu](mailto:elupier@luc.edu)

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Edmondo Lupieri

## Fragments of the Historical Jesus? A Reading of *Mark* 11,11-[26]\*

### I. A PREFACE

Most scholars nowadays would agree that Jesus was a Jew.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, almost every researcher ultimately discovers in Jesus his or her own prepackaged ideas,<sup>2</sup> and therefore I am quite skeptical about the possibility of ever satisfactorily reconstructing a full image of the man Jesus who must lay underneath or behind his pictures we have received from the various traditions about him.<sup>3</sup> It is possible, though, that here and there in the mass of literary traditional material there are surviving fragments that may refer to some details of his real humanity. Without thinking of constructing yet another figure of him, beginning with any of such fragments it may be possible to find more testimonies, all coherent with the one we started with, so that we can have in front of us a constellation of passages that may represent one aspect of the “real Jesus”. Quite obviously, this aspect should be then compared with other aspects that emerge from the rest of the traditions about him, and finally be accepted as logically fitting with a hypothetical and reconstructed general figure (the “historical Jesus”), or discarded as being historically unacceptable.

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\* If not otherwise indicated, all translations from Greek are mine.

<sup>1</sup> Although Western scholarship needed the guilt-complex of post WWII years to reach what seems to be such a logical conclusion.

<sup>2</sup> See recently the balanced words of D.C. Allison, *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2009, 16.

<sup>3</sup> To my knowledge, one of the best and most solid contemporary attempts to do so is Adriana Destro – Mauro Pesce, *L'uomo Gesù. Giorni, luoghi, incontri di una vita*, Milano, Mondadori, 2008 (to be published in English by Fortress Press in 2011).

The objective of this article is a first attempt to work on a marginal and usually discarded detail of the tradition and see if this detail could indeed be used to reach one peculiar aspect of Jesus' human life and teaching. The neglected detail I have chosen is the content of Mark 11,16: «And he did not allow any person to carry a vessel through the Temple». This verse has no apparent parallel in the NT traditions and does not even seem to fit in the Markan context of the so-called Cleansing of the Temple.<sup>4</sup> In my opinion it is a rather interesting clue which may be used as a foundation for the reconstruction of an overlooked, but historically plausible, aspect of the figure of the historical Jesus.

## II. THE MARKAN CONTEXT

The Cleansing of the Temple was considered a key event in the public life of Jesus, to the point that all four Evangelists, although in different ways and in different parts of their reconstruction of the story of Jesus, deemed it necessary to report.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the scene has frequently been commented on by the Church Fathers as well as by modern and contemporary scholars, with a large number of reflections, because the narrative also seems to offer indications for the Christians on how to handle their relationship with the Jews.

It makes sense that we start our analysis from Mark 11,11-[26], the immediate context of Mark 11,16, also accepting the presumption that the *Gospel of Mark* offers us the earliest available version of the event. As it is well known, the whole scene is a classic example of a Markan literary "sandwich", since the misadventure of the fig tree embraces the narrative strictly depicting Jesus' action in the Temple.<sup>6</sup> In this particular case, the "sandwich" is followed by a sort of appendix. Therefore we can identify the following sections of the text: a<sub>1</sub>) the cursing of the fig tree (vv. 12b-14); b) the cleansing of the Temple in the proper sense (15b-18); a<sub>2</sub>) the finding of the withered fig tree (20-21); c) an appendix on the efficacy of prayers (22-[26]).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See, in this same volume, the contribution by B.C. Dennert, "Mark 11,16: A «Status Quaestionis»".

<sup>5</sup> The core of the Markan scene (Mark 11,15-17) has parallel passages in Luke 19,45f., Matt 21,12f. and John 2,14-16. The major difference between the Synoptics and *John* is probably the well known fact that, while the scene in the Synoptics takes place at the beginning of the last and final period of permanence of Jesus in Jerusalem, just before the Passion, John puts it at the beginning of his Gospel, during the first visit of Jesus in Jerusalem.

<sup>6</sup> Other more or less convincing examples of Markan "sandwiches" are: Mark 2,1-12; 3,1-6 and 20-35; 5,21-43; 6,7-30 and 13,5-23.

<sup>7</sup> Mark 11,11-12a is an introduction, strictly connected to the preceding 11,1-10 that depicts the entering of Jesus into Jerusalem (or somewhere nearby). Similarly to the other con-

The first observation is that section c) explains and offers the key to understand a<sub>1</sub>) + a<sub>2</sub>) and that a<sub>1</sub>) + a<sub>2</sub>) does the same with section b).

I understand section c) as a reflection useful to the early church, since on one side it explains the cursing and withering of the fig tree as a sign of faith, deprived of a direct connection with the fate of Jerusalem (a question we will soon see), and on the other it shows the power of the church, the only space where prayers are effective. This section should be the most recent one, and it looks like it underwent a series of revisions, based on words and ideas originating from the *Gospel of Matthew*.<sup>8</sup>

The meaning of section a<sub>1</sub>) + a<sub>2</sub>) is strictly tied to the meaning of the fig-tree, its fruit, and the fact that it was not the season for fruit.<sup>9</sup> Like the vine, or the vineyard, and its fruit, the fig tree and its fruit can spiritually represent Israel or refer to it.<sup>10</sup> Among the many passages in the Scriptures, it is worth mentioning Mic 7,1b-2a (MT), since it also explains why God or his emissary/prophet should be «hungry for figs»: «There is no cluster to eat, nor early fig for my soul (= desire). The faithful have disappeared from the earth/land, and there is none upright among men».<sup>11</sup> If the «earth» is actually the «Land» – or can be understood as such – then the whole prophetic context deals with

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necting verses to be mentioned in this footnote, vv. 11-12a describe the geographical movement and the location of Jesus in the space. Verses 15a; 19 and 27 have the same function. We suppose they are the narrative framework of the Markan redaction.

<sup>8</sup> Beginning with the possible insertion of some words into an earlier text of v. 23, and ending with v. 26 which is not supported by all manuscripts. This opens the thorny question of the probable rewriting of *Mark*, a rewriting which possibly went on for centuries as it is blatantly shown by the various endings of the Gospel. The problem is largely beyond the scope of this contribution; it is important to note, though, that this reflection on the efficacy of prayers at a certain point in history became the main interest of the Christian churches reading the passage, so that the text had to be modified. (For the possibility of multiple redactions in *Mark*, see now D. Burkett, *Rethinking the Gospel Sources. From Proto-Mark to Mark*, New York, T&T Clark, 2004; for new – and unusual – hypotheses, see J. Rius-Camps, *El Evangelio de Marcos. Etapas de su redacción*, Estela, Verbo Divino, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> We would call this an «allegorical» or «symbolic» way of speaking, and it is somehow correct to do so. Though actually what we have here is a «spiritual» form of teaching, showing the faithful what the deep reality of things is. As in an apocalyptic context, the fig tree is a fig tree, but at the same time it is something else, and that something else is its deep, spiritual reality.

<sup>10</sup> Vine and fig tree are often mentioned together in the OT (Num 20,5; Deut 8,8; Song 2,13a; Joel 2,22; Isa 36,16; Mic 4,4; Zech 3,10; Hag 2,19; cf. Jas 3,12); symbolically or spiritually for Israel [Hos 9,10a: «Like grapes in the wilderness (LXX: desert), I found Israel. Like the first fruit on the fig tree, in its first season, I saw your ancestors»; cf. 1Kgs 2,46 (7 LXX = 1Kgs 4,25 = 1Kgs 5,5 MT); 2Kgs 18,31; 1Macc 14,12]; in scenes of punishment of Israel, as Hab 3,17a (LXX = Ode 4,17): «Because the fig tree will not bear fruit and no fruits will be on the vines» [cf. Hos 2,14; Joel 1,7.12; Jer 8,13 and cf. also Ps 104 (105), 33, describing the results of the hail sent by God upon Egypt].

<sup>11</sup> Translation adapted to be closer to the MT; the LXX is different.

the Land of Israel (and «being upright» could refer to the observance of the Law).

If the fruitless fig tree out of season is Israel, then this passage is the first leaf of a diptych with the immediately following parable of the vineyard which does bear fruit in season: Mark 12,1-12.<sup>12</sup> The vineyard and its seasonal fruit, however, are the object of the avidity of its wicked tenants, who end up killing the beloved son of the owner to get possession of his inheritance. Explicitly, after the end of the parable and after the words of Jesus on the rejected stone, Mark 12,11f. says that high priests, scribes and elders understood that Jesus was talking against them. This last sentence runs parallel to Mark 11,18, the end of our section b), and creates an even stronger connection between the two scenes and their contents.<sup>13</sup>

### III. EXCLUSION OF THE GENTILES?

The cursing/withering of the fig tree and the parable of the vineyard and its wicked tenants (connected with the «rejected stone») appear to be two prophetic utterances regarding the destiny of Israel as a whole, incapable of producing fruit during the unexpected visitation by God or his emissary, and of his leaders in everyday life, avidly attempting to appropriate not only that fruit which is not theirs and should be given back to God at the right and expected time, but also the whole vineyard.<sup>14</sup> I am inclined to believe that the «fruit» God ex-

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<sup>12</sup> The opposition «out of season» / «in season» is part of the Markan literary construction and theological teaching regarding the destiny of Israel and its leaders in the history of salvation. The fact that Jesus looks for fruits from a tree «out of season», since it must have sounded quite off, was avoided by Matthew (and the whole withering by Luke and John), and has offered easy cues for rationalistic criticism [famously Bertrand Russell in his *Why I Am Not a Christian* (orig. 1927)]. Nevertheless, what is usually called the «fruit» of a fig tree is actually an *inflorescence* (which turns into an *infructescence* when ripened), which appears very early on the twigs, together with the first leaves and when the other trees usually have only flowers and leaves. This has probably caused the fig tree to be considered a special tree, able to bring a sign of the future (see Mark 13,28 / Matt 24,32) and to be used in prophetic contexts (Isa 34,4 and Rev 6,13; cf. Nah 3,12) even beyond a proverbial usage (Prov 27,18; Judg 9,11). On the other side, there seems to be some traditional idea that the vineyards and its fruits usually are «in season», at least for God to «take [them] back»: Hos 2,11.

<sup>13</sup> In the Markan narrative context, the two scenes take place on two consecutive days. In Mark 11,18 we have only high priests and scribes, while in Mark 12,11 we find also the elders (the other members of the Sanhedrin?). In the first passage Mark says that they were trying to kill Jesus because they were afraid of him since the crowds were surprised by his teaching; in the second context he says they could not arrest him because they were afraid of the crowds. I would consider this a *crescendo* in the dramatization of the story.

<sup>14</sup> It is usual Jewish lore that God is the only owner of the land and that the leaders are in charge of the people but must respond to God for their administration [see the grim destiny of the 7 + 70 «angels-shepherds» to whom the people of Israel had been «handed over» by

pected from Israel and its authorities in the Markan context is the expansion of salvation with the inclusion of the Gentiles. The reproach against «the Jews» or some categories among them (the Pharisees, as an example) is very common in the Christian scripture, even in relatively early layers.<sup>15</sup> The idea that «the Jews» were unable to provide salvation for the Gentiles, and/or that Jewish authorities were unable to save their own people, is the theoretical basis for Christian supersessionism; if Israel as a whole and/or its authorities fail in their own function in the history of salvation as planned by God, they will be destroyed and/or substituted by the «verus Israel».

The parable of the wicked tenants, then, may originate from an earlier level of the tradition, since it appears to explain that the people of Israel (the vineyard) would have been able to produce the fruit for the right time (possibly the eschatological «season»), but were impeded or led astray by the rapacity of their leaders. On the other hand, the withering of the fig tree seems to imply full responsibility of Israel as a whole.<sup>16</sup> Whatever the historical connection of Jesus with a physical fig tree,<sup>17</sup> its withering was interpreted as a prophecy of the destruction of Israel and after the year 70 must have been understood as a realized prophecy. It is difficult to decide if the whole story was created after 70; in any case the explanation put on the mouth of Jesus seems to be there to comfort the early believers. The fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of Israel is not a cosmic tragedy, but the sign that God is faithful and keeps his own word.<sup>18</sup> The tragic collapse of Israel

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God, but who had «decided to kill many more than they were ordered», in *1En.* 90 (trans. E. Isaac in: *OTP*, vol. 1, 69-71).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *1Thess* 2,14-16 or *Matt* 23,15. It is not important for our discussion if *1Thess* 2,14-16 is spurious; the fact that there is no textual incertitude in the manuscripts means that the idea is early and must have sounded logical to the early generations of believers, esp. after 70 C.E. The roots for this way of thinking are polemical biblical passages like *Isa* 52,5.

<sup>16</sup> This would be coherent with the Matthean position expressed in passages like *Matt* 27,25.

<sup>17</sup> I am ready to believe that Jesus did talk about some fig tree in symbolic/apocalyptic contexts (see again *Mark* 13,28). It seems beyond our capability, though, to understand whether there was at a certain point a physical fig tree that underwent the quite drastic experience of being withered by Jesus.

<sup>18</sup> As in *Rom* 3,3 and always elsewhere in the NT, *pístis* is followed by a subjective genitive, not an objective. The real problem of v. 22b, *échete pístin theou*, is not *pístis theou* [which should not mean «faith in God», but must signify «faithfulness of God»]; I would like to extend to our passage what Richard Hays says regarding Paul's text in *Galatians* (*The Faith of Jesus Christ. The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2002<sup>2</sup>) and therefore to cancel its exceptionality, which was noted by many, but is actually the result of our modern theological preconceptions and not caused by the text *per se*, but *échete*. As in *échete koustōdían* of *Matt* 27,65, the verb is in my opinion a present indicative, not an imperative. Our passage, therefore, should be understood as meaning: «Here you have, in front of your eyes (with the withering of the tree meaning the destruction of Jerusalem), the proof, or an example, of the fact that God is faithful to his own words». The sentence already created problems in the antiquity, to the point that about half of the

under the brutal repression by the Romans must not be feared; it is indeed the deserved punishment for Israel, incapable of bringing fruit, and could even be the object of the prayers of the faithful.

If the parable of the wicked tenants originates from an earlier redactional level, since it sorts out the responsibility and guilt of the authorities, then the symbolic narrative of the withered fig tree, since it condemns Israel as a whole, may derive from a more recent meditation. This one may reflect both the frustration for the non-conversion of «the Jews» (see Matt 28,15) and the need to theologically justify the fall of Jerusalem.

Gradually, with the addition of material of probable Matthean origin, the focus is moved away from the fall of Jerusalem to the efficacy of praying. We can imagine behind this a church that grows in the world of the Gentiles and is less and less interested in the destiny of Israel, but is always attentive to strengthen the confidence of the faithful in the power of their prayer.

At this point we can analyze the internal part of the Markan literary “sandwich”, always keeping in mind that the two external halves, the cursing and the withering of the fig tree, are there to explain the content. Also section b) can be subdivided into various parts: we have a narrative frame (vv. 15a + 19), a series of acts and words of Jesus in indirect speech (vv. 15b-16), a teaching of Jesus in direct speech (v. 17), and the reaction of the authorities (v. 18).

Jesus’ words in v. 17 are a mixture of Isa 56,7 and Jer 7,11. The three Synoptics agree on this,<sup>19</sup> but Mark has a detail the others don’t have: the «house of prayers» will be such in relation to «all the peoples». This fits exactly in what we were discussing above: the sin of Israel in our present context is the exclusion of the Gentiles. Whoever stressed the presence of the Gentiles in the words of Jesus<sup>20</sup> intended to connect it to the cursing and withering of the fig tree.<sup>21</sup> In any case, the words of Jesus and the reaction of the authorities are to be considered part of the same redactional level of the cursing and withering of

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manuscripts insert *ei* before it and almost all the others add *gár* in the following sentence to harmonize the context and have the following sentence explain ours. This easier reading is also supported by the Synoptic parallels in Luke 17,6, Matt 17,20 and 21,21, where *theou* has disappeared.

<sup>19</sup> While John 2,16-17 has only a loose connection with Isa.

<sup>20</sup> We can suppose that both Matthew and Luke decided independently to suppress the detail (Matthew because he was not interested in stressing this aspect in a pre-Easter narrative – as he did in avoiding to reproduce Mark 13,10 in Matt 10,17-22 – and Luke because he was interested in reducing the anti-Jewish bias of the context), or that one of them did and the other followed, or that they did not find it in the Markan text they had at hand. Each hypothesis has stronger and weaker points.

<sup>21</sup> Or vice versa. I am inclined to believe that it was the same person who built the “sandwich” and therefore the main authorial level of *Mark*.

the fig tree and therefore of the parable of the wicked tenants, followed by the words of Jesus on the rejected stone and the reaction of the authorities in that context.<sup>22</sup> Even here, though, the criticism does not involve the whole people of Israel (the crowds agree with Jesus), but only some authorities. This reinforces my supposition that the cursing/withering of the fig tree originates from a different, possibly more recent, compositional milieu, even if it was then used at the same redactional level of the context.

#### IV. A HALAKHIC CONTEXT?

The acts of Jesus in the Temple do not seem to have anything to do with the Gentiles. Verses 15b-16 describe Jesus as impeding or prohibiting a series of activities in the Temple. At Mark 11,15b Jesus «throw[s] out those who sell and those who buy in the Temple». Since there is no object, Jesus impedes the selling and buying of anything in the Temple. After having thrown out people, at Mark 11,15c Jesus goes from people to objects, «overturn[ing] the tables of the money changers and the chairs of those selling the doves». The text does not say what Jesus did with these two categories of persons. Did he throw them out too? And those who sold the doves, had they not been thrown out before, together with all those who were selling things in the Temple? And who were those who sold the doves? Could they possibly have been Levites?<sup>23</sup> Also, Jesus seems to avoid any physical contact with them and with the money changers,<sup>24</sup> as if he wanted to avoid any risk of contamination (by him to them or by them to him).

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<sup>22</sup> It seems probable to me that this is the level of the construction of all the Markan discussions in the Temple. I would notice that at v. 18 the “scribes” appear as adversaries together with the high priests, since according to *Mark* they seem to be the principal antagonists of Jesus. In the following chapters the polemical discussions seem to follow a similar pattern: Mark 12,40 criticizes the scribes, «who devour the houses of the widows»; Mark 12,41-43 shows the result of that crime, depicting the «poor widow» offering «her whole life» in the «treasury» of the Temple; Mark 13,1-2 shows the right punishment: no «stone upon stone» will remain of all the Temple constructions. [I agree with Häkkinen that the scene of the poor widow in *Mark* depicts the sin of the scribes more than the piousness of the woman: S. Häkkinen, “Two Coins Too Many: Reflections on the Widow’s Offering”, *The Fourth R* 20/4 (2007), 9-12].

<sup>23</sup> Also in John 2,15-16, after having «throw[n] all out of the Temple», animals and people, he «tells the sellers of the doves to take them away from there [the Temple]». I wonder if all this could reflect the memory of some sort of respect for their function. For the possibility that this function be a result of Caiaphas’ new practices, see the bibliography quoted by Denert, “Mark 11,16...”, n. 17.

<sup>24</sup> The idea of avoiding bodily contact could be reflected by John 2,15 when he explains that Jesus «made a “flagellum” out of cords». Also the detail of the «cords» is strange, because a *sfragëllion* «flagellum» was usually made of strings of leather. Is there here the memory of Jesus trying to avoid contamination?



The possibility that the context has or reflects some halakhic meaning finally emerges in v. 16: «And he did not allow any person to carry a vessel through the Temple». Mark 11,16 has the typical structure of a Sabbatical prohibition of carrying, with an indication of the category of prohibited objects and of the place where the prohibition has to be implemented, but without indication of time.

As it is shown in the works by Alex Jassen,<sup>25</sup> it was not so clear at the time of Jesus what could be allowed and what would be forbidden on Shabbat. Since the main problem was that the biblical texts on the subject, which could be connected with Moses, were few and generic, it took centuries of «exegetical reformulation» to obtain sets of prohibitions most Jews would accept. This “exegetical reformulation” consisted in taking the structure of an existing clear prohibition (usually: «Do not allow any man to... on the Shabbat [day]») and substituting and/or adding the content of the prohibition (usually, in our case, «carrying» instead of «exiting»/«entering» or «working», and objects, like «loads», and places, like «through doors» or «from one house to another»). By the foundational texts in Exod 16,27-29 and Jer 17,19-27, we understand that the prohibitions both of exiting/entering and of carrying («loads») always involve some trespassing of a physical or ideal borderline (a threshold, a door, a dividing line).

Two OT texts seem to be most influential for the construction and meaning of our Markan passage. The first one is Neh 13,15-22. As it is well known, here Nehemiah describes the way he purified Jerusalem from prohibited activities on Shabbat. The first thing he did was to expel the Tyrian merchants from the city and then even from the vicinity of the walls on the night and day of Shabbat.<sup>26</sup> Only after the expulsion and final removal of the merchants, Nehemiah orders the Levites to purify themselves and watch over the city doors, so that Shabbat could be sanctified.<sup>27</sup> In this way the whole city is purified and kept pure.

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<sup>25</sup> See his “Law and Exegesis in the Dead Sea Scrolls: The Sabbath Carrying Prohibition in Comparative Perspective”, in: L.H. Schiffman – S. Tzoref (eds.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls at 60. Scholarly Contributions of New York University Faculty and Alumni*, Leiden, Brill, 2010, 115-56, and his contribution to the present volume.

<sup>26</sup> Since they kept selling their goods (apparently mostly fish, and therefore quite perishable), the inhabitants went out of the city to buy what they needed and brought back their purchases, crossing the threshold of the city doors and therefore breaking the Sabbatical rule. The Greek text of the LXX renders the Jewish inhabitants of Jerusalem even guiltier, since it is them, and not the unmentioned Tyrians, who sell and buy on Shabbat, both inside and outside the city.

<sup>27</sup> When the merchants were still around, camped outside the walls, Nehemiah does not send the purified Levites at the doors, but armed guards, to impede people from carrying anything inside Jerusalem. He probably wants to reduce the risk of any potentially contaminating contacts for the Levites, whose purity was a guarantee for the whole city.

Apparently Jesus does not want to apply Nehemiah's Sabbatical purity to the whole city,<sup>28</sup> but is happy to protect the purity of the Temple. Like Nehemiah, he seems to think that the first thing to do is to expel the merchants.

The other OT text is Zech 14,20-21, a sort of apocalyptic rendition of Jer 17 and Neh 13. In these famous last verses of Zechariah's booklet, the prophet<sup>29</sup> describes «that day» in the eschatological Jerusalem and in its «house of Jahveh». There won't be any «Canaanites» (again meaning “merchants”) in «that day», and many objects in the city will have exceptional levels of purity. Explicitly, a special category of «vessels» (some kind of pots and/or basins) will have a level of purity like that required inside the Temple. It sounds logical to ask ourselves what day could be «that day». Since it is the eschatological day of Jahveh, I would suppose that it is the cosmic Shabbat.<sup>30</sup> We will come back to this; for now I want to stress that both Neh and Zech seem to connect the expulsion of the merchants and high level of purity with some form of Sabbatical observance.

*Jubilees* 2,29f. and 50,8 offer more examples of exegetical reformulations, but it is in Qumran that we find the closest texts to Mark 11,16.

CD A XI, 7-9 (= 4Q270 6 V and 4Q271 5 I):

7 ...No man carry from the house outside and from outside in the house. And if he is in a hut, he will not carry outside from it and will not carry inside it.<sup>31</sup>

4QHalakhota (= 4Q251) fr. 1-2 (ex 1), 4-5:

4 ...No] man will carry from his place for the whole Shabbat. 5 And from the house not outside [...

Apart from the structure, it is interesting to notice that these first two prohibitions do not have any explicit object. This means that the prohibition is total: nothing can be carried on Shabbat. The third prohibition is almost parallel to our text.

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<sup>28</sup> According to various sources, it was subject to a specific level of purity and had the Temple as its ideal central point. The *Scroll of the Temple* describes eleven levels of purity (see J. Meier, *Die Tempelrolle vom Toten Meer*, München, Reinhardt, 1978, 12f.), Josephus seven (*B.J.* i, 26; cf. v, 227 and *C.Ap.* ii, 103f.), the Mishnah ten (*m.Kelim* 1,8-9).

<sup>29</sup> Whoever this Deutero- or Trito-Zechariah was, in the first century the passage was considered ancient and original.

<sup>30</sup> Its chronological extension could vary according to different opinions. Most Jews would have accepted the idea, even among the rabbis; to use the words of *m.Tamid* 6,4, it is «the time that it has to come... the day that shall be all Shabbat and rest in the life everlasting».

<sup>31</sup> Here and in the following passages I adapted the translations in F. García-Martínez – E.J.C. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls. Study Edition*, 2 vols., Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1997/98, making them more literal, although less elegant.

4QMiscellaneousRules (= 4Q 265) fr. 7 I, 5-6 and 8-9:

5 ...No] man [carry o]ut from his tent vessels and food 6 in the day  
<space> of Shabbat.

8 ...And vessels no man [carry (?) / lift (?) / unseal (?) on the day of]  
Shabbat. And if an army [...

Before trying to understand what «vessels» (*kelym*) could mean in the Qumran and NT texts, we can accept as a first conclusion that there were indeed discussions about Sabbatical prohibitions of carrying vessels in the first century.

## V. A SABBATICAL PROHIBITION OF CARRYING?

The first question that arises is whether the historical/real Jesus would have ever had any interest in applying a Sabbatical prohibition of carrying anything inside the Temple.

We can begin by observing that the text offers indications of object («vessels») and place («through the Temple»), but not of time. As the absence of object means “anything” and the absence of place means “anywhere”, then the absence of time means “always”. Therefore the hypothesis is that Jesus would like to apply a prohibition of carrying that is typically a Sabbatical prohibition to the everyday life of the Temple. In this way he would expand the halakhic rules of the Temple in a period in which the Pharisees had not yet succeeded in imposing their own rules in the Temple, a period in which priestly hierarchy in Jerusalem was the subject of various criticisms for their halakhot.<sup>32</sup>

As likely as this could be from a strictly historical perspective, the next step for us is to see if we can find any supporting material in any ancient tradition we have regarding Jesus. I would articulate three questions on this subject: a) Do we have traditions according to which Jesus appears particularly careful with the Sabbatical observance, or in a way that his teaching could appear more radical than that of his ad-

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<sup>32</sup> The *Halakhic Letter* recovered at Qumran (4QMMT) as a whole is a polemical text, showing how interpretations could be different, even among groups with common priestly cultural roots. The Mishnah and in general the rabbinic literature inherit the Pharisaic criticism against the priestly halakhic traditions and testify to the temporary victory of the Pharisees, when, sometimes during the first century C.E., they were able to oblige the priests to follow the Pharisaic rules even in the Temple. The most famous anecdote on this subject describes how, on the eve of an important festival, a drop of saliva of a (Roman) commander reached the vest of the officiating high priest. The Pharisees obliged him to step down and had his brother celebrate the day after instead of him. The story is told many times in different ways (the foreign person can be an «Arab», a «lord», or even a «king»: *b.Yoma* 47a; *t.Yoma* III), but it means that, against the priestly halakhic traditions, a foreigner is considered to be polluting – and that the Pharisees are strong enough to impose their view even upon the high priest.

versaries? b) Do we know of him showing any particular attention to the purity of the Temple? c) Do we know of him discussing Sabbatical observance regarding the Temple?

To point a) the answer is almost certainly *no*. The traditions of Jesus discussing Shabbat have been largely studied and I would agree with most scholars, believing that Jesus very probably kept Shabbat all his life, but also that he stuck to the Torah and disregarded halakhic expansions or explanations from other schools. Apparently, he was not interested in expanding Sabbatical observance either. On the other side, the general tendency of the early communities, whose thoughts are reflected upon in the canonical Gospels, was that of overcoming the Sabbatical observance.<sup>33</sup>

For point b), on the contrary, we have plenty of supporting passages, coming mostly from the *Gospel of Matthew*. We can identify three foci.

1: Matt 7,6 and its potential criticism of priestly carelessness in the observance.

«Do not give the holy thing to the dogs» very probably refers to the risk that sacrificial food (*qodoshim*, the «holy things»), which is the food for the priests, becomes fodder for dogs. This is possible when priests keep dogs in their homes and some of the priests' food (meat leftovers) is eaten by their dogs. Even if impure animals are not contaminating when alive (and are originally prohibited only as food),<sup>34</sup> we have strong pre-70 criticism against the high priests for keeping dogs at home.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> In my opinion, not even Matt 24,20 should be considered a proof that the Matthean communities were still keeping Shabbat. Jerusalem fell at the end of the summer and apparently no reliable source tells us that a Shabbat day had any particular significance during its agony. Therefore, I think that for Matthew the «Winter» and the «Shabbat» of 24,20 are the apocalyptic-eschatological concepts of «cosmic Winter» and «cosmic Shabbat» [see my «La fuga di sabato. Il mondo giudaico di Matteo, seguace di Gesù», ASE 20/1 (2003), 57-73]. It would be interesting to know whether those groups of followers of Jesus who kept the Sabbatical observance had specific traditions with words of Jesus recommending it.

<sup>34</sup> And, in any case, we have at least Rabbi Eliezer (the Great, a disciple of Johanan ben Zakkai before the year 70) equating impurity of dogs and impurity of pigs: *b.B.Qam.* 83a (with quite unpleasant consequences for the owners).

<sup>35</sup> For the protection of the purity of *qodoshim* already Lev 6,19 (LXX 6,27) prohibits their consumption outside of the Temple (and see the whole of Lev 7 for the protection of priestly food [= offerings]). In spite of this prohibition (which involved also the mandatory burning of any leftovers on the altar), polemical discussions were quite lively: 4QMMT, B 58-62 of the reconstructed text. See E. Qimron – J. Strugnell, *Qumran Cave 4, V, Miqsat Ma'ase ha-Torah* (DJD, 10), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994, 163 and comments by Y. Sussmann, *ib.*, 189f.; M. Philonenko, ««Dehors les chiens»» (Apocalypse 22.6 et 4QMMT B 58-62)», NTS 43 (1997), 445-450. For the relative date of this kind of discussions, see Th. Kazen, *Jesus and Purity Halakhah. Was Jesus Indifferent to Impurity?* (Coniectanea Biblica, NT Series, 38), Stockholm, Almqvist & Wicksell Intl., 2002, 80. Dogs could be «dangerous»

2: Matt 5,23-24 and the prohibition of bringing «gifts» (sacrificial victims) to the altar in the Temple, while thinking of a dispute with a «brother» (co-religionist).

This prohibition seems to me to imply that even thinking, if inappropriate, can contaminate a religious action. I see here a way of reasoning analogous to the one that brought to the prohibition of talking or even of thinking of work (or prohibited actions, like buying or selling) on Shabbat.<sup>36</sup> We have several examples of this kind of spiritualized concept of observance in various Jewish traditions,<sup>37</sup> even contemporary to Jesus. It must have had a particular weight in discussions on purifications with water, as in Philo, who talks of the «impure purity» of only formally observant Jews,<sup>38</sup> or Josephus, when he says that John's immersion was not useful to take away sins, but to purify a body, the soul of which had already been purified by the practice of virtue.<sup>39</sup> In the canonical texts we do not have memory of Jesus explicitly criticizing immersions in water,<sup>40</sup> but something might have been saved in the *P.Oxy 840*.<sup>41</sup>

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in many ways; besides eating priestly food, their bodily excretions, since they came from impure animals, could be deemed impure (see discussions justifying the purity of honey, in spite of the fact that it proceeds from an impure animal, like the bee: *m.Bek.* 1,2; *b.Bek.* 7b; cf. Str-B, vol. 1, 100f.), and, in case of a dog's death, its carcass would have definitely been a source of impurity of high degree in a house where purity should have been kept at the highest levels. For the problems caused by the presence (and the death) of dogs in a house of observant people, see *m.Ohal.* 11,7; *m.Zabim* 2,3 and *m.B.Qam.* 7,7; *m.Tehar.* 3,8; 4,3. For the prohibition of using offerings as dog's food: *m.Tem.* 6,5.

<sup>36</sup> See A. Jassen, "Toward a History of Jewish Law and Legal Exegesis: The Restriction of Thoughts of Labor on the Sabbath in Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism", forthcoming.

<sup>37</sup> See esp. *m.Yoma* 8,9.

<sup>38</sup> Philo, *Cher.* 94 (cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* vii, 4,26).

<sup>39</sup> Josephus, *A.J.* xviii, 5,2 (117).

<sup>40</sup> Apart from the fact that Jesus did undergo John's immersion, notably John 3,22 and 4,1-2 connect Jesus and his disciples with full immersions in water, John 11,55 does not seem to explicitly condemn purifications, and John 13,4-10 seem to implement a special washing ritual in the Johannine communities.

<sup>41</sup> In this Gospel fragment, Jesus is confronted in the Temple by a Pharisee of a high-priestly family, whose name might be Levi. The geography of the Temple seems to be quite confused, but some details must be old and the text may have saved some polemical statement by Jesus, criticizing immersions in «gushing waters», where also «dogs and pigs» take their baths. Jesus is accused of «walking on sacred ground» and «looking at sacred vessels» (which seems to imply the typically priestly concept of contamination by sight: see n. 63) together with his disciples without having «immersed themselves» and not even «washed their feet» [for these prescriptions, applied to priests and high priests, see *m.Yoma* 3,3 and 7,3-4; *T.Levi* 9,11 and cf. *Jub.* 21,16. For non-priestly believers see Philo, *Deus* 8 (cf. *Fug.* 41; *Cher.* 95); CD 9,21f. and *y.Yoma* 40b]. Whatever its historical value, the context is not too far from passages like Mark 7,1-23 (esp. 7,3-4, *var. lec.*) // Matt 15,1-20 and Matt 23,25. *P.Oxy 840* is particularly curious for us, since it contains a discussion on purity in the Temple involving the presence of «vessels». Given the context, these «sacred vessels» are the various vases and instruments used in the Temple, which we believe were not usually on display outside the area reserved to the priests. See M.J. Kruger, *The Gospel of the Savior*.

3: Matt 5,34-35 and 23,16-22 and the prohibition of swearing, given the Presence of God in the Temple (and in Jerusalem).

Similar to the spiritual dimension of point 2, the prohibitions of swearing do not involve defilement by physical contact, but probably the possibility of defiling the Name because of its Presence.<sup>42</sup> In ch. 5 we have one general and four particular prohibitions of swearing, all of them justified by the risk of invading the space of God,<sup>43</sup> and in ch. 23 an even clearer set of prohibitions of swearing connected with the Presence of God, in heaven as well as in the Temple. In ch. 5 the Matthean Jesus polemically addresses the tradition of «the elders» and the context of ch. 23 is explicitly directed against «Scribes and Pharisees».<sup>44</sup> From these words we learn that according to Jesus the Temple sanctifies the «gold» in it,<sup>45</sup> in the same way as the altar sanctifies the

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*An Analysis of P. OXY. 840 and its Place in the Gospel Traditions of Early Christianity* (Texts and Editions for New Testament Study, 1), Leiden, Brill, 2005. For more or less legendary ideas on the number and richness of those «vessels», see Ezra 1,9 and 8,26f. See also n. 46.

<sup>42</sup> Therefore, the decision of prohibiting any form of swearing seems to be a radical solution to avoid a potential sin against the second (or third) commandment (Exod 20,7). It is not by chance, then, that Matt 26,72 and 74 stress the fact that Peter swears by oath (worsening the picture of Mark 14,71), while in *Luke* and *John* the words of Peter are just a denial. What did Mark and Matthew think Peter was swearing by?

<sup>43</sup> 5,34b-36: «...not by heaven, since it is God's throne; not by the earth, since it is his footstool (Isa 66,1); not by Jerusalem, since it is the city of the Great King; not by your head, since you are incapable to make a single hair white or black». Also this last prohibition, as shown by Matt 10,30, wants to avoid any interference with God. For the prohibition of swearing among early believers, see also Jas 5,12.

<sup>44</sup> The prohibition of swearing is addressed to «blind guides», otherwise anonymous, but these should be scribes and Pharisees on the basis of 23,24 (cf. 15,14 and 23,26).

<sup>45</sup> While in Matt 12 and 21 the «Temple» (*'ierós*) is the whole sacred complex on Mount Zion, here the «Temple» (*naós*) is the central building, or House. Usually, here «gold» is interpreted as the gold of the offerings, both the visible ones (which were hung in front of the House) and the ones already in the treasury. I wonder if it could (also or instead) refer to the most famous golden objects (the *menorah*, the altar of the incense, the table of presentation) standing in the Holy, or to the plates in massive gold which hung at the walls inside the Holy of Holies, facing the spot where the Ark stood in Solomon's Temple (*m.Mid.* 4,1: «The whole of the House was overlaid with gold, except the space behind the doors»; *m.Sheqal.* 4,4 «...beaten plates of gold for covering the interior of the Holy of Holies»; all this goes back to the memory of the gold in the first Temple: 1Kgs 6,20-30). In my understanding, the treasuries stood in the inner forecourt of the Temple, or the Court of the Israelites, which is in the *'ierós*, but not precisely inside the *naós*. In any case, if Matthew's text refers to the treasury, then it would stress the Matthean irony regarding who is capable of protecting its purity, given the fact that the religious authorities of Jerusalem do not want to risk defiling it by putting into it the 30 pieces of silvers thrown back by Judas into the Temple (*naós*: 27,5). The explanation by Matthew is that those silver coins are considered «blood money», capable of defiling the treasury according to the high priests (but apparently not the House, into which the money is thrown by Judas who, correctly, does not enter it – nor it seems to be considered defiling by the priests, who pick up the coins: 27,6). Apart from Matthew's bias, the behavior of the priests on one side is coherent with our passage (23,16-17), according to which the gold of the Temple is «greater» (= «more sacred»; cf. 12,6) than the House, while on the other it seems to expand the rule according to which money from «dogs» and «prosti-

victims on it. Whoever swears by the altar swears also by all the offerings upon it; similarly, whoever swears by the Temple swears also «by the One who dwells in it», in the same way as whoever swears by heaven swears by both the throne of God (which heaven is) and «by the One who sits on it». Therefore it is better to avoid swearing at all.

It is worth noticing that all Jesus' prescriptions of point b) are negative ones, or prohibitions, as it is the case with Mark 11,16 (and with many rabbinical statements).

To point c) we have again a passage in *Matthew*. It is *Matthew's* addition to the discussion on Sabbatical allowability of picking the heads of grain as of Mark 2,23-26 and Luke 6,1-5. If the text we have of *Mark* is the source of the other Synoptics, both Luke and Matthew must have understood the halakhic and historical incongruences of the discussion, and corrected it. The addition of Matt 12,5 makes very good sense: «Or have you not read in the Law (the Torah) that on the Shabbat the priests in the Temple profane the Shabbat and are unguilty?» Independently from the following explanation by Matthew, about Jesus being himself, or bringing something that was «greater than the Temple»,<sup>46</sup> the sentence reflects the pre-70 situation, both during the ordinary Shabbats of the year<sup>47</sup> and when Passover or another major festivity happened to be on a Shabbat.<sup>48</sup> The sentence contains no criticism against the behavior of the priests in the Temple,<sup>49</sup> but recognizes the prevalence of the Torah over the Sabbatical

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tutes» (where «dogs» possibly means male prostitutes) could not be accepted in the treasury of the Temple (Deut 23,18), since it brought with it the defilement caused by sexual activity particularly impure (the passage from sex to blood seems quite natural). On this subject rabbinic texts have saved what might have been some teaching by a disciple of Jesus (James, the brother?), according to whom Jesus would have allowed the use of impure money (offering of a prostitute) for an impure use (construction of a privy for the high priest: *b.Abod.Zar.* 16b-17a). In any case, Matthew seems to willingly open a discussion on who is really protecting the Temple's treasury from defilement: the Judean authorities or Jesus and his followers?

<sup>46</sup> Matt 12,6. Since the comparative is expressed with a neutral form, it is not sure that it refers directly to Jesus. In any case it may or may not come from the mouth of the historical Jesus.

<sup>47</sup> It is not clear which Mosaic disposition was considered to conflict with the Sabbatical observance: possibly the sacrificial activity prescribed in Num 28,9f. and/or Ezek 46,4-5; L. Doering [*Shabbat. Sabbathalacha und -praxis im antiken Judentum und Urchristentum* (TSAJ, 78), Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1999, 20.22] thinks also of the breads of presentation on the basis of Lev 24,8. Any daily sacrificial and liturgical activity (like the one prescribed at Num 28,3-8) or any activity which covered a whole week (like the one prescribed at Exod 29,35-37) could have been considered to interfere with the Sabbatical rest.

<sup>48</sup> Apparently the overlapping of Passover and a Shabbat began with the adoption also in the Temple of the "new", lunisolar calendar, instead of the old sacred solar calendar; this adoption must have taken place during the III-II cent. B.C.E. But see discussions below, in n. 67 and context.

<sup>49</sup> It is similar in this to Mark 1,44 // Luke 5,14 // Matt 8,4, according to which the healed leper is sent by Jesus to be checked by the priest and to offer a sacrifice in the Temple, in observance with the Law of Moses [Lev 14,1-9; also *m.Neg.* 3,1 recognizes that only a priest

rules and the duty-right of the priests to follow the Torah and overcome those rules. This allows us to suppose that this tradition is very ancient and may go back to the “real Jesus”.

If all this is true, then we are able to put together a relatively larger Matthean fragment that supports the image of Jesus which we are trying to read into Mark 11,16.<sup>50</sup> In this way we have the support of only Markan material on one side, and of only a Matthean one on the other, a fact that may indicate via two independent sources the existence, towards the end of the first century, of a minority tradition describing Jesus as worried about the purity of the Temple, and aware that in the Temple the priests did indeed profane Shabbat (which he ordinarily kept) since they had to adhere to the words of Torah and not to the tradition of the elders according to the Pharisees (as he also was doing).

## VI. JESUS AND THE SHABBAT IN THE TEMPLE

If the real Jesus wanted to introduce rules of Sabbatical observance into the everyday life of the Temple, why was he so disrespectful during the so-called Cleansing of the Temple? Wouldn't he have profaned it with his behavior, if that day had been a Shabbat?

According to the Gospel tradition, the first thing Jesus did was throw out of the Temple those who sold and those who bought (whatever happened to be there for sale). But this is exactly what Nehemiah did with the whole of Jerusalem, as we have seen, and was therefore considered a logical and necessary prerequisite for the sanctification of the Shabbat. The action could have been understood as an expression of *zeal* for the Torah and not as an infraction of any Sabbatical prohibition.<sup>51</sup>

The second thing he does is overturn tables and chairs and have coins fall to the ground. No one of these acts is specifically taken into consideration by the Torah, but a general rule we can infer from the Mishnah is that it is allowed to let objects fall on Shabbat, as long as we are not doing it with the intention of using them. It is rather obvi-

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may pronounce a person clean or unclean, even if he may need the help of (lay) people «qualified to inspect leprosy signs». The acceptance of animal sacrifices in the Temple can be proved for Jesus both directly, in passages like this one or Mark 14,12-14 [for the text of many manuscripts at Mark 9,49 *var. lec.* (from Lev 2,13)], and indirectly by the fact that the early followers in Jerusalem did not find anything strange in sacrificing (Acts 21,26). I would also interpret Matt 17,24-27 (the discussion about the Temple tax) as a critical, but not subversive or disrespectful statement.

<sup>50</sup> I want to stress that I am not using *Matthew* to explain *Mark*, since each passage in each gospel finds its justification in its own context.

<sup>51</sup> See the reflection in John 2,17 quoting Ps 69,10. The whole Bible is filled with examples of much more violent cases of zeal (e.g. Num 25,1-15).



ous that Jesus was not interested in using those tables, chairs and even coins, but various *mishnayot* allow us further and more precise reflections.

*M.Shabb.* 4,2 tells that wool-shearings on top of lids (to keep the food warm) can fall on the ground when the lid is removed. *M.Shabb.* 24,1 tells that even bags can be made to fall from the back of a donkey by undoing their belts at the beginning of a Shabbat (the case is that of a person arriving late from a trip and the bags containing things that cannot be carried on Shabbat). *M.Shabb.* 21,2 has three cases that interest us: a) a stone, put on the mouth of a jar, can be made to fall by tilting the jar (to reach the food in the jar); b) if that jar is among other jars, it can even be lifted (this is usually forbidden) to let the stone fall; c) finally, coins on a pillow can fall on the ground by removing the pillow. This last case is particularly interesting since it involves coins that are not picked up to be used, but which are left on the ground, as also Jesus presumably did. The most interesting passage, though, is *m.Shabb.* 21,3: «[Those of] the school of Shammai say: bones and [nut]shells may be taken up from a table [obviously not to be used as food], and [those of] the school of Hillel say: The entire table must be taken and shaken [to let them fall]». <sup>52</sup> The analogy is quite striking and the fact that the *gemara* of *b.Shabb.* 143a reverses the content of the discussion between the two schools proves that it was an old discussion, in all probability already existing at the time of Jesus. My point is that if Jesus shook chairs and tables to dislocate people and have coins fall on the ground, without lifting them with the intention of moving them or utilizing them (the furniture nor the coins, which he did not collect from the ground), that behavior would almost certainly have been considered compatible with Sabbatical observance even by the most stringent Pharisaic decrees. This has interesting consequences we will examine later.

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<sup>52</sup> Translations here and elsewhere are adapted from H. Danby, *The Mishnah*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1964 (orig. 1933). Stones and coins are usually not allowed to be moved on a Shabbat; the *gemara* (*b.Shabb.* 142b) explains that people needed the objects that were supporting them, the use of which was allowed on Shabbat (to take the food, as an example). The case of bones and nutshells is slightly different (as the *gemara* explains in a very concise way at *b.Shabb.* 143a). They are forbidden (to be handled, lifted, carried) according to those rabbis who accepted also for them the interdict of the *muktzeh* [originally meaning “(objects) put out of one’s mind” and not to be used on Shabbat; later many categories of prohibited objects]. The interdict can be expanded to include an object, like a table, which supports them and does not have another specific function (what counts is the *intention* of whoever puts the object on a table before the beginning of Shabbat). Usually, an object in the category of the *muktzeh* should not be moved in a “normal” way, like using one’s hands to take it. If all this reasoning makes sense, Jesus seems to consider (correctly) the coins to be *muktzeh*, but not the tables on which they were kept.

## VII. FURTHER HALAKHIC REFLECTIONS

For now, let us clearly state that all this is not sufficient to explain the halakhic complicacy of Mark 11,16, even if it is useful to understand that its content fits well in first century discussions and in the image of Jesus we are slowly putting together. One nebulous aspect of Jesus' prohibition is its object: the «(any) vessel». There should be little doubt that the «vessels» (Gr.: *skeúē*) are the *kelym* of Jewish halakhic discussions. Originally, the word meant any container, or even a curved surface of an object, which could be used to contain something, and then as an extension any instrument prepared by humans for some specific use. The largest, and possibly one of the oldest treatises of the Mishnah, the treatise *Kelym*, of the division *Tohorot* (*Purities*), is fully dedicated to them. In spite of this, it is hard for us to understand what was exactly considered in the category of the *kelym* at the time of Jesus and, since the *mishnayot* we have are of rabbinic-Pharisaic tradition (and therefore focusing mostly on the questions connected with the transmission of impurity), we can ask ourselves if the *kelym* of the rabbis were such also for the other Jews. In any case, the «vessels» can be considered a halakhic sub-category of a larger one, the «loads». Any object can be a load if it is big enough: all vessels are loads, but not all loads are vessels. Whatever vessels are, Jesus does not prohibit carrying loads, but only «vessels». As an example, living animals or foods (breads, fruits, parts of sacrificed victims...) or plants (branches) are not prohibited to be carried through the Temple.<sup>53</sup>

Also the expression «through the Temple» needs some explanation. First of all, since Jesus is said to throw «out of the Temple» sellers and buyers and to overthrow tables and chairs «in the Temple», the «Temple» (*ierós*) in this context is not just “the House” «stricto sensu»,<sup>54</sup> but the whole religious complex on Mount Zion, including the porches, where the rules of purity were less stringent.<sup>55</sup> If this is the case, could then the expression «through the Temple» mean “entering from one side and exiting from another”? Since Billerbeeck<sup>56</sup> quotes a *mishnah* that prohibits using the «Mount of the House» as a shortcut, many commentators think that Jesus is teaching something similar. The *mishnah* recalled here (*m.Ber.* 9,5) sounds as follows: «He will

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<sup>53</sup> Nor is he prohibiting *impure* vessels. Since the prohibition is to be applied in the Temple, any impure object would have been stopped at the various doors and there would have been nothing worth mentioning in his words. This had already been noticed by Patristic commentaries (Jerome, *Tract.Marc.*) and then, via Bede, had entered Aquinas' *Catena Aurea* (see Dennert, “Mark 11,16...”).

<sup>54</sup> For which also Mark correctly uses the word *naós* at 14,28; 15,29 and 38 (see above n. 46).

<sup>55</sup> This terminology is normal in the NT as well in most authors, including Josephus.

<sup>56</sup> Str-B, vol. 2, 27.

not enter the Mount of the House with his stick and with his sandal and with his money-belt and with dust on his feet and he will not use it as a shortcut and even less will he spit there». The prohibitions are varied. This *mishnah* prohibits the introduction into the Temple of some vessels (as the money-belt), of some loads (I would say the stick), of something that has no weight but could bring impurity (dust collected in an impure area), and then prohibits disrespectful behaviors, like using the area with a non-religious intention (making a shortcut) or spitting.<sup>57</sup> The prohibition of making a shortcut does not prohibit carrying anything, but simply prohibits the crossing of the space. If Jesus had wanted to prohibit the shortcut, he would have also simply prohibited walking through the area or to carry loads or any object in general through it. The absurd result of the prohibition, indeed, would be that, without vessels (but with any other load) it would be permitted to use the Temple area as a shortcut. Therefore Mark 11,16 is not a prohibition of crossing the Temple area to make a shortcut.

What then could «through the Temple» mean? As we noticed above, all Sabbatical prohibitions of carrying involve some trespassing of a physical or ideal borderline (a threshold, a door, a dividing line).<sup>58</sup> Mark 11,16 does not prohibit carrying in or carrying out vessels, but «carrying through». My hypothesis is that it means a prohibition of carrying vessels through the different parts of the Temple, those having different levels of purity. The internal borderlines in the Temple were usually clearly marked (notoriously some more than others), so that, as an example, everyone knew where the Court of the Gentiles ended and the Court of the Women began.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Although, at least from a radical point of view, spitting could create some risk of impurity. Let us think of a man or a woman who enters the porch of the Gentiles being in a state of lesser purity, such that would impede him or her from entering the areas where a higher level of purity is required, and suppose that he or she spit on the ground. A man in a state of higher purity could accidentally step on it and then enter an area where a higher level of purity is required; although unknowingly, he would bring some residual amount of impurity with him, depending on the level of impurity of the spitting person [see above discussion in n. 33; cf. *m.Tehar.* 5,7-8 and, for uncleanness related to different levels of purity, *m.Hag.* 2,7; for (relatively lenient) rules on the impurity of spit, see *m.Sheqal.* 8,1].

<sup>58</sup> Not so the non-Sabbatical prohibition of carrying. As an example, to carry the carrion of an impure animal is simply prohibited anywhere, if the person does not want to contract impurity.

<sup>59</sup> For these internal borderlines, see the passages quoted in n. 29. Interestingly, the passage from one area to another was the reason for the immersion of priests, even if they were already pure (*m.Yoma* 3,30) and even if both areas were pure, but with a different level of purity (*b.Yoma* 30a: «From purity to purity»). For the interpretation of our passage as prohibiting the carrying of (sacred) vessels through the various areas of the Temple, see W.R. Telford, *The Barren Temple and the Withered Tree* (JSNTSup, 1), Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1980, 92f, n. 102.

The first impression is that such a prohibition, while protecting the different levels of purity inside the complex of the Temple, is not as radical as it appears.<sup>60</sup> People could have carried in their vessels for the festival of Sukkoth (as an example), eaten their food and drunk their beverages in the external court as usual, and then carried them out without problems. There was no reason for carrying them through the Temple.<sup>61</sup>

Other vessels, though, would have had to be carried to allow the sacrificial and religious activity in the Temple. Most notably blood of the victims and water for purifications had to be carried. The difficulty would not have been insurmountable in most cases.<sup>62</sup> A most common situation is the transportation and pouring on the altar of the victims' blood. At the time of John Hyrcanus' reform (135-105 B.C. E.), when the victims began to be slaughtered (without having their head smashed with a silver axe), new slaughter-areas had been built in the Temple and since then, when needed, the blood collected in golden basins was carried to the altar. There are discussions where exactly these slaughter areas were located, or even if they were covered by some sort of roof. They were certainly very close to the altar, in its same area of purity, which also was the area reserved to the priests.<sup>63</sup> There-

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<sup>60</sup> It could actually be considered a "lenient" application of what was going to become the 39<sup>th</sup> rabbinical prohibition of Sabbatical work, the one prohibiting to «carry out anything from one domain into another» (*m. Shabb. 7,2*).

<sup>61</sup> Since a "vessel" is such when it is used as a vessel, empty new vessels, purified to be used in the innermost parts of the Temple, could have been brought in, as well as old or broken ones could have been brought out, even passing through the different areas of the Temple.

<sup>62</sup> The water system of the Temple is far from being clear. Just for the purifications of officiating priests and Levites, and for the ritual washing of the slaughtered victims (especially the entrails) before being salted and eventually burned, a very large amount of water was needed. Besides more or less legendary springs, there were large cisterns and wells, from which the water must have been canalized (as an example to reach the immersion pool for the officiating high priest). As long as the water could reach the area of the Temple in which it was needed through some form of canalization, its use would have been allowed, since it was not carried with a vessel from one area to another. A special and emblematic case was the large bronze laver for the purifications of the officiating priests. At the time of Jesus a wooden (and noisy) mechanism, invented by a certain Ben Katin, was probably in place: it was a large pulley shaped like a wheel by which the entire laver was lowered into a well at night and pulled out in the morning, filled with water: *m. Tamid* 1,4; 3,8; *m. Yoma* 3,10. For a cistern, see *m. Mid.* 5,4. For channels, see *m. Sheqal.* 4,2; *m. Zeb.* 8,7ff.; *m. Tem.* 7,6; *m. Tamid* 5,5; *m. Yoma* 5,6; *m. Mid.* 3,2.

<sup>63</sup> *M. Mid.* 3,5; 5,2; *m. Tamid* 3,5. Non-priestly male Israelites were allowed in, «when needed for laying on of hands, slaughtering and waving»: *m. Kelim* 1,8. If Agrippa II could see the slaughtering from a window of Herod's palace, and if the priests decided to build a wall to protect the area from a possible contamination by sight (which is typical of priestly halakhah, in some cases also accepted by the Pharisees, as an example for the preparation of the dough for Terumah: *m. Hal.* 2,3; for more "lenient" rabbinic positions, see *b. Pesah* 26a), this means that the eyes of the potentially impure king could direct their look to the area reserved for the priests. Independently from what Josephus may tell to his Greek readers on

fore, most activity in the Temple would have been possible, with some carefulness.

There were cases, though, as during the ceremonies for Yom hak-Kippurim, in which «vessels» – in this case filled with blood and incense – had to be brought through different areas of the Temple, at least from the area reserved to the priests as far as inside the Holy of Holies.

It is important to mention at this point that all the «sacred vessels» in the Temple, from the shovels for the coals and ashes to the basins for the blood to the pitchers for the water, all of them were carried exclusively by Levites, priests and high priests. But Matt 12,5 can be brought into the discussion, to support the hypothesis that Jesus did recognize a Sabbatical exception for priests officiating in the Temple.<sup>64</sup> If this is the case, Jesus' prohibition of carrying vessels through the Temple would not have impeded its religious and sacrificial activity. It would have meant that he wanted to protect the Temple from any risk of mishandling by applying a Sabbatical – and therefore more stringent – prohibition to its everyday life, a prohibition valid at least for any faithful of non-priestly family.

## VIII. WHEN IS SHABBAT IN THE TEMPLE?

Why should Jesus have wanted to apply Sabbatical rules to the everyday life of the Temple? Was it just a way to protect its purity in a special way, or can we suppose that Jesus thought that in the Temple it was always Shabbat? This second idea is worth further analysis.

First of all, is it possible that in a certain place on earth it is always the same day? I am ready to answer yes, if we accept the concept that time, in pre-modern way of thinking, is or can be fluid. Days can be shortened by God (Mark 13,20) and different times or periods can be

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this anecdote [Josephus, *A.J.* xx 8, 11 (190-195)], I do not believe the usual explanation, according to which the behavior of the king was «offensive» for the priests, since he was an «indolent onlooker», who «during his idle hours observe[d] the sacred proceedings» [see E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C. – A.D. 135)*, trans. T.A. Burkill *et al.*, rev. & ed. G. Vermes – F. Millar – M. Black, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1973, vol. 1, 475]. Apart from the political implications, building a wall seems to me a halakhic decision implying a severe critical judgment of the racial purity of the last Herods, their courts, their soldiers.

<sup>64</sup> It is also worth mentioning that according to *m. 'Erub.* 10,14c (see Doering, *Shabbat...*, 74f.) it was allowed on Shabbat to scoop water in the Temple, apparently from two different cisterns (the names are not clear for us, but the general content seems to be sure). The text does not explicitly mention priests or vessels, but who else was supposed to scoop water in the Temple and how would the operation have been possible without a vessel? The passage should therefore be explained as another Sabbatical exception for officiating priests (or Levites) in the Temple.

co-present before God.<sup>65</sup> Further, a special festival can be considered a Shabbat, whatever day of the week it really is.<sup>66</sup> If the Son of Man is «Lord of the Shabbat» (Mark 2,28 parr), then he can decide when it is Shabbat. I would suppose that, if Shabbat is the day of God, wherever His Presence is there should be Shabbat. Therefore, in the Temple it should always be Shabbat.

Outside of the Temple, according to Matt 6,11 the faithful should pray that it is always «Friday», or the day before Shabbat. «Give us today our food of tomorrow» is the fulfillment of Exod 16,29. But if we pray that today is Friday, we also pray that tomorrow will be Shabbat.<sup>67</sup>

The first result of this way of reading the Cleansing of the Temple and of using Mark 11,16 as the foundation for its interpretation, is not

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<sup>65</sup> This is usually testified by humans during apocalyptic visions. See 2Bar 48,2 (where the text sounds, literally: «O Lord, you summon the heads of the times, and they stand before you») and 54,3; *Apoc.Ab.* 9,5 and 21,1 and my comments on Rev 12, in E. Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2006, 189.

<sup>66</sup> This is particularly true for the Day of the Atonement, which is called *shabbat shabatwn* in Lev 23,32. The LXX translates *sábbata sabbátōn* (a phrase similar to «Holy of Holies» etc.) and we should probably translate «a Shabbat of absolute rest». The biblical expression is used in the Bible only for the calendrical Shabbats (the 52 last days of each week) and for the Day of Atonement (see Exod 31,15; 35,2; Lev 16,31; 23,3 and 32). From Lev 23, though, it is possible to infer that also other holy days could be considered to be Shabbats, in whatever day of the week. This was, at least, the Pharisaic-rabbinic interpretation of Lev 23,11, an interpretation which allowed to fix the date of Pentecost on the 6<sup>th</sup> day of the third month [Sivan; see the commentaries to the passages in A. Berlin – M.Z. Brettler (eds.), *The Jewish Study Bible*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999<sup>2</sup> (orig. 1985)]. Particularly, besides the «Shabbats of Shabbats», any of the seven festivals established by God in Lev 23 could be considered a Shabbat, since it was a day of «rest» and of «holy convocation» (also translated «sacred occasion»). Further, any 7<sup>th</sup> day in any calculation was a Shabbat, independently from which day of the calendrical week it was. In this way Pentecost can be «the first day after the 7<sup>th</sup> Shabbat» (meaning each 7<sup>th</sup> day in the count), which means that it is the 50<sup>th</sup> day from the beginning of counting (for polemical discussions on this subject, since the Sadducees interpreted «Shabbat» as the day of the calendrical week, see *m.Hag.* 2,4). Finally, «Shabbats» (usually plural; but see 1Cor 16,2) can simply mean any «week», or group of seven days, independently from the correspondence of this «group of seven» to the days in any of the 52 calendrical weeks. Particularly, this was the case for the week of the festival of the Unleavened Bread (*matzot*), which became part of Passover and absorbed the festival of the 'Omer (elevation of the sheaf of barley), as well as for the week of Sukkoth. This is why «the first of the Shabbats» [Mark 16,2; cf. (16,9) and Matt 28,1; Luke 24,1; John 20,1] probably means «the first day of that group of seven days» (which may or may not be a calendrical week).

<sup>67</sup> No wonder if Luke 11,3 says that the food should be given us «every day»: whichever the most original version, Luke would not have accepted a different eschatology. This way of thinking allows us to understand Matthew's reasoning when he explains David's behavior in taking the bread destined to the priests with the fact that the priests profane Shabbat in the Temple and are unguilty, as well as when he justifies the disciples' behavior with the fact that Jesus is more than the Temple. The Presence of God, Matthew teaches, is now in Jesus (the Emmanuel), and in this Presence the rules do change, as it already happens in the Temple. This also explains why Matthew would have probably not accepted the teaching implied in Mark 11,16.

only that of reconstructing an image of Jesus understandable in the surrounding Jewish world of the early first century, but also and more importantly to present Jesus as a teacher of halakhah worried of the purity of the Temple. His behavior is not a challenge to the Temple, but a sign of extreme respect for the place, given the presence of God in it. If this is true, we can understand why he was not immediately arrested or thrown out of the Temple. Especially in a period in which the Pharisees criticized the priestly halakhot as applied in the Temple, his preaching was no menace. The Gospel contexts created the tension, with or without the withering of the fig tree. If this is also true, then we can disconnect the Cleansing of the Temple from the crucifixion, and maybe reconsider the Johannine chronology as more historically correct than that of the Synoptics.<sup>68</sup>

Having said this, we can go further with our hypothesis that, according to the Jesus of Mark 11,16, it was always Shabbat in the Temple of Jerusalem. If this is the case, what was the nature of that perennial Shabbat, caused by the Presence of God, in the Temple of Jerusalem?

An eschatological-apocalyptic interpretation of the idea becomes possible. The Shabbat in the Temple is the beginning of the cosmic Shabbat on earth. It is the Kingdom of God, which is already present among us and which will soon expand on the whole surface of the inhabited earth. With the acceptance of the announcement by Jesus, it will be possible to see it.

This could be a very archaic reading of the events that might have left a trace in another NT tradition, that of *Luke* and *Acts*. Accordingly, the evangelization begins in the Temple (with the annunciation to Zechariah) and continues in it, until the apparition of the resurrected Lord who, in the Temple, sends Paul to convert the Gentiles. The diffusion of the Kingdom, then, begins not only in Jerusalem, but precisely in the Temple. Subsequent reflections on the non-conversion of the (other) Jews, who did not listen to Jesus (actually to his disciples), might have later – and certainly after 70 – contributed to the construction of the theology of supersessionism.

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<sup>68</sup> If not a growing consensus, there is a growing awareness that Johannine chronology may be more reliable. If this is true, then there would be no direct or necessary connection between the «Cleansing of the Temple» (an intra-Jewish halakhic teaching) and the crucifixion (a Roman form of execution for rebellious provincials). See e.g. P. Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ. The Origins of the New Testaments Images of Jesus, Introduction to the Second Edition*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000, xiii-xxviii. Needless to say, the relevance of this interpretation for the Jewish-Christian dialogue is based on the fact that we can try to build a historically tenable reconstruction of events according to which «the Jews» appear less and less responsible for the death of the “real Jesus”.

## IX. A TENTATIVE CONCLUSION

I am perfectly aware of the hypothetical dimension of my reasoning and the reader will judge the likelihood and plausibility of the image of Jesus which emerges from our «fragment». Altogether, I felt obliged to rethink some interpretive convictions and to try to read with different lenses some passages, like Mark 11,16, which are usually neglected by many commentators. To transform a rejected stone into a cornerstone, although a risky endeavor, is something that can allow the beginning of a new construction.

Edmondo Lupieri  
Department of Theology  
Loyola University Chicago  
1032 W. Sheridan Rd.  
Chicago, IL 60660  
USA  
elupier@luc.edu