



2014

## Business and Merchants Will Not Enter The Places of My Father: Early Christianity and Market Mentality

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### Recommended Citation

Lupieri, Edmondo. Business and Merchants Will Not Enter The Places of My Father: Early Christianity and Market Mentality. *Money as God? The Monetization of the Market and its Impact on Religion, Politics, Law, and Ethics*, , : 379-413, 2014. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, Theology: Faculty Publications and Other Works,

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from the Dead Sea, “spirit” is a dynamic principle that shapes human lives according to the sovereign will of the creator. It is instructive to place this dynamic view of human existence in the context of an equally dynamic, monetized economy. Money accelerated the pace of the economy in Syria-Palestine and, therefore, had a tremendous impact on the social systems of that area. The boundaries between societal classes had become more permeable than ever before. The new, money-based economy even challenged the family systems, since property was no longer solely defined in terms of commodities that were handed down from one generation to the next.<sup>35</sup> Put more pointedly, for better or worse, money had the power to shape and change the lives and fortunes of individuals, and it seems to have been this potency that the Qumran authors viewed with great suspicion. Thus it seems reasonable to assume that these authors modeled their understanding of the spirit and the individual soul as a counter-proposal to the economic reality of their time. This does not mean that the eschatology that one finds in these texts could or should be reduced to being merely a reaction to an outside world that the Qumranites experienced as threatening. However, it is safe to say that money was a determining factor in a world in which the idea of an immortal soul as something infinitely precious took shape.

<sup>35</sup> Thus it is not surprising that 4QInstruction emphasizes the importance of the family hierarchy between parents and children (4Q418 9,17–10,8), which might have been an issue in situations when children had become economically independent of the family “inheritance” (נתלה).

## 17 “Businessmen and merchants will not enter the places of my Father”:<sup>1</sup> early Christianity and market mentality

EDMONDO F. LUPIERI

### Premise

At the time of the redaction of the New Testament (NT), the relatively newly constituted Roman Empire seems to have brought some sort of political uniformity to the whole Mediterranean world. This phenomenon must have had some kind of financial repercussions due to a more centralized administration and a relatively larger diffusion of a standardized monetary system. Can we understand if this had any impact on the preaching of (the historical) Jesus? Did his early followers have the memory of any teaching of his regarding money, its possession or its use? And, in the times and areas they were living in, did they develop any reflection on these subjects, which can testify to the new economic situation?

### Introduction

The first century CE was a period of consolidation of the Roman Empire in the East. After the collapse of the two kingdoms of Syria and Egypt, the shift in the political panorama was dramatic. While the Empire of Persia still extended its influence up to the borders of India, all the rest of the “inheritance” of Alexander the Great had been swallowed by Rome.

In the Middle East the political and administrative situation was very diversified. We find the descendants of Herod the Great, a plethora of other kinglets (who were more or less willingly vassals to the Romans), and/or Roman functionaries who were all in charge of the administration of the territory. They were often involved in complicated relationships with extraneous political bodies, such as neighboring principalities and kingdoms that were always ready to change

<sup>1</sup> Gos. Thom. 64 (NHC II, 2; 44:34f.).

allegiance, or semi-independent cities that were usually under the governance of a political and economic oligarchy.

Each political entity was able to mint its own coins according to local traditions. Overarching the whole system, however, was the Roman coinage:<sup>2</sup> through sets of exchange rates based on the intrinsic value (weight and alloy) of each coin, all the local coinages were connected to this system.<sup>3</sup> It was the furthest the Romans could go to impose a standardized monetization system in the first century.<sup>4</sup>

We may suppose that the very existence and relative abundance of Roman coins,<sup>5</sup> the value of which was universally recognized, facilitated commercial and financial transactions in all regions of the empire and beyond its official borders. This must have had a stabilizing effect on the markets, even if it did not impede fluctuations of prices, especially on the occasions of extraordinary events such as droughts, wars,

<sup>2</sup> Inside the Roman Empire there were 500–600 mints. Only the most important centers were allowed to mint silver coins (in the first century, golden ones were usually minted in Rome or in the West, particularly at Lyon; in the East this happened only exceptionally at Pergamum or in other centers), while coins of bronze and other copper alloys could be struck in many cities in every province.

<sup>3</sup> After Augustus and through the first century (with some small changes in the weight of the silver coins, beginning with Nero), the main Roman coins were as follows: the golden *aureus*, corresponding to 25 silver *denarii*; the *denarius* (also called *argýrion* in Greek texts), corresponding to four brass *sestertia*; the *sestertium*, corresponding to four copper *asses* or *assarii* (the old *pondus* or *pound*); and the *as*, corresponding to four copper *quadrantes*. To these were to be added the brass *dipondium* (“two pounds”), corresponding to two *assarii*, and the bronze *semis*, half an *assarius*.

<sup>4</sup> Even after Augustus and his reform, in the Eastern part of the empire two systems basically coexisted: the Greek and the Roman. The Greek system was centered on the silver *drachma*, roughly corresponding to the *denarius*, with its silver multiples (the *didrachma* and the *tetradrachma*, corresponding to 2 and 4 *drachmas*), the golden *stater* (20 silver *drachmas*) and smaller coins: the silver *obolós* (one-sixth of a *drachma*), corresponding to eight bronze *chalkoí* (one *chalkós* corresponding to seven copper *leptá*). According to Mk. 12:42, two *leptá* make one *quadrans*. Local coinages usually corresponded to the Greek system.

<sup>5</sup> It is very difficult to know what level of liquidity there was at any given time. It seems that under Nero a great number of new coins were struck, but, generally speaking, “In currency terms, the Roman world was above all things under-monetised” (R. Duncan-Jones, *Money and Government in the Roman Empire*, Cambridge: 1999, 21; see also esp. 3 and 32; for Nero, see 31, Fig. 2.2). “Surface, excavation, and hoard finds in Jerusalem” and in Jewish Palestine have brought out a surprisingly low number of Roman coins minted before the war of 66–70: F. E. Udoh, *To Caesar What Is Caesar's: Tribute, Taxes, and Imperial Administration in Early Roman Palestine (63 B.C.E.–70 C.E.)*, Brown Judaic Studies, 343, Providence: 2005, 233f.

earthquakes, etc. Further, it was in the interest of the Roman administration to have an equally distributed and possibly florid market economy in all the provinces.<sup>6</sup>

Besides the availability of money, a flourishing market economy in the first century was also favored by the Roman road system and, after the war against the so-called “pirates,” by the security of the sea: the Mediterranean had become the *mare nostrum*.<sup>7</sup> All this allowed quick fortunes to be built and destroyed, especially those based on shipments of durable goods.<sup>8</sup> The scenario for such sudden wealth was no longer that of the traditional agricultural society, with wealth slowly growing in the hands of the landowners, but that of the cities, some of which had been newly founded or rebuilt, often planned to serve as harbors or commercial centers.

This was the environment in which Paul and his fellow missionaries went on to preach in the squares and in the markets, both in Jewish and Greek areas.<sup>9</sup> The world of the cities soon became the world of the followers of Jesus, but it had not been the world of Jesus. As far as we can see from our sources, Jesus avoided the cities; and, in the NT as a whole, not a single scene depicts him in a market.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The increasing importance of the equestrian class in the public administration since the end of the Republic should be noted. The knights were more likely to support mercantile activity – to make money and attain power, directly or through their friends – than the senatorial class, traditionally tied to landed property (notoriously, Roman senators were not even allowed to own ships).

<sup>7</sup> We should not imagine, though, a homogeneous monetized market economy. Barter, and in general, pre- or non-monetary ways of exchange and lending were diffused, as noticed by Strabo (see R. Duncan-Jones, *Structure and Scale in the Roman Economy*, Cambridge: 1990, esp. Ch. 2 (“Trade, Taxes and Money”), 30–47).

<sup>8</sup> As an example of first-century cargo, see the impressive list of (imported) goods enjoyed by “the city” in Rev. 18:12f. Notoriously, the figure of Trimalchio, in Petronius’ novel, *Satyricon*, is a literary example of the sudden changes in one man’s destiny, due to a change of fortune in maritime commerce.

<sup>9</sup> Not by chance was it in Antioch that for the first time some followers of Jesus, probably converted from paganism, were called “Christians”: Acts 11:26.

<sup>10</sup> This attitude may be connected with a traditionally Jewish conservative world-view, similar to the one voiced by Josephus in a famous passage of *Contra Apionem* I, 60: “Well, ours is not a maritime country; neither commerce nor the intercourse which it promotes with the outside world has any attraction for us. Our cities are built inland, remote from the sea; and we devote ourselves to the cultivation of the productive country with which we are blessed. Above all we pride ourselves on the education of our children, and regard as the most essential task in life the observance of our laws and of the pious practices, based thereupon,

Therefore we must suppose a socio-cultural shift from the years and the world of Jesus to those of the authors of the NT and of the earliest Christian "apocryphal" works. This renders a comprehensive picture of the sociological dimension of early Christian groups extremely complex and multifaceted,<sup>11</sup> even if we get the general impression that there was some sort of critical reaction to a widespread "market mentality," some kind of mistrust towards "businessmen and merchants," or even traces of some possible discomfort with the very use of "money." The various assertions on these subjects that we find in the NT and in other "Christian" texts of that period, though, if framed in their contexts, show their true nature as religious and theological reflections. They aim more at explaining the history of salvation than at voicing socio-economic criticism.

### Criticism of wealth

Criticism of wealth is largely attested in religious and philosophical literature of the time and is by no means exclusively Jewish or "Christian." To remain in our cultural framework, though, we can easily find passages in the Book of the Similitudes (1 En. 37–71) which parallels the Infancy Gospel of Luke in its perspective on the eschatological destiny of the rich and powerful.<sup>12</sup> Also at Qumran,

which we have inherited" (trans. H. St. John Thackeray). See B.-Z. Rosenfeld and J. Menirav, *Markets and Marketing in Roman Palestine* (Supplements to *JSJ*, 99), Leiden-Boston: 2005. The times Jesus is reported to have mentioned a "market house" (John 2:16) or a private "business" (Matt. 22:5; a shop?), the context is very critical (see the discussion below on the "Cleansing of the Temple"). For Jesus' avoidance of cities, see A. Destro and M. Pesce, *Encounters with Jesus: The Man in his Place and Time*, Minneapolis: 2011 (orig. pub. as: *L'uomo Gesù: Giorni, luoghi, incontri di una vita*, Milan: 2008).

<sup>11</sup> See E. and W. Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century*, Minneapolis: 1999 (orig. pub. as: *Urchristliche Sozialgeschichte: Die Anfänge im Judentum und die Christengemeinden in der mediterranen Welt*, Stuttgart: 1995).

<sup>12</sup> As an example, cf. 1 En. 38:4f. and Luke 1:51ff. The presence of such criticism in the Apocalyptic literature (the Book of the Similitudes was part of the Enochic "Pentateuch," but was not found in Qumran and is dated to the first century CE) should not be surprising, since, maybe for the first time in Jewish literature, Apocalyptic texts do not seem to proceed from politically and/or economically leading sectors of the Jewish population. It is very possible that the earliest among those texts are also the cultural result of impoverishment and deprivation experienced in post-exilic times by part of the (former) Jewish intelligentsia. The exclusion of some of the acculturated people from power and wealth continued

"wealth" is one of the "three nets" used by Belial (the Devil) to catch Israel and cause its ruin (CD IV:15–19). Similarly, the "risk" caused by wealth is present in almost every level of the NT. The "lure of riches" (Mark 4:19; Matt. 13:22) or simply the "riches" (Luke 8:14) are able to "choke" the word of God or those who have accepted it. That the problem is felt inside the communities of believers is clear from many passages of James (1:9–11; 2:2–7). The epistle strongly criticizes the iniquity which is supposed to be the basis for the acquisition of wealth, and at a certain point seems to criticize some mercantile activity in some "city" far away.<sup>13</sup> We can also read in a similar way a quite famous passage of Revelation, rebuffing the believers in Laodicea (3:17).

In the Jewish pre- or non-Christian world, there were also more-or-less realistic descriptions of ideal communities, like that of the Essenes, which fascinated both pagan and Jewish writers with their absence of money,<sup>14</sup> community of goods,<sup>15</sup> and total abstention from any form of commercial trade, including navigation.<sup>16</sup> In the NT literature, the most striking similarities can be found in Acts' idealized description of the community in Jerusalem.<sup>17</sup>

We must notice, however, a basic ambiguity in the judgment of wealth and in the use of terminology related to it. Even if there seems to be an incompatibility between the dimension of God and that of wealth (Luke 16:13 and Matt. 6:24) and if rich people face difficulties in entering the kingdom announced by Jesus (Luke 6:24; 16:19; 18:23; Matt. 19:23f.), nevertheless some of them can convert (Zacchaeus in Luke 19:2) and also become some sort of disciple (Joseph of Arimathea in Matt. 27:57). Furthermore, in the language of the parables, God can be not only a king, landlord, and slave-owner, but even a "rich man" (see esp. Luke 16:1–13, with the almost positive evaluation of "mammon" at v. 9, and 19:11–27). And, curiously enough, in Paul

under the Hasmoneans and under the Romans, while the divisions in the priestly class culminated in a self-centered and extortive policy of tithing by the high priests that damaged the other priests and was bitterly criticized by Josephus (*Ant. Jud.* XX, 180–207).

<sup>13</sup> See esp. 5:1–6 and 4:13f. (The rich have killed the just and stolen "the hire of the laborers," and are blind in programming their future, without taking into consideration their finitude.) At the same time we already find in these passages (and others, such as 1 Tim. 6:9, 17–19) a nucleus of catechesis for the rich, which will be developed in the following centuries.

<sup>14</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Nat. Hist.* V, 15,73. <sup>15</sup> Josephus, *Bell.* II, 127.

<sup>16</sup> Philo, *Quod omnis probus* 78. <sup>17</sup> Acts 2:44f.; 4:32–34f., 37.

the words connected with “wealth” (πλοῦτος and its homoradicals) are always and only used by him to describe the positive values of faith, virtue, religion, etc. In other words, the only “rich” people are the faithful.

Luke, though, in a couple of scenes which he uses to reconstruct the life of the early Church, takes his meditation a step further. In the episode involving Ananias and his wife Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11), and especially in that dedicated to Simon, the sorcerer of Samaria (Acts 8:9–24), the point is not simply or only a negative judgment on the use of money and wealth, but involves a reflection on their wrong use in things related to God. This is an aspect characteristically present in much of Luke/Acts, but may also introduce us to a more general “Christian” idea of the incompatibility between a human commercial attitude – what I would call a “market mentality” – and salvation brought by God. Not the use of money *per se* seems to be criticized, but a series of activities (especially spiritual or religious) in which money is involved.

### Market mentality

The negative appreciation of such “market mentality” appears in some cases as an appreciation of non- or pre-monetary situations. Luke 6:30 seems to exclude the use of money in the lending that is praised by Jesus,<sup>18</sup> while the lending activity by the others is actually practiced by “sinners,” even when they charge no interest (and therefore it seems to be fully monetized: Luke 6:34f.).<sup>19</sup> Explicit avoidance of money is recommended in the Synoptics, as a teaching of Jesus for his disciples involved in missionary activity. Interestingly, Mark 6:8 prohibits the taking of any *chalkón* (“bronze”; probably any coin in copper alloy) in the “belt” (which is where one kept one’s money), while Luke 9:3

<sup>18</sup> The parallel passage in Matt. 5:42 may involve the use of money.

<sup>19</sup> The lending without interest suggests that those “sinners” are Jews lending to other Jews and avoiding the risk of usury. Nevertheless, we must remember that the big “credit crunch” of the year 33 CE was finally solved when Tiberius lent 100 million sesterces for three years at zero interest, allowing the recovery of the credit market in Rome. I doubt, however (and apart from the time difficulty), that any echo of the financial crisis in Rome could have reached the agricultural and pastoral world of the historical Jesus in the kingdom of Antipas or in the province of Judaea.

prohibits any *argýrion* (properly any silver coin, be it a *denarius* or not). Matthew 10:9 goes on to specify: no gold, no silver, no bronze are allowed. Matthew seems willing to clarify that no money whatsoever should be in the possession of the missionary, who should abandon himself<sup>20</sup> completely to the providence of God and be like the “lilies of the field” (6:28; no parallel in the other gospels).<sup>21</sup>

Selling and buying, though, and some uses of money are not only allowed, but suggested in some cases. Unique among the gospels, it is Matthew again that shows in a relatively clear way a double level of positive meaning of selling and buying. The “selling” is that which involves the selling of all personal belongings. The first meaning is a spiritual/parabolic one: when one identifies the “kingdom,” in the form of a “treasure buried in a field” or of a “pearl of great price,” one is expected to sell everything and buy that field or that pearl (Matt. 13:44–46: a passage with no parallel in the other gospels). Here we find the idea and the wording of a financial transaction (selling and buying) applied to a spiritual reality.<sup>22</sup> More concretely, there is another set of passages where Jesus is presented as inviting his followers in general, or some person in particular, to “go, sell all [their] belongings” (Matt. 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22<sup>23</sup> and Luke 12:33) and give everything to the poor, in order to obtain treasure in heaven. This is probably the ownership of the kingdom or the “inheritance” (Mark 10:17; Luke 18:18).<sup>24</sup> In these cases, property is sold and *money* (though not explicitly mentioned) is distributed to the

<sup>20</sup> I say “himself,” since Matthew doesn’t seem to envision a strong presence of women with such functions in his communities.

<sup>21</sup> In the final part of this chapter, I will come back to the peculiar attitude towards money, as shown in some passages by Matthew.

<sup>22</sup> In Matthew, both “treasure” and “pearls” (see 7:6; only Matt.) can and should signify a spiritual reality. See esp. 12:35 (Luke 6:44f. specifies “treasure of the heart”) or 13:52 (a treasure with “new and old things”; only Matt.) or 6:19–21 (the two treasures, “on earth” and “in heaven”; Luke 12:33f. mentions only a treasure in heaven). See also further, n. 95 below.

<sup>23</sup> Luke is the one who stresses the necessity to sell “all” one’s belongings.

<sup>24</sup> There are indications that there were discussions in the communities of the early followers of Jesus about exactly the point of selling everything for the poor or for the communities: 1 Cor. 13:3 considers it an extreme case, but stresses that the gesture is not sufficient; on the other side, the story of Zacchaeus, as told by Luke 19:2–10, shows that a donation in good faith of half of one’s belongings (together with the restitution of the illegally owned) is sufficient for the owner to be considered again a “son of Abraham” (therefore, to enter into the inheritance). In Acts, the case of Barnabas who sold “a field he owned” (Acts

poor. Possibly because of practical reasons,<sup>25</sup> then, the property should not be donated directly to the poor, but the money obtained by selling it should be distributed.

In order to donate, you should always be allowed to sell what you have, especially if it is precious. Nevertheless, the scene of the anointing in Bethany seems to go further. While it is true that the vase of alabaster could have been “sold” for a good price<sup>26</sup> and the money could have been distributed to the poor, the need to anoint the body of Jesus before his burial creates an exception.

If this is the case for “selling,” “buying” also has some apparently contrasting functions. It is certainly and always was permissible to “buy” spiritual treasures, but, generally speaking, what can we do with the money we (already) own? Immediately before the so-called “Feeding of the Five Thousand,” in all four gospels there is a rhetorical opposition between going to “buy” enough food and simply distributing what there is to everybody. Apart from the Eucharistic symbology involved in the scene, it is quite clear that only through the sharing (*con-divisio*) of what is already owned by the followers of Jesus (and obviously thanks also to the presence of Jesus), can the mercy of God feed the thousands and allow commensality.<sup>27</sup>

The underlying teaching seems to be that you can either sell your worldly property to buy spiritual treasures for yourself, by donating the

4:37: was it the only field he owned?) is contrasted with that of Ananias and Sapphira, who sell some “property” (Acts 5:1–11). And it is still Luke (8:1–3) who stresses that the women who followed Jesus from Galilee helped him and his disciples “out of their belongings.”

<sup>25</sup> *A house or a piece of land cannot be divided to help all people in need.*

<sup>26</sup> Matt. 26:9, Mark 14:5, and John 12:5 offer the indicative figure of 300 *denarii*.

<sup>27</sup> In the Synoptics, the disciples think that “the crowds” should “buy” food for themselves (Matt. 14:15; Mark 6:36. Luke 9:12 does not use the verb “to buy,” but “to find [food]”); in John 6:5f. from the beginning the responsibility to “buy” food for the masses falls on the disciples (who probably represent the community and possibly its leaders), who need – but don’t have – at least 200 *denarii* (thus Mark 6:37 and John 6:7). The scene is also very similar in the “Second Multiplication of Loaves and Fishes,” even if the verb “to buy” does not appear in that context (see Matt. 15:33 and Mark 8:4). From a practical point of view, 5 loaves and 2 fish, or 7 loaves and some fish, can be directly divided and distributed: there is no need for “selling” an indivisible property. For the connection between commensality and kingdom, see Destro and Pesce, *Encounters with Jesus*, and, for the possible specific meaning of meals in Johannine communities, E. Kobel, *Dining with John: Communal Meals and Identity Formation in the Gospel of John and its Historical and Cultural Context*, Leiden: 2011.

money you get from the sale, or, more usually, you need to be able to share (with the poor, with the community, with everyone) whatever you already own: if you (con)divide what you have, independently from its amount, you will multiply it.

### Real purchase and true possession

At this point in our reasoning, two further steps are expected. The first is to understand how we enter into the possession of something. How do we own what is ours? The answer seems to be that one only really owns what one receives from God. God, however, donates everything, including salvation. He does not “sell” anything.

The second step, therefore, is to understand that we are supposed to do the same since, ultimately, we do not give away what is our inherent possession, but what was donated to us by God. This is explained in many different contexts in early “Christian” literature, from Paul to John to Revelation,<sup>28</sup> or in passages like Matthew 10:8: “Freely you have received, freely you give.”

The model is Jesus Christ. According to Paul, Jesus is the one who was able to “buy.” His buying “at a great price” was the buying of the faithful, at the price of his own blood (see esp. 1 Cor. 6:20 and 7:23). Therefore, the transaction accomplished by Jesus was his free gift (Gal. 2:21) of himself on the cross. Through such acquisition, a faithful person now “belongs” to him, he or she is his “slave,” but this makes him or her a “free person.” Not only this, but whatever their ethnic/religious origin, thanks to the sacrifice of Jesus, the believers are now part of “the seed of Abraham” and therefore are entitled to the inheritance and can be saved (see esp. Gal. 3:29 and also 3:8 and 13f.). The other Jews do not believe that the non-Jews can be saved immediately, but think that the Gentiles must undergo proselytism and its rites and the acceptance of circumcision and the Torah. They ignore or don’t understand the novelty brought by Jesus, the Anointed of God: therefore, they try to administer the salvation, which God had put in their hands, in the old, traditional, wrong way, based on ethnicity (see esp. Rom. 2:17–24 and 11:13–24). The

<sup>28</sup> See e.g., 1 Cor. 4:7; 2 Cor. 11:7; John 4:13f. or 7:47f.; Rev. 21:6 or 22:17. Please note in many of the passages quoted in our discussion the theological use of the adverb “freely” (*δωρεάν*).

key question for Paul seems to be that of who is the instrument of salvation for the non-Jews. This appears quite clearly also in the canonical gospels and elsewhere:<sup>29</sup> the other Jews sell salvation in the wrong way. Particularly, there are numerous passages in Revelation that, though apparently oriented towards the criticism of the surrounding social world, refer to a religious polemic against the other Jews. I will analyze two contexts: the dirge of the merchants over the fall of the "great city,"<sup>30</sup> and the reflection on the relationship between the markets and the Beast.

The dirge of the merchants is pronounced by "the kings of the earth," the "merchants of the earth," the helmsmen, the seamen and all those who "practice trade by sea" (Rev. 18:9–17), therefore involving "earth" and "sea," while "heaven" is invited to "rejoice."<sup>31</sup> The "kings" who lament the fall of the city-woman are among those with whom she used to prostitute herself (17:2; 18:3) and are afraid "of her torment."<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> See Gos. Thom. 102 and cf. 39, where the Pharisees are depicted like dogs "sleeping in the manger of oxen." They don't eat and do not allow others to eat. Under the cover of the Pharisees, the text as it is now refers to the authorities of the "Great Church." It is not impossible, however, that the probably proverbial expression derives from some ancient tradition, rooted in the first generations of followers of Jesus, who struggled with pharisaic proselytism (notice also the possibly ironic choice of potentially impure animals, like dogs, about which see Matt. 7:6; Mark 7:27/Matt. 15:26; 2 Pt. 2:22, and Rev. 22:15 with Phil. 3:2).

<sup>30</sup> I belong to a minority of scholars who believe that "the city, the great one, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified" (Rev. 11:8) remains the same throughout the whole book and can only be Jerusalem (or, in any case, a Jewish reality, and not Rome). See E. Corsini, *The Apocalypse: The Perennial Revelation of Jesus Christ*, Wilmington: 1983; A. J. Beagley, *The "Sitz im Leben" of the Apocalypse: With Particular Reference to the Role of the Church's Enemies* (BZBW, 50), Berlin, New York: 1987; E. Corsini, *Apocalisse di Gesù Cristo secondo Giovanni*, Turin: 2002; E. Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John*, Grand Rapids: 2006.

<sup>31</sup> There, opposed to kings, merchants and sailors, we find "the holy ones (saints and/or angels) and the apostles and the prophets" (18:20). This corresponds to the usual cosmological view of Revelation, at least since 12:12, where, thanks to the fall of Satan, the "heavens" can rejoice, while "woe" reaches "the earth and the sea."

<sup>32</sup> Rev. 18:10; therefore they cannot be the same "kings," who are the "ten horns" of the Beast, in charge of the destruction of the city/prostitute (17:12) and who were also expected to do battle against the Lamb and be defeated (17:14). There the kingdom of Evil appears to be divided, with some of its components destroying others. This is typical of apocalyptic context, where often the felons

John's explanation of the deeper meaning of the scene is probably offered at 18:14: "And your seasonal fruit, your soul's desire, has departed from you, and all the sumptuous things and the splendid things are lost for you, and they will never find them again."<sup>33</sup> What is the "fruit" which was supposed to be the "seasonal produce of the desire" of the city? If the city is Jerusalem, my hypothesis is that this is the whole of the Jewish religion, the cultic dimensions of which are "all the sumptuous things and the splendid things," which are going to be lost. The loss has two levels: the historical one, with the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 CE, and the spiritual one. The "seasonal fruit" was the only produce the city had to give in exchange for the goods of the cargo.

I am inclined to interpret the passage as an allegory in the following way: the city in her prostitution gave away her seasonal produce, that religion of salvation she had received as a present from God and which was actually the only real instrument of cosmic salvation. But she did not give it away freely. Instead, she did it to receive all the goods of the earth, including "souls of men" (this should again be a violent criticism of Jewish proselytism). Instead of donating her seasonal fruit, like the tree in the eschatological Jerusalem (22:2), she exchanged it as at a market, and therefore she is now doomed, like the fig tree of Mark 11:13 (and Matt. 21:18), unable to bring fruit (in season or out of season).<sup>34</sup> And there is no possibility for the historical, earthly city to return to her former status.

destroy each other: e.g. 1 En. 100:2. It can also be considered a sign of the near end: Mark 3:24ff. (cf. Matt. 12:25f. and Luke 11:17f.).

<sup>33</sup> In the form of an apostrophe to the city (the speaking subject of which should be the same Voice from heaven of 18:4 and possibly 18:20), this is inserted between the long list of the cargo, remembered by the "merchants of the earth" (18:12f.), and the shorter one, spoken by the same merchants (18:16). Both lists are very carefully crafted by John, and are full of biblical echoes to the garments of the high priests, to the decorations of the tent/temple and to the materials brought by Hiram, King of Tyre, to the Jerusalem of Solomon. I find particularly striking the double presence of "fine linen" (βύσσινος), at vv. 12 and 16, which is always used by John to define the whiteness and positivity of the saints (19:8, 14). Similarly, "silk" in the OT appears only once, in Ez. 16:8–14, together with "fine linen," in a list of presents Jerusalem receives from God, but then uses for her prostitution; all this makes good sense if the city/prostitute is the degeneration of Jerusalem, and scarcely if she is Rome. See my discussion while commenting on these passages in Lupieri, *Commentary*.

<sup>34</sup> If the woman-city is said to have produced in the past some sort of "seasonal fruit," this may signify that she is compared, at least in the mind of the author, to a

These ideas are repeated several times in the book, but possibly the strongest passage is that depicting the activity of “the beast coming up out of the land” (13:11), the one who organizes the cult in favor of “the beast coming up from the sea.” In the interpretation I accept, the beast coming from the sea is the pagan power<sup>35</sup> and the one “coming from the land” is the corrupted religious power of Israel. This second beast “was granted [ἑδόθη; the usual *passivum divinum*] to provide Spirit to the image of the [first] beast . . .<sup>36</sup> and it causes all, the small and the great . . . that they should give them a brand on their right hand or on their forehead, and that no one can buy or sell except he who has the brand, the name of the beast or the number of its name” (13:15ff.).

In sectarian apocalyptic imagery, what we see depicted here should be the situation of the temple. John’s irony transforms the tephillim, supposed to keep the name of God close to the forehead and the hand (Deut. 6:8; Isa. 44:5), into the “brand/mark” of subjugation to the beast.<sup>37</sup> This “mark,” then, is the satanic counterpart of the “seal” the “servants” of God bear on their “forehead.”<sup>38</sup>

The seal is explained at 14:1, where we see the 144,000, “who had his name and the name of his father written on their foreheads.” The presence of “the name” may be a sign of possession, since the army of the Lamb, we learn from the context, was “purchased and taken away from among men, a first offering for God and for the Lamb” (14:4).

fruit tree. This is usual for Israel (the vine, the fig tree . . .) and the possible connection with Mark 11:13 is quite striking. We could be dealing here with the traces of an early Christian speculation on the incapability of Israel to bring fruits out of season (see further discussion on the Withered Fig Tree) and on its rapacity in appropriating them when “in season” (Mark 12:2 et seq.; see further n. 53 below).

<sup>35</sup> At the time of John, it is basically the Roman Empire, but John’s beast represents all satanic earthly power, since it is the fusion of all the constitutive elements of the four beasts, corresponding to the four empires in human history, as seen by Daniel in Dan. 7:3–7.

<sup>36</sup> This is the sin of idolatry, repetition of the sin of Aaron in the desert. Corrupted Judaism uses the Spirit of God for the religious cause of the heathen and therefore it is identified as the “Pseudo Prophet” (16:13; 19:20; 20:10).

<sup>37</sup> Although the Bible does not explicitly say which should be the hand with the tephillim, the traditional Jewish usage involves the left hand and not the right. I suppose that in Revelation there is a conscious passage from the hand of the side of the hearth to the hand of economical transactions.

<sup>38</sup> 7:2ff.; 9:4. No hand is ever mentioned for them: perhaps, given the fact that they do not access the markets, they don’t need hands to be shaken (to make a valid contract).

The human activity of “purchasing,” then, and the related one of “selling,” do not concern the saints as subjects. Only evil people seem to be interested in buying or selling (13:17) and only imperfect, “lukewarm” believers are invited by John to purchase from him the real “gold, fired by fire,” the one capable of making them “rich” (3:16ff.). The faithful, like the “angel of the church in Smyrna,” are already “rich,” in spite of their (worldly) “poverty” (2:8f.), and there are some ready to “walk . . . in white garments, since they are worthy” (3:4). Therefore, they don’t need anything, but are expected to join the Resurrected Lord in his universal power (2:26ff.).

The saints are rich, not because they have purchased anything, but because they have been purchased: “You [the Lamb] were slaughtered and you purchased for God, by your blood, men of every tribe and language and people and nation . . .” (5:9). As we see in the description of the 144,000, the blood of the Lamb is the “money” used for their purchase “away from the earth” and “away from among [the other] men” (14:3f.).

The only righteous purchase, then, is that completed by Jesus Christ the Lamb, who offers salvation to all (including the nations of 5:9), through his blood. In John’s perception, the real followers of Jesus do not care for the square of the market, but for the mountain of Golgotha.

### The death of Jesus as gratuitous act of ransom

Although the term “ransom” (λύτρον) appears only twice in the NT,<sup>39</sup> and the term “redemption” (ἀπολύτρωσις) only in texts of Pauline tradition,<sup>40</sup> the idea is widely present in all NT “streams.”<sup>41</sup> With or without terms related to buying/selling/redeeming, the main Christian interpretation of Jesus’ execution by the Romans is that of a freely accepted sacrifice, therefore having a central function in the cosmic salvific history.<sup>42</sup> According to

<sup>39</sup> Mark 10:45 = Matt. 20:28, in both passages supporting the idea of “substitution” (Jesus died “instead of”).

<sup>40</sup> Rom. 3:24; 8:23; 1 Cor. 1:30; Eph. 1:7, 14; 4:30; Col. 1:14; Heb. 9:15; 11:35 and Luke 21:28 in an apocalyptic context.

<sup>41</sup> See e.g., John 1:29.

<sup>42</sup> It appears to be *the* explanation of Jesus’ death offered by Paul, possibly already “received” by him (1 Cor. 11:25), and accepted by Peter, by the surviving apostles and, at a certain early point, by at least one of the brothers, James (possibly after his experience of the Resurrected Lord: 1 Cor. 15:7). It will be absent, though, in many Gnostic Christianities, where the historical death of Jesus



Revelation, the sacrifice of the Lamb, as well as the constitution of the lists with the names of the saved human beings, has taken place “from the establishment of the world” (13:8; 17:8; see Matt. 25:34). God has planned, decided and already accomplished human salvation through his Son in a meta-historical dimension, even “before” that event (the sin of Satan in Rev. 12), the reparation for which, as an extraordinary program of salvation, had to be planned.

Both the intervention of God and the sacrifice of Jesus are gratuitous. Consequently, the extension to all mankind of the salvation offered by God through Christ must also be a gratuitous act of donation and self-donation. This complex of thoughts seems to be a very old *theologoumenon* in the Christian tradition, the scriptural foundations for which are easily identifiable.<sup>43</sup> In NT contexts, though, it appears to be constantly connected to the bias against “the (other) Jews” and their presumed intention to “sell” salvation. Therefore we should probably conclude that the whole reflection was originated among the early groups of followers of Jesus who could explain in such a way both the death of their master and the incredulity of the other Jews.

Having said this, we should attempt to reach some glimpses of the possible preaching of the historical Jesus regarding money, as well as its reflections upon the early life of his followers. Towards this goal, I would like to concentrate our attention on the well-known scene of the so-called “Cleansing of the Temple” and to other gospel passages involving Jesus and the use of money.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, the “Cleansing of the Temple” was considered such a meaningful incident in the public life of Jesus that all four evangelists decided to reproduce it in their works. On the one hand, this may signify that the historical tradition or memory of the event was so strong that it could

has little or no salvific dimension, as salvation comes through the illumination and knowledge brought by the Celestial Savior (in some Gnostic contexts, the “cross” may still have a salvific function, but only as the necessary moment of the separation of Christ from Jesus; see e.g., Gos. Phil. 72).

<sup>43</sup> Plenty of passages in the canonical Bible and in the Pseudepigrapha present various forms of God’s gratuitous intervention to “redeem” individuals and/or his own people. For the Exodus ideology, see Ps. 74 [73]:2 and Exod. 15:13. Accordingly, it is also acceptable to think of a first-century Jewish preacher announcing a new redemption, even without the superimposition of ideas developed by the church of his followers.

<sup>44</sup> It is worth noticing that, with the exclusion of the parables, the gospel passages which put the figure of Jesus in more-or-less direct contact with money also involve the temple of Jerusalem.

not be obliterated, but on the other it proves that the scene, duly adapted, was useful to the narrative of each evangelist. Over the centuries, then, the episode continued to be read and interpreted, receiving different, and even opposing, explanations. Today, some contemporary readers would incline towards a socio-religious understanding of it: Jesus offered religious motivation for Jewish social uneasiness, and this led to his capture and execution. Others believe that the action of Jesus was a prophetic one, a prefiguration of the destruction of the temple (and possibly of the near end of the world), but that unfortunately, it was interpreted as an obviously menacing action (and perhaps it really was such); therefore, it was the wrong thing to do at the wrong time. And others, finally, would completely deny its historicity.<sup>45</sup>

We should first of all, though, try to understand what each evangelist wants to say with his version of the scene and then see what we can still *suppose* Jesus did and/or wanted to communicate with his action. Therefore I will analyze the content of the four versions of the “Cleansing of the Temple,” see whether we can still understand something of Jesus’ behaviour, and then follow Matthew in his meditation on the spiritual meaning of the use of money, since his reflections on one hand help to contextualize his version of the “Cleansing of the Temple” and, on the other, are most central to our analysis.

### The “Cleansing of the Temple” in Mark

Mark<sup>46</sup> places the “Cleansing of the Temple” in the first part of Jesus’ last week in Jerusalem.<sup>47</sup> The section of the story which interests us the

<sup>45</sup> See discussion in P. Fredricksen, *From Jesus To Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus*, Introduction to the Second Edition, New Haven: 2000, xx–xxiv.

<sup>46</sup> It is usually accepted that the gospel went through a complex redactional history, with a series of editions or re-writing of the text. For the complexity of the problem, see the recent book by Josep Rius-Camps, *El Evangelio de Marcos: etapas de su redacción*, Estella (Navarre): 2008.

<sup>47</sup> The redactional aspects of this fraction of Mark (11:1–[26]) have been widely studied, and there is a consensus on its structure, crafted by the author. According to Mark, this is the first time Jesus enters Jerusalem and the temple. If we should try to reconstruct the chronology of the presence of Jesus in the Temple of Jerusalem basing our reconstruction on the canonical gospels, our task would be practically impossible. Even if both accept the idea of the “Passion Week,” for the presence in the temple, Mark uses a “3-day scheme” and Matthew a “2-day

most takes place on the second and third days of that week.<sup>48</sup> Here the evangelist combines three narrative elements: (a) the Cleansing of the Temple, which is sandwiched<sup>49</sup> between (b) the Cursing and the Withering of the Fig Tree, which is then followed by (c) some Teaching of Jesus to his disciples on faith and prayer. Each of these three elements has its own theological and/or ecclesiological meaning, which explains its narrative function.<sup>50</sup>

The Cursing and Withering of the Fig Tree, given the symbolic value of the tree,<sup>51</sup> appears to be a prophecy of the punishment of the unbelieving Israel.<sup>52</sup> The phrase that is very difficult to understand

scheme." Luke not only prolongs the presence of Jesus for an unspecified number of days during his last permanence in Jerusalem, but also considers the presence of Jesus in the temple theologically meaningful when he was a newborn and when he was a child (at least once every year, until he was 12). Both Luke and Matthew also testify to an apparently short presence of Jesus during the temptation narrative and John, finally, describes multiple, prolonged periods of Jesus' presence in different times and years. We can only say that Jesus very probably *was* in the temple.

<sup>48</sup> On the first day we find Jesus' "Triumphal Entry" on a colt (it is not clear where Jesus made his entry; apparently not in Jerusalem, nor in the temple, but on the outskirts of the city); then he reaches the temple, "looks around" and, quite awkwardly, goes away, to spend the night in Bethany, "since it was already late" (Mark 11:1-11).

<sup>49</sup> This kind of "sandwiching" is frequent in Mark, and has been studied by scholars. See e.g., G. Theissen, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition*, Edinburgh: 1983 (1st pub. 1972), 180ff.

<sup>50</sup> Each of these three elements also contains different layers of materials and may have had separate origins before the present literary construction. For this section of my work, see E. Lupieri, "Fragments of the Historical Jesus? A Reading of Mark 11,11-126," *ASE* 28(1) (2011): 289-311. The Markan text we have, at least in its last part (c), went through a "growth process" of accretion of elements, probably deriving from its interaction with Matthew. The manuscript tradition of Mark 11:26 is not very strong, and the verse is usually considered spurious and derived from reworking Matthew, but vv. 24 and 25 are also full of Matthean expressions, often *hapax* here in Mark.

<sup>51</sup> In the OT, the fig tree is often paralleled with the vine (1 Kings 5:5; 1 Macc. 14:12; Mic. 4:4; Zech. 3:10), so that the fig tree can also represent Israel. This is particularly true when destruction (of the tree-Israel-Jerusalem) is involved: Jer. 5:17; cf. Joel 1:12. For the importance of the fig tree in apocalyptic contexts, see Mark 13:28.

<sup>52</sup> Also the uncomfortable idea that Jesus was hungry for figs finds its explanation in Mic. 7:1f., where the prophet complains against Judah that he can find "no early fig that I crave. The faithful are gone from the earth" (or, maybe better, "from the land [of Judah]").

with a different interpretation is verse 13: "It was not the time for figs."<sup>53</sup> If the fig tree is Israel, then Israel should be ready to offer its fruit whenever the visitation of God comes,<sup>54</sup> especially when it is not the right season for fruits.<sup>55</sup> Since Israel was not able to offer its fruits, its function in the history of salvation will be abolished. No one will eat any fruit from it, until the eon.

Since Mark was very probably written after the fall of Jerusalem, this passage should reflect a typically Christian explanation of the event. In this way the whole context is strongly connected with the final part of Mark 12 and the beginning of Mark 13<sup>56</sup> and, through the end of Jerusalem and the temple, to the end of the world in Mark 13. The end of Israel, though, as frightful as it was, was not to be feared by the followers of Jesus. They had to realize that God was simply maintaining his promises and being faithful to his own

<sup>53</sup> This sentence has always created problems for Christian exegetes (and not by chance is avoided by Matthew), while on the other hand, has helped anti-Christian critics. Famously, Bertrand Russell considered this passage, together with that on the drowning of the pigs in the Lake of Gennesaret, as examples of irrational behavior and useless cruelty (in *Why I am not a Christian*, originally a lecture held on March 6, 1927, then published in *Why I am not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*. Edited with an Appendix on the "Bertrand Russell Case," by P. Edwards, New York: 1957).

<sup>54</sup> In the Christian interpretation, it is Jesus, impersonating Yahweh, or being his emissary, who brings the time of the visitation.

<sup>55</sup> We must note that Jesus does not curse the tree directly, but says that "no one ever will eat" its fruits "until the eon." This creates a strong connection with one of the final scenes in Revelation (22:2), where in the New Jerusalem (in the new eon) the Tree of Life offers its fruits (and leaves) for the salvation of everyone, Jews and non-Jews. In the closer Markan context, the complementary explanation can be found in the parable of the vineyard, where the tenants keep the fruits for themselves, when it is the right season of the year (Mark 12:2).

<sup>56</sup> In the present subdivision in chapters, Mark 12 opens with the parable of the vineyard and the reflection on the "stone rejected by the builders" (12:10), while Mark 13 opens with the prophecy according to which "there will not be one stone left upon another [stone]" (13:2). This means that the whole of the teaching of Jesus during his third day in the temple is framed by strong supersessionist phrases that criticize non-Christian Judaism. This attitude is particularly strong at the end of Mark 12, where Jesus first attacks the scribes, saying that they "devour the houses of the widows" and therefore "will receive a harsher punishment" (12:40), then shows his disciples the case of the "poor widow" who throws "her whole life" in the treasure of the temple (13:44). But the temple is going to be destroyed, and this is probably the punishment (for this reading of the widow's mite, see S. Häkkinen, "Two Coins Too Many: Reflections on the Widow's Offering," *The Fourth R* 20/4 (2007): 9-12), heralding the end of the world as prophesied in Mark 13.

word.<sup>57</sup> As a result, the fall of Jerusalem, understood as the just punishment for the unbelieving Israel, is something the followers of Christ can only pray for.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, the final teaching of Jesus to his disciples (narrative element c) seems to be the most recent redactional layer of the whole passage and it is there to explain the meaning of the Cursing and Withering of the Fig Tree. The end of Jerusalem is no more immediately connected to the end of the world, but becomes a sign of the power of prayer.<sup>59</sup>

If this is true, then the most recent element (teaching of Jesus, (c) above) is added to offer the correct interpretation of the older one (Cursing and Withering of the Fig Tree, (b) above). I suppose that the Cursing and Withering of the Fig Tree in its turn plays the same role as the Cleansing of the Temple ((a) above). In other words, the narrative of Mark guides us to read the Cleansing of the Temple as a menace or, at least, as a prophetic act focusing on the end of the temple and of Jerusalem.

The hypothesis appears further convincing if we analyze the internal structure of the pericope of the Cleansing of the Temple (Mark 11:15–19). This also seems to reflect at least three levels of composition. Verses 15a and 19, which are the beginning and the end of the scene, connect it with the narrative context and say that Jesus went in and out of the temple and the city, undisturbed. This should be the most recent redactional level of the pericope. What lies in between can be divided into two subsections: verses 15b and 16, which describe the activity of Jesus in the temple (the “Cleansing” proper), and verses 17 and 18, which add some teaching (this time public) by Jesus and record the reaction of the authorities.

Verse 17 puts a modified Old Testament (OT) quotation on Jesus’ lips. According to the text (cf. Isa. 56:7 and Jer. 7:11) the temple was

<sup>57</sup> The phrase “ἔχετε πίστιν θεοῦ” (11:22b) should not mean “Have faith in God,” but “You have [here an example of the] trustfulness of God”: if God withered the tree, it means that he is ready to allow any miracle, if requested.

<sup>58</sup> This should be the meaning of the passage regarding the destiny of *that* “mountain,” that Jesus was able to show his disciples. The Zion (or possibly the Mount of Olives?), which used to be holy, like the other fallen angels had been transformed into one of the devilish mountains well known in Enochic traditions (1 En. 21:3), so that it could be “eradicated” by God and “thrown into the abyss/sea” (Mark 11:23; cf. Rev. 20:3 and esp. 19:21, where “a millstone, a great one,” is “thrown into the sea”). OT texts like Ezek. 6 should have been the scriptural basis for such speculations. For the correspondence between angels and mountains, see Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John*, 270f.

<sup>59</sup> This appears to be a useful idea in a growing church, more and more aware of its independence from the rest of Judaism, but also from its apocalyptic groups.

destined, in the plan of God, to be “called a house of prayer by/for all the Gentiles,” but had instead been transformed by the Jewish authorities into a “den of bandits.” This explains why the historical function of the temple is over. Judaism was expected to become the instrument of salvation for “all the Gentiles,” offering them the way to worship the only true God. But Jewish authorities considered salvation their own property, so that they acted like robbers or bandits (or the wicked tenants of the vineyard), appropriating what was not theirs.

This brings us back to the discussions on the gratuitousness of salvation and on who is able to save the non-Jews. At this point we can also affirm that the “fruit” Judaism was expected to produce was the salvation freely offered to the Gentiles. The impediment brought by the Jewish authorities to the salvation of the Gentiles is the reason for their punishment by God.<sup>60</sup> In this context, then, the OT quotation of verse 17 is there to connect the Cleansing of the Temple to the Cursing and Withering of the Fig Tree. Accordingly, verse 18 increases the criticism: the religious authorities perfectly understand what Jesus is talking about, but, instead of accepting his words and converting, they immediately plan to kill him. If they had a chance, they burned it. The Fig Tree is fruitless and is going to be withered.<sup>61</sup>

Verses 17 and 18 possibly belong to the same redactional activity that was responsible for inserting the Cleansing of the Temple inside the Cursing and Withering of the Fig Tree. This seems to be the case even more for the end of verse 18, which tries to explain why the Jewish authorities (and the temple police) did not immediately arrest Jesus: “They feared him because the whole crowd was *astonished* at his teaching.” Can simple *astonishment* explain the fear of even the high priests?<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> The most explicit text on this subject is 1 Thess. 2:15–16: “The Jews . . . who have killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets . . . prevent us from speaking to the Gentiles that they may be saved, thus constantly filling up the measure of their sins. But the wrath of God has finally begun to come upon them.” Independently of the fact that the last words came from Paul or not, this is also the idea Mark has.

<sup>61</sup> At the time of the redaction of the gospels, the destruction of Jerusalem would have been seen by the followers of Jesus as *the* proof that all Jesus had prophesied was on the way to realization, and particularly that the Gentiles were going to be saved by another providential instrument of God, the new religious reality that we now call “Christianity.”

<sup>62</sup> Both the other Synoptics, indeed, do keep the decision to kill Jesus immediately after his teaching, but in Matthew this teaching is notoriously virulent (see Matt. 21:45), and in Luke it stretches over a long period of time (Luke 19:47f.).

The other point is that we should ask ourselves if, in the narration, Jesus had done or said anything to deserve to be executed according to Jewish law. The answer comes from verses 15b–16: all Jesus did or said was *prohibiting*. Three categories of activities are prohibited by him: (a) buying and selling (whatever) in the temple; (b) changing money and selling doves in the temple; and (c) carrying vessels through the temple. The third prohibition<sup>63</sup> is the key to understanding the whole scene.

This prohibition is a “prohibition of carrying” and it is not generic (as it were, had Mark said “burdens”), but precise: Jesus does not prohibit carrying money, foods, offerings . . . but “vessels.”<sup>64</sup> Further, he does not prohibit “carry out” or “carry in,” but “carry through.” The space is also clear: “through the temple.”<sup>65</sup> Finally, the beginning of the verse (“He did not allow any person to carry . . .”) reproduces exactly the formulaic structure of sentences in those days used in lively

<sup>63</sup> Apparently the most difficult to explain, to the point that no other evangelist saved any mention of it.

<sup>64</sup> The word is technical and can be extended to refer to any container. If strictly observed, the prohibition could have created some restriction in the practical execution of some liturgical activities in the temple, but I want to stress that this is only a consequence. Jesus is not prohibiting the cult and its sacrifices, which can continue, but he seems worried about the level of purity of the “vessels.” If applied, his rules would have caused some liturgical changes or return to lost habits (as an example, not to have to transport their blood in vessels through the temple, animals should have been slaughtered by the altar and not in the slaughterhouse built by the high priest John (Hyrcanus)). Since it appears in Strack–Billerbeck (H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, vol. II, *Evangelium nach Markus, Lukas und Johannes und die Apostelgeschichte*, Munich: 1956), M. Ber. 9:5 is often quoted. The *Mishnah* prohibits one to “make of [the Temple Mount] a short by-path” (H. Danby, *The Mishnah*, Oxford: 1964, 10). This doesn’t seem to be the case for Jesus, since the prohibition of carrying “vases” has very little to do with a “short by-path.” The *Mishnah* prohibits the transit, with or without carrying anything, according to the intention of the passing person; if Jesus had wanted to prohibit it in the case of anyone who wanted to transport objects through the Temple Mount, why should he have prohibited only “vessels” and implicitly allowed all “burdens”?

<sup>65</sup> With most commentators, I suppose that here “temple” means the whole “Temple Mount,” for the extension of which, see J. Schwartz and Y. Peleg, “Are the ‘Halakhic Temple Mount’ and the ‘Outer Court’ of Josephus One and the Same?” in S. J. D. Cohen and J. J. Schwartz (eds.), *Studies in Josephus and the Varieties of Ancient Judaism: Louis H. Feldman Jubilee Volume* (AGAJU, 67), Leiden: 2007, 207–22.

halakhic discussions on the exact nature and extension of the “sabbatical prohibition of carrying.”<sup>66</sup> We find similar or parallel texts in Nehemiah,<sup>67</sup> at Qumran,<sup>68</sup> in Jubilees,<sup>69</sup> and in the Mishnah.<sup>70</sup> The objects, the carrying of which is forbidden, and the location of the prohibition are different,<sup>71</sup> but the halakhic structure of the sentence is the same (“Allow no person to carry . . .”). Mark 11:16 could be explained as an example of teaching on “sabbatical prohibition of carrying,” based on a quite common halakhic exegesis which interprets the prohibitions of Jeremiah 17 using the wording of Exodus 16.<sup>72</sup> The divergence from the other examples of this halakhic exegesis is that Jesus’ prohibition does not mention Sabbath. This means that Jesus is “expanding the Law,” by applying his interpretation of the

<sup>66</sup> A. P. Jassen, “Tracing the Threads of Jewish Law: The Sabbath Carrying Prohibition from *Jeremiah* to the Rabbis,” *ASE* 28/1 (2011): 253–78. I want to thank Dr. Jassen for his kindness in supplying unpublished works of his and for his personal communications on this subject.

<sup>67</sup> See further discussion below (n. 71).

<sup>68</sup> Most important passages: *CD* XI:7–9 (4Q270 frg. 6, col. V:13f. and 4Q271 frg. 5, vol. I:3f.); *4QHalakhah A* (4Q251) frg. 1–2:4f.; *4QMiscellan. Rules* (4Q265) frg. 6:4f. (subdivision of the text as quoted in Jassen, “Tracing the Threads of Jewish Law,” according to J. Baumgarten et al. (eds.), *Qumran Cave 4, XXV: Halakhic Texts* (DJD 35), Oxford: 1999).

<sup>69</sup> Jub. 2:29f. (on carrying burdens) and 50:8 (on buying and selling and carrying burdens). The latter passage specifies that the punishment for any infraction is death.

<sup>70</sup> M. Shab. 1:1. The Mishnic text is much more developed and the halakhah detailed, so that the result appears to be far from the earlier texts, although the basic question is still that of how to interpret the prohibition of bringing something into and outside a house on the day of Sabbath.

<sup>71</sup> The strictest parallel is to be found in *4QMiscellan. Rules* (4Q265) frg. 6:4f.: “Let no on[e] ca[r]ry out[ ] from his tent any vessel or foo[d] on the day of the Sabbath” (trans. Baumgarten, “Tracing the Threads of Jewish Law,” modified). In the same fragment (7, col. I:8f. according to F. García Martínez and E. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (Study edn.), Grand Rapids: 1997, I, 548) there is another prohibition regarding vessels: “And a vessel no one [. . . on the day] of the Sabbath” (translation modified), although this may refer to the quite common prohibition of opening a sealed vessel on a Sabbath.

<sup>72</sup> Jer. 17:19–27 (esp. 21–22) is possibly the most detailed classical biblical text on sabbatical prohibitions, but has the big disadvantage of not being “Mosaic.” Exod. 16:28f. (esp. 29) is the only “Mosaic” passage on sabbatical prohibitions, but it is short and generic. Further, it doesn’t refer to “carrying,” but to “going out.” However, it contains the clear sentence “allow no person to . . .” Therefore, the Jewish reflection on the “sabbatical prohibition of carrying” usually takes the “Mosaic” phrasing of Exod. 16 to adapt and apply Jer. 17 to the sabbatical life of the community. See Jassen, “Tracing the Threads of Jewish Law.”

“sabbatical prohibitions of carrying” to the life of the temple on *every day of the week*.

This allows us to immediately and better understand the first prohibition of verse 15: Jesus is the new Nehemiah. The Jewish reformer of old threw (foreign) merchants out of Jerusalem on the Sabbath, to impede any mercantile activity (buying and selling) of the “children of Judah” on that day (Neh. 13:15–22).<sup>73</sup> Jesus throws (Jewish) buyers and sellers out of the temple, and his halakhah should be valid in the temple every day of the week.

The final part of verse 15 explains to what extent the prohibition of mercantile activity was supported by Jesus. He “overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling the doves.”<sup>74</sup> For foreign pilgrims, the exchange of currency was the

<sup>73</sup> This model is usually little taken into consideration by contemporary scholarship, but Nehemiah notoriously introduced draconian measures in fifth-century BCE Jerusalem to purify the priesthood, the temple, and the city. As it is narrated, he not only obliged the Jews to observe a stricter observance of the Sabbath, but threw out of the city “those who resided in her [Jerusalem] and were carrying fish and were selling any kind of merchandise on the Sabbath to the sons of Judah and in Jerusalem” (v. 16). The LXX does not specify who “they” are, but the MT explains that those merchants are “men from Tyre” (thus further proving the historical mercantile connection between Tyre and Jerusalem). Nehemiah then shuts the doors of the city and puts guards on them (v. 19), to avoid any risk, but “the merchants and the sellers of any merchandise spent the night immediately outside Jerusalem, once and twice” (v. 20), and, according to the Greek: “They all spent the night and made their selling outside Jerusalem once and twice.” At that point, Nehemiah menaces them and obliges them to go away from the walls of the city and to come back only after the end of the Sabbath (v. 21). Jassen (“Tracing the Threads of Jewish Law”) stresses the fact that Nehemiah criticizes not only the selling and buying, but the *carrying into* the city of all kinds of food and merchandise (esp. in vv. 15f.).

<sup>74</sup> The text does not say that Jesus touched the money that was on the tables, nor the people who sat on the chairs. In this same context, John 2:15 relates that Jesus “made a whip out of cords” to “throw out” of the temple people and animals. John uses the word *φραγέλιον* (curiously enough, for the flagellation of Christ, John 19:1 does not use the verb *φραγελλῶ*, like Mark 15:15 and Matt. 27:26, but the verb *μαστιγῶ*). Usually a *flagellum*, technically speaking, is not made of cords, but of leather strings. I wonder if this anomalous detail, instead of being a sign of Jesus’ wrath, could strengthen the hypothesis that he was avoiding direct contact, and therefore contamination with people and objects who/which might have been considered impure *in the context of the temple*. Outside of the temple, the Jesus we find in the gospels is not usually worried about being contaminated by even highly polluting people or objects, like lepers or blood, or even

necessary prerequisite for any buying or selling or offering for the temple and could in itself be considered an act of buying and selling Tyrian *tetradrachmae*.<sup>75</sup> The selling (and buying) of doves, even if they were not particularly expensive, exemplify the kind of mercantile transaction that was taking place in the temple. Again, Jesus is not criticizing these activities *per se*, since they were both useful, or even essential to the Jewish cultic life, but because they take place inside an area he considered sacred.<sup>76</sup> Even if in Matthew 5:35 Jerusalem is still “the city of the Great King,” Jesus is not presented as particularly concerned about its purity.<sup>77</sup> He does not seem to be interested in expanding the purity of the temple to the whole city. What worries him is the risk brought against the temple and its parts (altar, offering, treasure) even by some otherwise licit activity.<sup>78</sup>

human cadavers (see T. Kazen, *Jesus and Purity Halakhah: Was Jesus Indifferent to Impurity?* (Coniectanea Biblica, NT Series, 38), Stockholm: 2002). While outside the temple polluting agents are purified by the power of Jesus, in the temple these are “thrown out” by him.

<sup>75</sup> It was the right of any adult male circumcised Jew in a state of purity to bring into the temple his own offerings (living animals and food or money and gold, or even the wood to burn his offerings, if that be the case), as long as they were all in the prescribed state of purity and perfection. Nevertheless, especially for pilgrims coming from a distance, it was easier to buy whatever was needed on the spot. There was therefore the possibility to buy everything needed, the purity and perfection of which was checked and guaranteed by the Levites (the animals, which had to be physically “blameless,” usually came from the rearing farms owned by the priestly families – and so did the wood, only twelve kinds of which were allowed to be burned in the temple). To stabilize the prices, the use of money in the temple had been standardized: for the various transactions the silver *stater*, or shekel, from Tyre should have been used. In Greek terms it was a *tetradrachma*, and had probably been chosen because of its good and constant alloy and because of the traditional importance of Tyre as a mercantile and commercial center, the ties of which with Jerusalem were old and solid (actually from the times of King Hiram, who helped Solomon build the temple). It is worth noting that no purity or religious rule was involved in the choice, since the coin bore the image of the god Melkart. According to some scholars, this last detail may have caused the reaction of Jesus. In any case, if the faithful man did not already own Tyrian coins, he could exchange his currency (whatever this was) on the tables of the money changers, who rented some allotted space from the administration of the temple for their activity.

<sup>76</sup> And this is why he throws the people “outside,” where we can suppose they could continue with their activities, if not forbidden for different reasons.

<sup>77</sup> Possibly because its end is near, at least according to the gospels: Luke 13:34f.; 19:41–44; Matt. 23:37ff.

<sup>78</sup> Other traces of this can be spotted in other NT passages, notably Matt. 5:23f.; 23:16f. and 18–22. Regarding Jerusalem, there were ample discussions about

### The historical Jesus and the Cleansing of the Temple

The earliest redactional layer of the Markan version of the Cleansing of the Temple allows us slowly to unearth the figure of a Jewish teacher of halakhah, very concerned with the purity of the temple. The way Jesus acts and talks in this context is not at all "revolutionary," but could be considered ultra-conservative. He is stricter than the Sadducees and the Pharisees<sup>79</sup> and presents himself as a defender of the temple, not as an attacker. The mercantile attitude which characterizes the religious life of his time could bring impurity inside the temple, and stricter sabbatical rules had to be applied. But why *sabbatical* rules?

I see two possible explanations, which do not exclude each other. The basis is a reflection on the presence of God in the temple.<sup>80</sup> If the presence is in the temple, its space belongs to God, and the time of the temple becomes the time of God. But what is the time of God? The time of God is His day, and His day can only be the Sabbath. Wherever God is, there it is the Sabbath. Therefore, in the space of God the sabbatical rules must be implemented every day.

The second explanation is a further step in a similar way of thinking, just more connected to apocalyptic-eschatological reflections. The presence of God on earth is the beginning of the cosmic Sabbath. The temple, on its sacred mountain, is the point of contact between the two eons. On that sacred spot the space/time of God touches the earth. It is always Sabbath there, and this is or should be the beginning of the eternal Sabbath on earth.

If we can accept that these or similar ideas determined the action of Jesus, then, besides the model offered by Nehemiah, the apocalyptic ending of Zechariah could have offered further scriptural support for his behavior: "On that day. . . the *vases* in the house of the LORD . . . and every vase in Jerusalem and in Judah shall be holy to the LORD of

which rules of purity should apply to the city, which objects could or could not be brought inside the city, and which levels of purity should be kept by people entering it. On the "geography of purity" in Jerusalem and in the temple, see M. Kel. 1:8f. Cf. E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)*, eds. G. Vermes et al., vol. II, Edinburgh: 1979, 285, n. 58.

<sup>79</sup> Pharisees' halakhot had not been fully implemented in the temple yet, but they were criticizing the Sadducees on similar subjects.

<sup>80</sup> The Presence of God in the temple, before and after the destruction by the Babylonians, was a very important subject of texts of visions like those of Isa. 6:1–7 and Ezek. 8:1–11:25 MT.

hosts . . . on that day there shall no longer be any *merchant* in the house of the LORD of hosts" (Zech. 14:20f.).

Jesus presents himself as a new Nehemiah who realizes the prophecy of Zechariah and openly protects and expands the sanctity of the temple. His behavior is coherent with that of a concerned and observant Jewish teacher of halakhah not deprived of prophetic-apocalyptic ideas.<sup>81</sup> The "crowds" understand it, and the temple police do not intervene. Finally, if this is true, the behavior of Jesus does not reflect any concern regarding the use of money or commercial transactions in everyday life. His concern is the purity of the temple.

### The Cleansing of the Temple in Luke

The atmosphere in Luke is different. When Jesus arrives near Jerusalem and gets the "colt," he does not seem to enter the city, and especially not the temple, but to climb the Mount of Olives instead (Luke 19:28–40). Possibly from there he already has the chance to utter a lament over the fall of Jerusalem, which includes the statement about the enemies not leaving "one stone upon another stone" (vv. 41–44). The withering of the fig tree disappears, substituted in a different context<sup>82</sup> by the beautiful parable of the barren fig tree, which the owner (God) would like to eradicate, but is, however, saved by the servant of the landlord.<sup>83</sup>

The scene of the "Cleansing of the Temple" is also reduced to a minimum (Luke 19:45–48). When Jesus enters the temple for the first

<sup>81</sup> After his death, his followers may very well have obliterated the purely halakhic explanation and stressed the apocalyptic potentiality of the scene, by connecting it to the fall of Jerusalem and to the expectation of the eon.

<sup>82</sup> Luke 13:6–9.

<sup>83</sup> Jesus himself? The new leaders of the "Christian church"? The Greek says: "the [man] in charge of the vineyard" (the vineyard is traditionally Israel, but here the meaning could encompass anyone, from the whole of humankind to the community of the believers, including Israel in an ethnic sense). This figure obtains a delay so that conversion is still possible. It seems that in Luke the teaching on the destiny of the fig tree switches from the polemical attitude towards Israel to a more general reflection on human sinfulness and repentance. Different from the other gospels, and possibly developing Pauline teaching, Lukan supersessionism is based more on continuity with Israel than on antagonism. Besides that of the fig tree, the disappearing of the "doves" is another example. How could Jesus throw the sellers of the doves out of the temple, since according to Luke 2:24 his own observant parents, when he was born, probably bought a pair of them from those sellers to be sacrificed for him?

time<sup>84</sup> on the first day, he immediately begins to “throw out those who were selling.” According to Luke, therefore, only “sellers” are involved in Jesus’ action. The possible buyers (the Jewish people?) are exempted from his wrath and no other human category is mentioned (nor are we told what the sellers were selling). Apparently to those sellers Jesus proclaims a contracted form of Isaiah 56:3 and Jeremiah 7:11: “It is written: And my house will be a house of prayer, but you made it into a den of robbers.” The allusion to the Gentiles has disappeared; the polemical discussion is now an intra-Jewish one and Jesus’ criticism is directed only against the “sellers.” His action does not seem to cause any reaction. Luke goes on, saying that Jesus “was teaching during the day in the temple”<sup>85</sup> and that only after such teaching the Jewish authorities, obviously hurt by Jesus’ criticism, “were trying to kill him,” but were not able to find the way, since “the whole people” were listening to his words.

### The Cleansing of the Temple in Matthew

Also according to Matthew 21:12–14, Jesus acts immediately after having entered the temple,<sup>86</sup> but the people who sell and buy seem to be only one category and certainly face the same criticism, since Matthew stresses that Jesus threw out “all” of them together. Tables and chairs suffer the same destiny as in Mark, but there are no “vases” carried through the temple. The OT quotation, as in Luke, does not mention any Gentile, but stresses that the adversaries of Jesus are

<sup>84</sup> Just in this context; see above, n. 47.

<sup>85</sup> The length of Jesus’ teaching in the temple remains undetermined; cf. 20:1 and 21:37 (here we learn that Jesus did not spend the nights in Bethany, but on the Mount of Olives).

<sup>86</sup> Matthew first has Jesus enter Jerusalem on a female ass and a colt together, so to fulfill a prophecy constructed from Isa. 62:11 and Zech. 9:9 (Matt. 21:1–9). Then, after noticing two opposite feelings, the negative one of “the whole city” (which is “shaken” as it was at the announcement of his birth: 21:10 and 2:3) and the positive one of “the crowds” (who salute him as a “prophet”: 21:11), Matthew depicts Jesus entering “the temple.” There he “threw out all those who were selling and buying in the temple and overturned the tables of the money-changers and the chairs of those who were selling the doves and told them: ‘It is written: “My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it into a den of robbers”,’ and blind and lame people came to him in the temple and he cured them.”

transforming the house into a den at that moment, in the present tense of the narration.

Unique to Matthew is the coming to Jesus of the blind and the lame, who are cured by him right “in the temple.”<sup>87</sup> The following confrontation with “high priests and scribes” is also described in a way that is peculiar to Matthew. It takes place when they see all “the wondrous things” that Jesus had just done and when they hear “the children scream in the temple and say: ‘Hosanna to the son of David’” (v. 15). When the authorities protest to Jesus, his answer, a quotation from Psalm 8:3 according to the LXX, offers the interpretive key to the whole scene: “Out of the mouths of infants and nurslings you have brought forth praise” (v. 16). Then Jesus can leave the temple and spend the night in Bethany (v. 17).

Matthew accepts the Markan point of departure: the temple has become a place for selling and buying, and it is not presently a house of prayer. The Gentiles are not yet in the picture, though,<sup>88</sup> but we are in the eschatological times, at least for Israel. Jesus is the Son of David,<sup>89</sup> and the blind and the lame are healed in the temple, where, finally, the children praise the Lord by recognizing the Davidic descentance of Jesus. In this way, the temple (mentioned in almost every sentence) is offered the possibility of going back to its original function of being the true house of prayer.

Unfortunately, this will not happen, as the withering of the fig tree shows.<sup>90</sup> The following explanation by Jesus doesn’t mention the “faithfulness” of God, but the necessity of “faith” in the prayers of

<sup>87</sup> They must, therefore, have entered it, although this seems quite improbable for purity reasons (the crippled beggar of Acts 3 does not seem to enter the temple until he is healed, and the same seems to happen with the blind man of John 9).

<sup>88</sup> This is in agreement with Matthew’s idea that the person we would call the historical Jesus came basically to save “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:6), while the mission to the Gentiles will be commissioned by the Resurrected Lord to the Eleven in Galilee (28:19).

<sup>89</sup> Matthew shows this from the opening of his narration: 1:1 plus the genealogy of 1:2–17 and the angelic recognition of the legal paternity of Joseph, “Son of David” (1:20).

<sup>90</sup> The morning after, when Jesus and his disciples come back to the temple, he sees a fruitless fig tree. Matthew does not mention that it was not the season for fruits, and therefore, the tree had no possible excuse not to bear fruits. That was *the* moment to show the fruits. The cursing of Jesus is directly against the tree: “May no fruit come from you any more until the eon.” And the fig tree dries up on the spot (Matt. 21:18).

the disciples. The withering of the tree, analogous to the throwing of the "mountain" into the "sea," keeps its strong apocalyptic dimension.<sup>91</sup> It must not be feared by the faithful, though. On the contrary, it can be the object of the prayer of any believer who has a true "faith."<sup>92</sup>

To sum up, Jesus is the eschatological figure who offers Israel a last chance to abandon its sinful way, represented by sellers and buyers inside the temple, and to choose the right path of free donation of grace, represented, among other passages, by the healing of the blind and the lame in the temple. This also allows the full and legal reconstitution of the cultic life (in the form of "praise" by children) and the reintroduction of the categories of the excluded Jews, including the children, in the economy of salvation.<sup>93</sup> But the refusal by the Jewish authorities to recognize Jesus will impede Israel from taking advantage of God's offer and will ultimately bring to an end the temple and its function in salvation history. Its destruction will become one of the eschatological signs of the beginning of the end (Matt. 24:2).

### The Cleansing of the Temple in John

In John the "Cleansing of the Temple" takes place not at the end of the public activity of Jesus, but at the beginning, when he goes to Jerusalem around "the Passover of the Jews."<sup>94</sup> Jesus finds "in the temple [men] who were selling oxen and sheep and doves and the money-changers who were sitting [there] and he made a whip out of cords and threw them all out of the temple, and the sheep and the oxen and spilled the

<sup>91</sup> See Rev. 19:21, mentioned above. It must also be noted that the verbs involved in the descriptions are all passive and may very well be *passiva divina*.

<sup>92</sup> This should be read in parallel with Matt. 24:15–22, where the Matthean Jesus, reinterpreting Mark 13:14–20, says that the prayer of the faithful can "shorten . . . those days" so that the "flight not be on winter or on the Sabbath." I explain this sentence as meaning that the faithful should pray to hasten the coming of the end, so that the great tribulation does not arrive at the scheduled end of time, the "winter" of the eon, which is the last day, "Sabbath," of the last "week" of salvation history; see E. Lupieri, "La fuga di sabato: Il mondo giudaico di Matteo, seguace di Gesù," *ASE* 20(1) (2003): 57–73.

<sup>93</sup> This was both a messianic sign and the subject of extended meditation in the early literary production of the followers of Jesus, especially Luke (see Luke 7:21–22/ Matt. 11:4–5; Acts 3:1–10; 8:26–39; and John 9), also because it was one among the theological and scriptural models for the introduction of Gentiles into the pact of Israel. For the exclusion of "under-age boys" see CD XV:16 or 1QM VII:3.

<sup>94</sup> John 2:13, apparently "many days" after the wedding of Cana (2:12).

money of the money-changers and overturned their tables and to those who sold the doves he said: 'Take them out of here and do not make [= stop making] my Father's house a market house [οἶκος ἐμπορίου]' (John 2:14–16).

Immediately afterward, quoting Psalm 69:9, John introduces the memory of the disciples and focuses on the "zeal" Jesus shows "for his house" (v. 17). This allows him to continue with a confrontation between Jesus and "the Jews" asking for a "sign," with Jesus uttering the famous sentence: "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up" (vv. 18–20). The concluding reflection again shifts the attention and the level of the theological discussion from the earthly temple of Jerusalem, the destiny of which appears to be relatively unimportant, to the "body" of Christ (vv. 21–22).

In spite of all the diversities, though, we can consider the passage as an additional proof of an ongoing discussion, at least among the believers, about the physical temple of Jerusalem. It had been transformed into a "market house," and this fact was in some way connected to its destruction.

### Money and the temple

Jesus' criticism of the use of money in the temple was part of his criticism against a mercantile ideology in religious matters that was putting the purity of the temple at risk. The early groups of Jesus' followers knew that he had spoken against "the merchants."<sup>95</sup> Once the temple was gone and its purity rules became obsolete, the criticism of the mercantile dimension of main-stream Judaism remained the basis for even more elaborate reflections on the proper way for attaining salvation, not only for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles.

<sup>95</sup> This should be clear not only from the canonical texts we discussed, but also from passages like the one I chose as a title and which, in spite of the verbal analogy with the canonical passages, comes from a different context in the Gospel of Thomas. It is at the end of the parable of the man inviting people to dinner (64; NHC 2, 44:11–33). The sentence has a strong Gnostic flavor: the "places" of the Father should denote the pleromatic level of spiritual perfection that cannot be reached by the psychical or ecclesiastical Christians excluded from the dinner. The ecclesiastical Christians are the new Jews, "businessmen and merchants." Still, it shows that even among Christian Gnostics there was a lively tradition about some sort of incompatibility between market mentality and salvation. An exception is the merchant of "beautiful pearls" in Matt. 13:45 (see above, n. 22).



In Matthew, these reflections apparently assume the aspect of a direct criticism of the use of money.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, while the Matthean Jesus is able to throw all the people selling and buying out of the temple, the only thing high priests and scribes or Pharisees or elders seem to be able to do effectively to try to combat Jesus is to use money, an act that appears related to deception. This is quite clear already at the end of Chapter 17 when, after the second prediction of the Passion, Matthew describes the discussion of Jesus and Peter about the temple tax. This passage has no parallel elsewhere in the NT and is written in a fantastical style that probably reflects Matthew's own intervention.<sup>97</sup> Matthew 17:24–27 has two main goals. One is to stress the special relationship existing between Jesus and Peter (one single coin suffices for both); the other is what interests us here. The money for the temple, in the concrete form of one *didrachma* per adult male (v. 24), was collected by envoys of the high priest during the month of Adar, the last before Nisan, the month of Passover. This must have been well known and therefore, apart from our uncertainty about the historical basis of the scene, the authority that is criticized by Matthew is the temple authority. Matthew says that “the kings of the earth” do not

<sup>96</sup> The use of money is implicit in the parable of the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1–13), which is only Matthean and strongly connected with our discussion. The foolish virgins, not having enough oil, can still go to the “sellers” and “buy” some (even if it is after “midnight”), but their buying is useless. This should mean that the non-believing Israel keeps its habit of buying/selling salvation, even in the dark of the night or when the bridegroom is already there, but it is useless. The text as it is seems to be constructed by Matthew using literary material similar to Mark 13:33–37; Luke 12:35–38, 40 and 13:25–28. The cultural context is strangely polygamous: there is no bride for the groom, but the ten virgins. The five wise ones “entered with him into the wedding and the door was closed,” the “remaining” five stayed outside and were not “known” by the groom.

<sup>97</sup> It may very well be a diptych of the Synoptic discussion on the “coin for the [Roman] poll-tax” of Matt. 22:15–22 (see Mark 12:13–17 and Luke 20:20–26). There the discussion involves a Roman *denarius* bearing the picture and the name of “Caesar.” Here we have a coin for the temple (see below, n. 100). Recent studies add the extreme scarcity of *denarii* in Jerusalem before the war of 70 CE to the fact that there is no other evidence of the existence in Palestine of a Roman poll-tax (*census*, to be paid with a Roman coin, as Matthew says?) in the years of Jesus, and draw the conclusion that the discussion about Caesar's *denarius* is also historically improbable: Udoh, *To Caesar What is Caesar's*, esp. 207–43. This may very well be the case, but it is a good rule to think that the absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence.

take taxes<sup>98</sup> from “their own sons/children.” This means that (a) Jesus and Peter are “sons/children” of the taxing authorities, and that (b) the behavior of temple authorities is wrong, being worse than that of “the kings of the earth.” The “sonship” may refer to the real (spiritual?) descent from Abraham (see Matt. 3:9), while the earthly kings are under the power of Satan, as proved by Matthew 4:8.<sup>99</sup> This means that the high priests, asking for money from the sons/children of Israel, are worse than the representatives of Satan on earth. Why? The basic idea is again that salvation cannot be sold, but only donated freely. In particular, the religious duty of the Jewish authorities is to offer salvation to the people, and the Jewish people, in general, are expected to bring salvation to the whole world, for free.<sup>100</sup>

Matthew's version of Judas' story is paradigmatic of the habit of Jewish religious authorities of selling and acquiring everything with money. While Mark 14:11 says that the high priests with “joy” promise Judas they will give him “some money” (ἀργύριον; same as Luke 22:5), Matthew develops the well-known story of the “thirty pieces of silver”

<sup>98</sup> Matthew uses two different words for “taxes”: τέλη, which are the taxes collected by the tax-collectors (τελώναι), and κῆσος, although what it could mean at the beginning of the first century CE in Palestine is not clear (Udoh, *To Caesar What is Caesar's*, 225f.). In any case, Matthew's words are very generic, refer to foreign kings and kingdoms (not only or necessarily the Romans), aim at comparing the temple tax to a foreign poll tax, and seem to describe the time of Matthew more than that of Jesus.

<sup>99</sup> Even more, “kings” usually presented themselves as the human dimension of a god, but for a believing Jew this was nothing else than a fallen angel, which is Satan.

<sup>100</sup> And not with money, the purity of which, after all, could be the object of discussions. It should be noticed that, in our context, Jesus not only does not have the coin, but does not even touch it (acting in the same way he was going to act with the Roman *denarius*; see above, n. 97) after Peter finds it in the mouth of the fish. That coin, since it pays for two, is explicitly called a *stater* (v. 27), which is a *tetradrachma* or, again in this case, the silver Tyrian coin officially used in the temple! Further, Matthew doesn't have any parallel to Mark 12:41–44/Luke 21:1–4, the scene of “the widow's mite,” where the collection of money as offering to the treasury of the temple (γαζοφυλάκιον) could have been interpreted by him as having a positive religious value (but see above, n. 56). Matthew's only explicit mention of the temple treasure, for which he uses the Semitic word *korbanās*, is very critical: Matt. 27:6 (Mark 7:11 uses *korban*, but Matt. 15:5 has only δῶρον, which, in the other contexts, means “religious offering, sacrifice”: Matt. 5:23f.; 8:4; 23:18f. and cf. 2:11).

(26:15; 27:3–9).<sup>101</sup> According to the narrative, Judas asks the high priests for money and they assign him the sum; he accepts (Matt. 25:14ff.), but, after the betrayal, he “repents” and brings the money back to the high priests (and elders); they refuse to accept the money; Judas throws it “in the temple”; they “take” the money, which they handle as a freewill offering,<sup>102</sup> but cannot put it in the treasury (*korbanās*; see above), because of its sanctity. At the end, all the authorities apparently gather together again and decide to use the money for a merciful act.<sup>103</sup>

Matthew’s irony is merciless. Independently from historical plausibility and biblical foundation in the story, here the Jewish authority is a typically Matthean example of hypocrisy, even as they do their best to protect the temple from contamination and to use that money in a correct way.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>101</sup> Matthew never says whether those silver coins were Roman *denarii* or Tyrian *stateres*. If the latter be the case, independently from any historical plausibility that high priests used temple money for such transactions, the Matthean criticism would be simply ferocious.

<sup>102</sup> In the case of animals to be sacrificed, the norms for free-will offerings were slightly less rigid than those for other kinds of sacrifices. According to Lev. 22:18–23 even animals with something “superfluous or lacking” in their limbs could be offered (which was otherwise forbidden). 2 Kings 12:4f. states that King Joash allowed the priests to use the “money” received as a free-will offering for the repairs of the temple (in the age of Joash there probably was no coined money; the text possibly refers to offerings in silver or gold).

<sup>103</sup> They establish a cemetery for the foreigners: Matt. 27:3–10.

<sup>104</sup> There must have been an ongoing halakhic discussion on free-will offerings. The Essenes were stricter than others: “Concerning the regulation for freewill-offerings. No-one should dedicate anything, obtained by unjust means, to the altar. Neither should the [pr]iests take from Israel [anything obtained by unjust means]” (CD XVI:13f. (García Martínez and Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, I, 565)). This position is coherent with the Essenic idea that even what we would call “ethical sin” causes some sort of contamination. The ideas reflected in Matt. 27 are more specifically connected with the possibility that money can be contaminated and become contaminating, especially for the sanctity of the temple (which had the highest standard of purity). Deut. 23:19 (“Thou shall not bring the hire of a whore or the price of a dog into the house of the Lord thy God for any vow”) proves that the gain from any illegal sexual activity (dogs are probably male prostitutes, and in any case “dogs” were deemed incompatible with the sanctity of the temple and priestly purity: see above, n. 29) could not be brought into the treasury of the temple. On this subject we have an interesting and famous tradition, attributed to R. Eliezer, according to which, he had a discussion with a disciple of Jesus in Sepphoris, a certain “James.” The disciple reports the idea of Jesus that it is possible to use money offered by a prostitute to

The question, therefore, is again the same: who really protects the temple from contamination and who contaminates it?

This whole scene with Judas constitutes a kind of preparation for the last appearance of the high priests, together with the elders, in this gospel. After the resurrection of Jesus, some of the guards “announce to the high priests all that had happened” (Matt. 28:11). The fact is quite exceptional: pagan soldiers of the Roman army “announce”<sup>105</sup> “all” that happened to the highest Jewish authorities. They gather together again and decide to give “sufficient money” (ἀργύρια ἰκανά: again pieces of silver) to the soldiers to convince them to tell the famous lie about the disciples stealing the body of Jesus. This originates a false *logos* which still circulates “among the Jews” at the time of Matthew (28:12–15). In this way the Jewish authorities not only do not accept the good news brought by the pagan soldiers and believe, but, thanks to their use of money, they impede the possible salvation of the pagans

build a latrine for the high priest (impure money for an impure goal: see the discussions in the *Baraita* and *Tosefta* to AZ 16b–19b; see also D. Boyarin, “The Talmud Meets Church History,” *Diacritics* 28(2) (1998): 59f. According to Matt. 27:6 the reason that the high priests cannot bring Judas’ money into the treasury is that it is the “price of blood” (τιμὴ αἵματος). This is possibly an expansion (to blood-related impurity) of the Deuteronomic rule originally conceived for a sex-related impurity (the hire/price of a harlot/“dog”). In both cases, the decision to keep the money out of the treasury reflects a halakhic thinking according to which an impure/sinful activity somehow contaminates the money acquired through that activity. I don’t have precise rabbinic parallels, but I think this interpretation of “Judas’ money” most probably originated among early followers of Jesus, since it is true that “blood . . . of a dead man” contaminates (e.g. Rev. 16:3). Note, however, that (a) at the precise moment of the scene, Jesus is still alive, and (b) we can presume that any high priest would have considered the execution of Jesus perfectly justifiable, which would at least have excluded any idea of “sinful” behavior connected with the acquisition of that money. Curiously enough, in the years Matthew was composing his gospel, a complementary legend originated in Rome, according to which *pecunia non olet*, “money doesn’t stink.” The Emperor Vespasian, as a matter of fact, reintroduced the (originally Neronian) *vectigal urinae*, a tax on collection of urine from public urinals (still called today *vepasiiani* in Italian, and *vespasiennes* in French), when carried out for commercial purposes (such as professional tanning, or whitening of wool). When Titus protested, Vespasian invited him to smell a gold coin obtained thanks to that tax and pronounced the sentence, which immediately became proverbial, as related both by Suetonius (*Vesp.* XXIII) and Dio Cassius (LXVI, 14). In this way the famously greedy emperor refuses any connection, ethical or purity-related, between money and the way it is obtained.

<sup>105</sup> It is the same verb, ἀπαγγέλλω, used for announcing the resurrection on two other occasions in the immediate context: Matt. 28:8 and 10.

(who already knew "all that had happened" and had begun to "announce" it) and also that of their own people.

The whole scene, then, is another example of "blind guides of blind men" (Matt. 15:14), who do not save themselves and impede the salvation of others, in this case, both Jews and pagans.<sup>106</sup>

### Conclusion

Monetary standardization, as variously attempted by the Roman Empire, doesn't seem to have had a deep impact on Jewish Palestine before 70 CE. In the texts we have analyzed, all discussions and any criticism of market mentality, as well as use of money, are based on theological or ecclesiological motivations. This seems to apply to traditions that may bear the memory of the actual preaching of Jesus as well as to the reflections developed in the groups of his early followers. We do find traces, though, of discomfort with wealth and with rich people, who are actual or possible members of the community. The mercantile society, with its mobility, especially by boat, is notably depicted as external to early Christianity by the author of Revelation. Various aspects of that society are chosen to describe a godless world, where people can get rich, but are allied to the satanic forces that oppose the true faith.<sup>107</sup> Among the gospels, Matthew is the one who appears to be in many respects close to Revelation, but, like John of Patmos, he does not directly criticize the actual, everyday activity of merchants. His point is directed towards the market mentality applied (by the other Jews) to the religious reality and to salvation, which had been donated by God in the past to Israel and now, through the free and gratuitous self-donation of Jesus on the cross, to everybody.

Possibly in Jesus' preaching, and probably in the early Christian mission, the stress on donation and self-donation may have been

<sup>106</sup> See esp. Matt. 23:13 and 14 and the passages already quoted above. In the final part of his gospel, Matthew is claiming the right to the mission among both Jews and Gentiles for his own church, the one which recognizes the authority of Peter and of the Eleven, not for Paul (who is not in the picture) or his church. Therefore the whole scene may also have a polemical value against other groups inside early Christianity.

<sup>107</sup> The use of metaphorical language of wealth/poverty, buying/selling, acceptance/refusal of money shows that the NT authors have absorbed the language of the mercantile society they live in, even when they use it to depict internal religious polemics.

presented or understood as an alternative to an economy based on a selling/buying mentality.<sup>108</sup> Certainly, if practiced by everyone in everyday life, the substitution of any market mentality with a "gift ideology" would have brought the existing social system to its "implosion."<sup>109</sup>

In order to realize the ideal, though, it might have been necessary to attend the *parousia*. 2 Thess. seems to handle groups of believers who were worried about its so-called delay.<sup>110</sup> On the other hand, Revelation 3:17f. shows that most "Christians" at Laodicea, like the other Jews, were on their way towards integration, and maybe assimilation, into their social and religiously tolerant surrounding world.<sup>111</sup> Their "wealth" was still, for John, the sign of the temporary victory of Satan, but by the end of the first century, radical positions appear to be in the minority, at least among the believers in Asia Minor. Later the Great Church, turning into a worldwide institution, was able to marginalize any existing apocalyptic trends and/or organize the most radical Christian positions into special ecclesiastical structures (monasticism, missionary activity, etc.). The potentially revolutionary dimension of Christian utopia remained embedded in the Scriptures, ready to feed, through the centuries, periodic social Christian upheavals. But that is another story.

<sup>108</sup> In a slave society, though, self-donation presupposes the acceptance of slavery for oneself (see e.g., Phil. 2:6-11) and therefore not even the concept of slavery was contested on a social basis, as proved by Philemon.

<sup>109</sup> From what I understand, this may not have been the main subject of Jesus' preaching, but a very logical consequence. This would have marked the beginning of the "millennium" and/or of the "end of the world/aeon." But since it did not come to pass in those years, the social dimension of the idea may have become more and more secondary in the course of NT redaction.

<sup>110</sup> I would like to stress that the expectation of a *parousia* already shows that most followers of Jesus believed that it was not possible to realize the worldly dimension of his message without his second coming.

<sup>111</sup> "Because you say: I am rich, and I have become rich, and I have need of nothing. And you do not know that you are the wretched one and the pitiable and beggarly and blind and naked; I advise you to buy from me gold fired in fire, so that you may become rich . . ."