



The Impatient Jesus and the Fig Tree: Marcan Disguised Discourse against the Temple

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Abstract

In this article I propose an interpretation of the Marcan fig tree episode (Mark 11:12–14, 20–25) in its final form that draws on a vegetable metaphor widely known in Antiquity, and highlights the connection between the episode and the temple scene (Mark 11:15–19) that divides it. This interpretation addresses the problem posed by the narrator’s commentary in verse 13d and makes of it a key element to understand the Marcan Jesus’ attitude towards the temple. With the aid of James C. Scott’s work on resistance discourse of subordinated groups, I show that this text, together with the other Marcan references to the temple’s destruction, belong to one type of Scott’s resistance discourse, and deduce some implications for the social setting of the Gospel of Mark.

Key words: disguised discourse, dominant group, fig tree, Gospel of Mark, James C. Scott, social setting, subordinated group, temple

The Marcan fig tree episode (11:12–14, 20–25) that describes Jesus’ double encounter with a fig tree during his last days in Jerusalem poses a number of serious exegetical problems. Some of these problems have to do with the nature of its relationship to the temple scene (11:15–19) that interrupts the narrative flow of the episode. Given the weight that such a scene necessarily has on any assessment of the Marcan Jesus’ attitude towards the temple, the interpretation given to the fig tree episode might have more far reaching consequences for that important issue than a quick uncritical reading of it might suggest.

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

¹⁵And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons; ¹⁶and he would not allow anyone to carry any vessels through the tem-

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ple. ¹⁷And he taught and said to them, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers.” ¹⁸And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and sought a way to destroy him; for they feared him, because the multitude was astonished at his teaching. ¹⁹And when evening came, they went out of the city.

²⁰As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. ²¹And Peter remembered and said to him, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.” ²²And Jesus answered them, “Have faith in God. ²³Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. ²⁴Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. ²⁵And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.”

The most obvious problem for understanding the fig tree episode is Jesus’ apparently disproportionate reaction against the tree in his first encounter with it. Moreover, the disconcerting character of Jesus’ behavior is further highlighted by the narrator’s statement to the effect that “it was not the season for figs” (v 13d)—an observation that seems otherwise consistent with the narrative context of the episode, which takes place some days before Passover, that is, in early Spring. If it was not the season for figs, why did Jesus become so upset? Why did he curse the fig tree in such deadly terms? By giving a natural explanation for the lack of fruit in the tree, the narrator makes Jesus’ behavior even more unreasonable.

Some New Testament scholars have tried to save Jesus’ mental and moral integrity by adducing that the time for figs referred to in v 13d is the principal season for figs, which in Palestine extends from mid-June to early September, and that what Jesus was looking for were not regular figs, but winter figs or early spring edible buds (Evans: 155; Gnilka 1993: 143; Oakman: 253–72). According to those scholars, Jesus’ disappointment was caused, not by not finding regular figs, but by finding nothing at all except leaves. Even though such a hypothesis renders Jesus’ behavior a little less perplexing, it does not justify the magnitude of his frustration and the hostility of his words. Moreover, as someone with a rural background, Jesus had to have known that the prospect of finding something edible in a fig tree at Passover time was very small.

Jesus’ behavior in the second part of the episode is no less bizarre than in the first. His reaction to Peter’s remark at the fate of the tree suggests that he regards its withering as a practical illustration of the efficacy of faith in prayer (vv 20–24). But this implies that the words “may no one ever eat from you again” (v 14b) are not to be considered a curse but a confident prayer to God! According to this disconcerting assumption, the death of the tree is not the result of Jesus’ extraordinary power, but God’s positive answer to his apparently unreasonable prayer. Therefore, the seeming irrationality of Jesus’ uncanny words against the fig tree in the first part of the episode projects serious doubts about God’s rationality and fairness in the second.

But the question that most scholars have addressed to the fig tree episode is the reason why it is structured as it is, with the temple scene intercalated in the middle of it. Although the intercalation of scenes is a literary technique frequently used in oral narrative to connect different story themes (Collins: 524–25), a significant number of New Testament scholars think that its frequent use in the Gospel of Mark has also clear semantic implications (Edwards: 193–216). According to Brown, “intercalation stands as an invitation to read the framed episode in the light of the frame episode and vice versa,” a technique that, in some cases, allows the discovery of deeper or symbolic meaningful relations between them (Brown: 78–79).

In our case, the dissimilarity between the narrative contents of the frame and the central scene strongly suggests that, if they are related, their relationship cannot be but symbolic or metaphoric. As it is, most commentators follow this suggestion, and propose symbolic interpretations of the fig tree episode that relate, in some way or another, the withering of the tree with the fate of the Jerusalem temple or the Jewish nation (Gasparro; Marcus 2009: 788–90; Collins: 462–63; Focant: 422); Moloney: 227; Donahue & Harrington: 331–32; Evans: 151–54; Meier: 887–89; Hooker: 261).

One of the interpretations that does make sense of v 13d, and that has been adopted by many symbolic exegeses of the fig tree episode, is that of Lohmeyer (133–36). This author draws on certain Old Testament and Jewish traditions that linked the eschatological or Messianic age with an extraordinary fructification of plants. According to him, the reason why the fig tree was destroyed is that it did not alter its natural ways to receive Jesus, remaining fruitless in the face of the coming Messiah. For those that use Lohmeyer’s idea within a symbolic pattern of interpretation, the destruction of the tree

represents the eschatological punishment deserved by the Jewish religious institution or the Jewish people—represented by the temple—for not having recognized Jesus as the Messiah. The greatest weakness of this approach is that it does not justify why the Marcan Jesus explains what happened to the tree along totally different lines, as the outcome of faithful prayer (vv 20–24) (Gundry: 676–77; Esler: 50–51).

There are, indeed, some commentators who reject symbolic interpretations, arguing that the only reason suggested in the Marcan narrative for Jesus' action against the tree is to illustrate his later teaching about the power of faith in prayer (Branscomb: 206; Esler: 57–58). Yet, these authors have a lot of trouble explaining why the gospel narrative discontinues the expected development of Jesus' pedagogic performance by disrupting it with the temple scene, which is completely alien to the instruction's topic. Moreover, they do not completely eliminate the sense of inadequacy that Jesus' behavior engenders in the mind of any reader or listener of the Gospel. If Jesus wanted to prove the efficacy of faith in prayer, there were indeed many more straightforward ways of doing it than praying for the death of a fig tree because it bore no fruit out of season.

Although the interpretation that will be argued in this article also draws on symbolism, it has two significant advantages over those mentioned above. In the first place, the symbols on which it is based belong to a widely known metaphor in Antiquity. But most important, with the help of this metaphor we can understand Jesus' exhortations about prayer as an explanation of what happened with the tree and relate it meaningfully with both the temple scene and the disconcerting narrator's observation in v 13d.

The two next sections of the article deal with the clues that underlie the symbolism of the fig tree episode and its connection to the Marcan Jesus' stance towards the temple. In the two final ones I discuss the reasons why the Gospel of Mark used this type of symbolic discourse for dealing with that issue.

The Images of Fruitless and Destroyed Plants as Traditional Moral Symbols

When we look at ancient Jewish and Near Eastern literary traditions for symbolic usages of fruitless or destroyed plants, we are almost overwhelmed by their number and variety. This is not a surprise, as we are dealing with an agricultural civilization.

Yet, the fig tree episode connects the fruitlessness of the tree and its withering in a very specific way: the plant is sen-

tenced to destruction by Jesus' curse because it does not bear the fruit Jesus expected from it. This connection echoes an actual well known agricultural practice: If a cultivated plant does not bear the expected fruit, the best the farmer can do is to get rid of it. It does not deserve any more care or expenditures; it does not even deserve the ground on which it stands, which can be used to grow something else or be left fallow to feed the cattle (see Luke 13: 6–9).

Such, is precisely the situation depicted in Isaiah 5:1–7:

¹Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. ²He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. ³And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? ⁵And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. ⁶I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briers and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. ⁷For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but behold, a cry!

In this poetic song, Israel is represented by a vine and God by its owner. The prophet assumes the role of the owner's friend and tells the sorrow and anger of a farmer who has taken care of his vine in the best possible way, only to obtain sour grapes from it. He also announces the destructive actions his friend will take in retaliation against the vine. The prophetic message is that God will behave in an analogous manner towards Israel since it has not produced the moral fruits that God expected from it.

The rest of Isaiah's fifth chapter strongly suggests that the prophet is directing this parable, not to the whole people of Israel, but only to the powerful ones—to those that had enough power to join house to house (v 8) and enough wealth to feast with music and wine (v 11–12). Another example of this restrictive application of the metaphor to the powerful is found in Ezekiel 19:10–14, where the vine is said to refer only to the princes of Israel (Ezekiel 19:1).

Another parable of a fruitless tree, found in some late recensions of the *Story of Ahicar* offers additional evidence of the widespread use of the traditional metaphoric topic built on the correspondences furnished above. The parable is part of the answer with which Ahicar rejects his nephew's request for forgiveness. It is found at the end of the story, when the wise scribe Ahicar discovers that the nephew he had adopted as a son has plotted against his life.

My son, you are like a tree that bore no fruit, although it stood by the water; and its owner was obliged to cut it down. And it said to him: Transplant me, and if ever then I bear no fruit, cut me down. But its owner said to it: When you stood by the water you bore no fruit; how then will you bear fruit if you stand in another place? [Ahicar 7: 46–47; English text from Jeremias: 135]

In this instance, the person represented by the fruitless tree has had the privileges of a good education and the social advantages of his uncle's support. Accordingly, the expectations put on him were higher than those on commoners. For this reason, his disappointing behavior is thought to deserve an especially harsh punishment and to allow no mercy. This conception of justice has its metaphoric correspondence in the notion that the more valuable a plant's species is and the more care it has received, the more entitled the owner is to expect a good crop from it. See, for example, Daniel 4:19–22 and Ezekiel 31:1–13 where kings are depicted as high and beautiful trees that are cut down as punishment for their haughty behavior.

Hebrew Scriptures appropriated this symbolic pattern to express Israel's special relationship with its God. In these sacred texts and in Jewish ancient literature generally, the image of the fruitless or unproductive plant is most often applied to the whole people of Israel, or to its political and religious leaders. It functions as the negative counterpart of the pervading metaphor of Israel as God's chosen plantation, or as the first-fruits of his fields. These two metaphors are based on the central premise of Israel's self-understanding. According to that premise, God preferred Israel among all other nations to maintain with it a privileged relationship based on love, trustfulness and fidelity. He protected and benefited Israel in exchange for its promise to love and obey him as its only god. But, since the very beginning, Israel has repeatedly defrauded God's expectations. In metaphoric terms, it has failed to produce the fruits that God expected from it. Therefore, it is constantly threatened with divine condemnation to harsh punishment

or destruction (see: Numbers 24:5–6; Isaiah 5:1–7; 27:2–5; Jeremiah 2:3, 21; 11:15–17; 12:10; Ezekiel 17:1–8, 22–23; 19:10–14; Hosea 9:10; 10:1; 14:6–7; Psalms 80:8–16).

In the New Testament, the image of God's chosen plant or plantation most frequently represents the faithful in Christ, who are metaphorically encouraged to yield good fruit (Rom 7:4–5; 2 Cor 9:10; Gal 6:7–9; Phil 1:11; Jas 3:18). Nevertheless, the representation of the punishment deserved by morally wanting people as the destruction of fruitless plants is also very conspicuous (see, e.g., Matt 7:19; Luke 13:6–9).

The traditional metaphorical pattern of the plant that deserves destruction because it has not yielded the expected fruit works under the obvious assumption that the punishment will take place in the appropriate season, when the fruits of its kind reach maturity, and farmers collect them. Therefore, whenever mentioned or referred to implicitly, the time of the collection symbolizes the time of judgment.

Jesus' explanation of the parable of the weeds in Matthew 13:36–43 affords a good illustration of how this symbolism works: The wheat stands for the children of the kingdom, the unproductive weeds for the children of the evil one (v 38), and the time of the harvest for the end of the age (v 40), when evil doers, who in this instance are represented, not by a fruitless plant, but by an unproductive crop, will be punished.

Other relevant texts that clearly assume the same metaphorical pattern are Luke 3:9 (// Matthew 3:10), Galatians 6:7–9, Philippians 1:1, James 3:18, and Hebrews 6:4–8.

As the above instances show, in the cultural context of ancient Judaism and New Testament literature, the symbol of the destroyed fruitless plant can be considered a well-known metaphor referring to individuals or human groups that deserve punishment because of their moral inadequacy. Therefore, it can be assumed that Jesus' disciples in the Marcan narrative, and the intended audience of the Gospel of Mark were well acquainted with it (for further instances and nuances of this metaphor see Miquel). This acquaintance would predispose them to interpret Jesus' cursing of the fig tree in 11:12–14 as a symbolic message somehow related to the moral condemnation of a socially relevant individual or group. Moreover, the straightforward metaphoric correlation between the season of figs and God's judgment, together with the narrator's comment in v 13d, would make that audience aware of the one awkward feature in Jesus' symbolic condemnation: that it was pronounced without waiting for that judgment.

The Meaning of the Fig Tree Episode in Its Narrative Context

Although the intercalation of the temple scene in the middle of the fig tree episode suggests a meaningful relationship between them, the literary structure cannot by itself disclose further specifications. However, the metaphor of the destroyed fruitless plant, which I assume underlies Jesus' dealing with the fig tree, offers important clues to interpret both texts and the meaning of their connection.

To begin with, we note that the fig tree cannot stand for the temple, as some scholars have suggested (Boring: 319; Gasparro: 415–16). It has to stand for a moral subject, that is, a human being or a human group.

Moreover, the realization that Jesus' curse against the fig tree was a symbolic condemnation would alert the Marcan disciples, and the Gospel's original audience, to any hint that could reveal the real target of such an action. Jesus' subsequent behavior in the temple (vv 15–19) would enable them to identify this target with those responsible for what Jesus denounces as a corrupt way of running the religious institution.

Such identification is supported at a narrative level by the timeliness of the information advanced in v 11: "And he entered into Jerusalem, and went into the temple; and when he had looked round at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve." Indeed, this apparently irrelevant verse, which marks the end of Jesus' ascent to Jerusalem (11:1–11), offers a bit of information without which Jesus' symbolic curse against the fig tree would be narratively unmotivated. According to the Gospel of Mark, the visit to the temple recorded in v 11 was the only opportunity Jesus had to get disappointed with the workings of the religious institution before his encounter with the fruitless tree. Were it not for this visit, the Marcan Jesus could not have thought of using that encounter to express symbolically his moral indignation with such practices (Gasparro: 418; Telford: 44–46).

In v 17 Jesus combines two prophetic oracles (Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11) to endorse two significant claims:

- that God's intended function for the temple was to be a house of prayer for all the nations, and
- that those whom Jesus is presently accusing have distorted this original function of the temple by using it as a den of robbers.

Though the text does not make explicit their identity, the reaction of the chief priests and the scribes to Jesus' words implies

that they saw themselves as the target of his accusation (v 18). On the opposite side, the people who wondered at Jesus' words were not supposed to be included in that target as, at this point of the Gospel's plot, they were still expected to back him in any conflict with the authorities (Marcus 2009: 790; Evans :154).

Although the application of the metaphor of the fruitless tree to our text is independent of the specific grounds on which the Marcan Jesus made the accusation, the data furnished by the description of his behavior in the temple suggest a plausible answer to this important question.

In the first place, the term "robbers" in v 17 strongly suggests that such grounds might have something to do with the unfair appropriation of goods or money. Secondly, if we look at Jesus' actions in the context of what we know about religious routines in the Jerusalem temple, we will realize that most of them amount to frustrating the efficacy of sacrificial offerings.

Indeed, the prohibition to sacrifice outside the Jerusalem temple, together with priestly inspection for blemishes or impurities, forced people to buy their sacrificial victims in the temple itself, probably in its outer court (Gasparro: 420; for the historicity of these practices see Philo, *Special Laws*: 1.166ff; Sanders 1984: 63–65). In such a setting, Jesus' driving out buyers and sellers and overturning the chairs of those selling doves amount to nothing less than obstructing sacrificial offerings from the start (Gasparro: 422–24). His disallowing the transportation of baskets or vessels through the temple also makes sense as a further effort to stop the sacrifices of those who were bringing birds or vegetable offerings. It is interesting to note here that these two last types of obstruction would affect especially the poor, since the Law allowed them to substitute doves and vegetables for more expensive sacrificial victims (Leviticus 5:7, 11; 12:8; 14:21–22).

Moreover, Jesus' disruption of the activity of the money changers seems aimed at preventing people from making their annual contribution to the temple's maintenance. This contribution had to be paid in silver Tyrian shekels, a highly valued currency poor people did not use in their daily life (*Mishnah B'rachot* 8.7; Mann: 448; Marcus 2009: 782; Sanders 1992: 243). Thus, they were forced to use the service of the money changers, which probably meant paying an extra charge for the transaction.

The one hypothesis regarding the meaning of the Marcan Jesus' behavior that accounts for all the data in vv 15–19 is that he rejected the commercialization of people's cultic rela-

tion with God, mainly because of its impact on the economy of the poor. This hypothesis is further supported by 7:9–13 and 12:40, two statements by Jesus which show his anger at the negative effects that the economic dimension of certain pious practices had on poor people's lives. The scene that follows the second statement (12:41–44), in which Jesus comments on a destitute widow's gift to the temple, is a little ambiguous. Yet it can be read as an illustration of the type of circumstance that would annoy him: that of poor people who suffer deprivation for piety's sake (Wright; Mann: 493–96; Sugirtharajah). Thus, if according to the Marcan Jesus' views, the commercialization of piety was illegitimate, the money that flowed into the temple through the contribution to its maintenance and the practice of sacrifice was also so, and the temple could be aptly compared to a den of robbers.

In sum, since the metaphoric referent of the fig tree is to be found in the text immediately following Jesus' first encounter with it, it must be the chief priests and the scribes, for they are the only characters accused by Jesus while in the temple. This conclusion assimilates Jesus' use of the metaphor with that variant of it in which the social status of the condemned subjects is specially highlighted. The power and prestige enjoyed by these privileged groups increase their guilt before God and society, for they have defrauded the social and divine expectations attached to their office.

While the temple scene has allowed us to identify the target of Jesus' performed metaphor, his second encounter with the fig tree will disclose further aspects of its message, in particular, the full meaning and subtle implications of v 13d. As we noted previously, Jesus' surprising answer to Peter's remark at the sight of the dead tree insinuates that his curse in v 14 was not actually a curse, but a confident prayer, and that the death of the tree was God's answer to such a disturbing petition. Moreover, to the likely surprise and delight of the Marcan audience, he encourages his disciples to try themselves the efficacy of faith in prayer by telling "this mountain" to be cast into the sea. As "this mountain" has to be a nearby mountain, the most fitting candidate is the temple mount that Jesus and his disciples have just abandoned (Marcus 2009: 785; Borings: 324–25; Hooker: 269–70; Telford: 170).

In ancient Judaism, priestly offices were exclusively attached to the exclusive cult in the Jerusalem temple. Therefore, the disappearance of the temple mount with the temple on it, by sinking into the sea or by any other means, would mean the social death of the Jerusalem priesthood. Conse-

quently, the suggestion the Marcan Jesus makes to his disciples that they try the efficacy of prayer by praying confidently for the disappearance of this mountain, can be understood as the humorously veiled expression of his ill will towards the chief priests, to whom he wishes the loss of their "temple-den" as punishment for their wrongdoings.

Jesus' insistence on prayer as the means to obtain that wish, together with the insinuation that his curse was actually a faithful prayer, can be taken as clues to the gist of v 13d in this knotty text. According to them, Jesus acknowledges God as the only one who can punish the guilty, which implies that the only way to forward God's punishing intervention is to pray for it. This is why, after realizing the perverted workings of the temple (v 11), Jesus decides to launch a disguised prayer campaign to move God to punish those accountable for it as soon as possible, without having to await any future judgment. Jesus' action against the fig tree sets the stage for such a campaign by pointing symbolically to the culprits and showing that God will grant whatever the disciples may ask in faithful prayer, even if it means destroying a healthy fig tree before harvest time (v 13d).

The remainder of Jesus' teaching by the withered tree (v 25) focuses on the topic of the forgiveness of sins: "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses."

There is a widely held opinion that this verse has nothing to do with the fig tree episode, having been attached to the preceding instructions only because it shares with them the topic of prayer (Schmithals: 503; Telford: 53). I contend, however, that v 25 is an ironic proffer, on the part of Jesus, of a solution to the problem that the disappearance of the temple would pose to the Jewish practice of expiation.

Indeed, one of the most important functions of sacrifice in Israelite cult was expiation for sins (Lev 4–5, 16). As the Jerusalem temple was the only place where official Judaism allowed sacrifice, if the temple was to exist no more, conservative Jews might worry about the effect of its disappearance on Israel's access to God's forgiveness (for evidence of Jewish concern about this problem see Dowd: 47–51). In this context, the gist of Jesus' ironic instruction to his disciples in v 25 is that they need not be anxious about God hearing their prayer and letting the temple sink into the sea because there is an alternative way of obtaining divine forgiveness of sins that goes without temple, without sacrifice and without priests (Marcus 2009: 788–89; Gasparro: 459). It requires only

forgiving those who trespass against us.

If we consider that most sentences in vv 20–25 are very close to devout traditional sayings probably known by the Marcan audiences (1 Cor 13:2, Matt 17:19–20; 21:21, Luke 17:5–6, *Gospel of Thomas* 48, 106, Q 11:9–10, Matt 18:19; 21:22, John 14:13–14; 15:7, 16c; 16:23b, 24b, Jas 1:5–6, 5:14–15, Matt 6:14), the ironic and humorous character of Jesus' instructions might have resounded even more strongly in their ears. Through pious language and familiar formulae, the Marcan Jesus manages to share with them his impatient longing for the disappearance of his own nation's most sacred place.

Disguised Discourse about the Temple in the Gospel of Mark

The interpretation of the Marcan fig tree episode argued for in this article uncovers a hostile and critical message deliberately disguised by symbolism, irony and ambiguity. In both encounters with the tree, Jesus makes use of metaphorical images and pious exhortations consecrated by Israel's tradition to express in a subtle way that, if it was in his power, the temple would have already disappeared.

In 11:12–25 ambiguity is pervasive. The Marcan Jesus never declares in an explicit way that he yearns for the temple's disappearance, nor does the narrator attribute such a desire to him. Therefore, no one among the characters that belong to the Gospel narrative, nor among its real audience, can accurately accuse him of wishing for the end of the temple. Yet, the text offers enough hints for us to infer such a conclusion.

Jesus' wish that the religious authorities be punished straightaway with the loss of the temple is disguised by means of various discursive techniques that point to the operation of an intentional strategy for veiling communication: symbolic words and actions, critical use of traditional moral metaphors, harsh accusations in the form of scriptural quotations, and pious exhortations loaded with provocative proposals.

In this section I want to reflect on the type of discourse that the Marcan Jesus and the Marcan narrator use to disguise their messages about the temple. My aim here is to assess the communicative function of this type of discourse and the sociocultural circumstances that could have prompted its usage in the Gospel of Mark. In doing this, I will seek guidance in James C. Scott's work on resistant discourse by subordinated groups.

Drawing on large amounts of ethnographical and historical data, Scott has convincingly shown that, under certain

conditions of political and cultural domination, subordinated groups are likely to create specific types of discourse that are best understood as cultural forms of resistance (Scott: 17–23). One of these types is the "disguised discourse," which includes all resistance forms of expression that have been conceived to be used in public spaces. Since public spaces are usually under the actual or potential control of the dominant group, the function of disguised discourse is to express resistance while avoiding immediate retaliation on the spokesmen (Scott: 18–19, 136–182). To this end, they use ambiguous or partially veiled forms of language that have the capacity to discriminate between friends and enemies among the audience.

The strategies of resistant communication that subordinated groups use in public spaces allow their members to criticize, ridicule and delegitimize the dominant group without triggering an immediate violent reaction. The message conveyed is intended to be fully understandable by members of the subordinated group who might be present in the context of communication. Yet, it is delivered in such a way as to hinder members of the dominant group from grasping its full meaning or responding aggressively without losing face.

A significant number of disguised discourses' strategies studied by Scott agree fairly accurately with those present in the Marcan fig tree episode (for the application of Scott's works to other Marcan texts, see Horsley). Among the most familiar are irony, humor, and insinuation. Irony and insinuation are perfect tools to hint at implicit critical meanings. Since the criticism is implicit, those targeted by it might not recognize it, or in case they do, will not be able to denounce it. On the other hand, humor creates a playful context of communication in which susceptibility to offense would be considered out of place. We find a fine example of mixed humor, irony, and insinuation in 11:22–25, where the Marcan Jesus feigns to be teaching about a pious topic, while he is actually inciting his followers to urge God to wipe out the temple.

In most societies, the dominant group shares with subordinated groups an important part of their traditional morality. Therefore, it is not surprising that resistant discourse in public space makes frequent use of venerated shared traditions to criticise, shame, and coerce members of the dominant elite, or to put in evidence their moral inconsistency (Scott: 105–07). Jesus' quotation of the prophets in the temple scene (11:17) is a perfect example of this technique. Instead of denouncing the corruption of the chief priests using his own words, he appeals to revered traditional oracles which no one, least of all the

priestly elite, would dare to disallow.

Fictional or figurative forms of discourse, like parables, fables and jests, can also be used as disguised weapons of resistance (Scott: 152–54). They offer the possibility of venting insults, accusations and criticism without naming their real targets. The clues that facilitate their interpretation may belong to the shared cultural traditions. This is, for example, the case with the image of the plant punished for not yielding the expected fruit. In certain circumstances, however, subordinated groups make use of clues known only by their members. That might be the case with the warning sign mentioned by Jesus in his lengthy discourse in Mark 13: “But when you see the abomination of the desolation set up where it ought not to be, let the reader understand, then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains” (13:14). Here, the abomination of the desolation and the place where it will stand function as metaphoric images whose referents are a secret shared only by “those who understand.”

In many situations, disguised discourses of resistance adopt the language of bodily performances so as to transmit hazardous messages with the least possible verbalization. Clear examples of this type of discourse in the Roman era are the outdoors parodies and mimics that proliferated in city streets during the Imperial era. The cursing of the fig tree by the Marcan Jesus can be understood as one fine instance of this strategy of communication. The few words it contains are totally subservient to the dramatic action that represents the metaphoric fate of the fruitless plant condemned to destruction.

For the arguments that follow, it is important to realize that not all the instances of disguised discourse we have already identified in the Gospel of Mark belong to the same level of communication. Some of them operate inside the narrative world of the Gospel. They are intended to discriminate between the Marcan followers of Jesus and the Marcan enemies of Jesus. Others operate in the real world of the author(s) and audiences of the Gospel of Mark. They distinguish between those post-Easter followers of Jesus who sympathize with the message of this particular Gospel, and the actual or potential enemies of that group.

The symbolic expression of Jesus’ wish for the temple’s disappearance in the fig tree episode is an example of disguised discourse belonging to the second level of communication. In this instance, the use of symbolism, humor, and irony cannot be intended to protect the Marcan Jesus from his enemies because no enemies were present there. In both scenes by the

fig tree (11:12–14 and 11:20–25) Jesus and his disciples were alone. Here the use of such strategies of dissimulation can be intended only to disguise Jesus’ message from people that could be actually present among the audiences of the Gospel. Although we can presume that most members of these audiences were adherents to the Marcan positions, they might also include people still loyal to the Jewish institutions, who would take offense at any expression of contempt for the temple.

This conclusion is supported by the three texts in the Gospel of Mark that deal explicitly with the issue of the temple’s destruction. The first one (13:1–2) is a prediction of the event by Jesus. The other two report declarations that some other people ascribe to Jesus, but that are nowhere found in the Marcan narrative (14:55–59; 15:29–30). In fact, the narrator introduces these two groups of reporters as false witnesses at Jesus’ trial, and as mockers at Jesus’ execution. Yet, both of them agree in claiming that Jesus had made known his intention to destroy the temple and build a new one after three days.

For a reader or a listener that had not grasped the full meaning of the fig tree episode, the information offered by these three texts would be misleading. They would suggest that the above claim was radically false, and that Jesus was completely innocent of any bad intention towards the temple. For such readers or listeners, Jesus’ enemies would be to blame for having transformed a neutral prophecy about the temple’s destruction (13:1–2) into the false announcement that he himself was going to destroy it.

On the other hand, for a reader or a listener fully aware of the disguised meaning of the fig tree episode, these other Marcan texts would point to a different interpretation. They would hint at the idea that, although the false witnesses and the nasty mockers had distorted the tenor of Jesus’ intended participation in the temple’s end, they had correctly understood the substance of his yearnings. The Marcan Jesus never pretended to have the power to destroy the temple. Yet, he mimicked its symbolic destruction and was willing to suggest faithful prayer as a means to accelerate its end.

Moreover, when considered from a critical point of view, some of the words with which the Marcan Jesus complements his neutral announcement of the temple’s destruction show better his true feelings against the religious institution. Such feelings are implicitly expressed in 13:14–16, where he refers to the presence of the “abomination of the desolation” as a warning sign for his followers in Judea. If we assume, with almost all scholars, that such illicit presence refers to some event threaten-

ing the Jerusalem temple's integrity or holiness, the normal attitude of any mainstream Jew in the first century would be one of deep concern for the sanctuary. Yet, Jesus' only concern is the salvation of his disciples, whom he encourages to abandon the city without the least delay. Although Jesus' words contain no open condemnation of the temple, they imply, in a subtle way, that the more swiftly it disappears, the better.

From the preceding arguments we can conclude that the three Marcan texts dealing explicitly with the destruction of the temple share with the fig tree episode a discursive strategy that veils and discloses meanings at one and the same time. They avoid any explicit statement by the Marcan Jesus or the Marcan narrator about what Jesus really wished for the temple. Yet, they offer enough hints to allow sympathetic audiences to deduce that he was yearning and praying for its destruction. For unsympathetic listeners and readers, though, symbolism and ambiguity would seriously undermine their capacity to understand and their right to retaliate. Again, this is precisely what the dynamics of the disguised discourse of subordinated groups is all about. Therefore, it is appropriate that we ask ourselves what kind of social situation would explain the use of this type of discourse by the Gospel of Mark when referring to the temple's end. If we can answer this question, at least partially, we will be able to understand a little better the social context where the supporters and the intended audiences of this Gospel lived.

Implications for the Social Setting of the Marcan Group

In the rest of this article, I will refer to the group of post-Easter followers of Jesus that supported the Gospel of Mark as "the Marcan group." I assume that this Gospel was written for an audience made up of individuals already included in that group or considered potential members of it.

The principal aim of this section is to look for the type of post-Easter social environment in which the Marcan group would be in a subordinated position with respect to a group that would not tolerate any offenses against the Jerusalem temple or the memory of it. As we can assume that everyone loyal to the Jerusalem temple had Jewish ethnic origins or strong Jewish attachments, every possible social environment matching our requirements had to include an important Jewish population.

It is imperative to note here, that the issue of the temple's end would generate antagonisms, not only before, but also

after its actual destruction by the Romans in 70 CE. We know, indeed, that this dramatic event was a serious blow for most mainstream Jews who would have certainly taken offense at anyone showing satisfaction for what had happened.

Of course, most traditionally Jewish areas in Palestine, before and after 70 CE, had sufficiently important Jewish populations to justify the use of disguised discourse by any group speaking against the temple. Even in places where the local government was in gentile hands, the social weight of the Jews would have discouraged any public expression of wishing for or delight in the destruction of the sanctuary (see the murder of Stephen in Acts 6:8–7:60).

In the diaspora, everything would depend on the relative power of the Jewish community to influence its gentile hosts and/or to manage its own internal affairs. Influential and powerful Jewish communities could move gentile authorities or gentile pressure groups to act against any person or group that spoke openly against Jewish sacred traditions. (The situations described in Acts 13:50 and 17:10–14 would belong to this type.) If the Jewish community was not so influential but had the power to manage its own internal affairs, it could take measures against its own offending members, but not against outsiders. (The attitude of Gallion in Acts 18:12–17 presupposes that the Jewish community in Achaia had autonomy to judge regarding issues concerning its Law and traditions.)

We can therefore conclude that the use of disguised discourse against the temple by the Marcan group presupposes that it lived in one of the following possible types of social environment:

- Any place in Palestinian territory.
- A diaspora environment hosting a powerful Jewish community.
- A diaspora environment hosting an autonomous Jewish community to which a part or the whole of the Marcan group belonged.

In these three cases, the Marcan group would be in a subordinated position with respect to a more powerful Jewish group, and therefore would have reasons to use disguising techniques of expression when dealing with the temple issue. Conversely, the use of such techniques would be completely unjustified if the Marcan group had nothing to fear from a more powerful Jewish group.

At this point it is important to realize that this dominant Jewish group could be totally or partially made up of post-Easter followers of Jesus. We know, in fact, that most

early post-Easter followers of Jesus were Jewish, and that issues regarding Jewish traditions and devotions were an important source of conflicts in the early church.

Our critical reading of the Marcan discourse about the temple's end enables us to perceive other aspects of the Marcan group's social situation besides its subordinated position. It shows that this group belonged to a broader human context which was very sensitive to issues concerning the Jerusalem temple. For its members, the message that Jesus had prayed for its disappearance was so important that they were eager to spread it, even if this implied taking some risks. For the members of the dominant Jewish group, fidelity to the temple or to the temple's memory was so deeply felt that they were ready to use the power or influence available to them to oppose those who faulted or despised it.

Such sensibility suggests that the Marcan group was either not very far away from Jerusalem or had important ties with Judea. The best hypothesis to account for it is that, whatever its precise location might be, the group included a number of Jewish members coming from Judaea. This hypothesis is obviously compatible with the majority opinion among exegetes that gentile presence was conspicuous in the Marcan group. Gentile members are, indeed, needed to justify the effort undertaken by the narrator to explain certain Jewish practices, and the ethnically inclusive attitude of this Gospel (Mark 3:8; 7:1–4; 24–30; 11:17). Yet, we have to reject the plausibility of a chiefly gentile community, living in a chiefly gentile social setting, and thus utterly unconcerned with the fate of the Jerusalem temple (against Gnlika 1986: 40–41).

Conclusion

The interpretation of the Marcan fig tree episode argued for in this article highlights two features of the Gospel of Mark that have an important bearing on the question of its social setting:

- the strong anti-temple stance that it ascribes to Jesus, and
- the use of disguising techniques of discourse to express this radical attitude.

Further analyses of the three other Marcan texts that refer explicitly to the destruction of the temple confirm these two features.

Scott's conception of resistant forms of expression by subordinated groups has enabled us to interpret this peculiar discourse as an instance of disguised resistant discourse. As this

type of expression presupposes a dominant group from which its message is intentionally disguised, it must be the case that the social setting of the Marcan group fulfilled the conditions for the existence of the appropriate relation of domination.

This requirement has reduced the range of possible Marcan social settings to three main types, and has ruled out the picture of a totally gentile group located in a gentile environment. In the context of the long and still unresolved debate over the origin of the Gospel of Mark, such delimitation is, indeed, a small step forward, but, nevertheless, a significant one.

Finally, I think it is worth noting that my conclusions are clearly compatible with one of the two hypotheses for the location of the Marcan group preferred by current scholarship: that of Palestine (Marcus 1992; Marcus 2000: 25–36). As for the second, Rome (Incigneri), the compatibility with these conclusions is not so clear, but they offer us some significant criteria in seeking the answer. Since Rome was a Jewish diaspora setting, we would have to check whether, between Jesus' death and mid second century CE, there were any Jewish communities in this city that fulfilled the conditions for one of the diaspora environment types stated above. These criteria would link the possibility of a Roman location for the Marcan group to two other important and currently debated issues:

- the social situation of the Jewish population in Rome, its relative power, influence and autonomy, and
- the parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity in that city, or, put in more concrete terms: the possibility of a Marcan group totally or partially included in the Jewish community of Rome.

Although I cannot discuss here the potential outcome of such enquiry, I point to it as an example of the use the results of this study can be put to further research on the origin of Mark's Gospel.

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