Having named Jesus’ activity in the temple as the surest starting point for our investigation, I must hasten to say that the question of Jesus and the temple brings with it the amount of uncertainty which is usual in the study of the Gospels. There is neither firm agreement about the unity and integrity of the basic passages concerning the ‘cleansing of the temple’ (Mark 11.15–19 and parallels), nor is there absolute certainty of the authenticity of either or both of the sayings about the destruction of the temple (Mark 13.2 and parallels; Matt. 26.61–62/Mark 14.58). Despite all this, it is overwhelmingly probable that Jesus did something in the temple and said something about its destruction. The accusation that Jesus threatened the temple is reflected in three other passages: the crucifixion scene (Matt. 27.39–42/Mark 15.29–31); Stephen’s speech (Acts 6.13f); and, with post-Easter interpretation, in John 2.18–22. The conflict over the temple seems deeply implanted in the tradition, and that there was such a conflict would seem to be indisputable.

The ‘cleansing’ of the temple (Mark 11.15–19 and parallels)

The older understanding of the event, and the one which still predominates, is that it was just what the title of the pericope in modern synopses says: the cleansing of the temple. This implies a prior profanation or contamination, and the profanation has been readily found in the conducting of trade in or around the temple precincts. To many this is self-evidently a debasement of true religion, and Jesus was intending to purify the temple so that it should better fulfil its purpose. Thus, for example, Ederseheim was of the view that ‘the whole of this traffic – money-changing, selling of doves, and market for sheep and oxen’ – was in itself, and from its attendant circumstances, a terrible desecration. It is
noteworthy that Abrahams, in disagreeing with Edersheim, nevertheless accepted his major premises: what is external is bad, and Jesus was right to attack it. Edersheim accepted the charge of corruption (‘den of thieves’, Mark 11.17) as being necessarily a part of any trading. Abrahams countered with the observation that while some individual abuses might have occurred, a general charge would be unjustified. Yet he himself also wrote that he approved of Jesus’ attack on ‘externalism’. ‘When Jesus overruled the money-changers and ejected the sellers of doves from the Temple he did a service to Judaism.’

This is a strange position for one to adopt who argued that buying and selling were necessary for the continuation of the temple sacrifices. It shows the pervasiveness of the view that Jesus opposed externals in the name of true religious interiority.

This same view, though now expressed differently, is seen in more recent exegetical remarks. After rejecting (correctly, in my view) what he identifies as the two principal recent interpretations of the ‘cleansing’ – that it expresses the opposition of the early church to the temple cultus and that it represents ‘the present power of the raised Christ in the confession of the post-Easter community’ – Roloff gives his own interpretation: the action was ‘a prophetic sign which intended to bring about the repentance and return of Israel in the last days’. He charged Judaism with its own recognition of the holiness of the temple as the place of the presence of God and demonstrated that its practice stood in contradiction to that holiness. Jesus’ action constituted a ‘requirement of the absolute maintenance of the holiness of the existing temple.’ There was, it seems from this remark, an interior holiness which was being besmirched or obscured by the actual conduct of the temple’s affairs.

Other recent scholars, without explicitly expressing the view that religion must be devoid of crass materialism, also understand Jesus’ action as being a ‘cleansing’ of defiling trade. Thus Jeremias proposed that the ‘cleansing’ was directed against the priestly class because ‘They misuse their calling...by carrying on business to make profit.’ Similarly Aulén remarked that ‘To transform the court of the temple to a market place – and for their own profit – was a violation of the law concerning the holiness of the temple...’ We may also cite Tromeé’s view: the action was ‘in defence of the honour of God’, which the trade apparently called into question. Harvey speaks of ‘the abuse of Jewish institutions’ which Jesus attacked and characterizes the action as a prophetic one which represents ‘the divine judgment on a particular use which was being made of the temple’. That ‘use’ was trading, and Harvey writes that Jesus had good grounds for thinking that trade should not have been taking place in the temple precincts.

Such comments as these are doubtless intended to distinguish the temple ordained by God – which Jesus did not attack – from the Jewish ‘abuse’ of the divine institution – which Jesus did attack. The way in which the distinction is made, however, implies that it is just the trade itself – the changing of money, the purchase of sacrifices, and probably also the charge for their inspection – which is the focus of the action. The assumption seems to be that Jesus made, and wanted his contemporaries to accept, a distinction between this sort of ‘practice’ and the ‘real purpose’ of the temple. This seems to owe more to the nineteenth-century view that what is external is bad than to a first-century Jewish view. Those who write about Jesus’ desire to return the temple to its ‘original’, ‘true’ purpose, the ‘pure’ worship of God, seem to forget that the principal function of any temple is to serve as a place for sacrifice, and that sacrifices require the supply of suitable animals. This had always been true of the temple in Jerusalem. In the time of Jesus, the temple had long been the only place in Israel at which sacrifices could be offered, and this means that suitable animals and birds must have been in supply at the temple site. There was not an ‘original’ time when worship at the temple had been ‘pure’ from the business which the requirement of unblemished sacrifices creates. Further, no one remembered a time when pilgrims, carrying various coinages, had not come. In the view of Jesus and his contemporaries, the requirement to sacrifice must always have involved the supply of sacrificial animals, their inspection, and the changing of money. Thus one may wonder what scholars have in mind who talk about Jesus’ desire to stop this ‘particular use’ of the temple. Just what would be left of the service if the supposedly corrupting externalism of sacrifices, and the trade necessary to them, were purged? Here as often as we see a failure to think concretely and a preference for vague religious abstractions.

In order to solidify the present point, and to gain perspective on the possible range of meanings of Jesus’ action in the temple, we should lay out more thoroughly the common view of the temple, the sacrifices, the changing of money, and the sale of birds. The common view was that the temple was where sacrifices to God were offered, and that these sacrifices were not only appropriate but necessary. Josephus, in commenting on the strategic importance of fortified places in the city, gives clear expression to this view:
The Restoration of Israel

Whoever was master of these [fortified places] had the whole nation in his power, for sacrifices could not be made without (controlling) these places, and it was impossible for any of the Jews to forgo offering these, for they would rather give up their lives than the worship which they are accustomed to offer God (47. XV.248).

The importance of sacrifice emerges in another way in Josephus, in his account of the beginning of the revolt. One Eleazar persuaded the priests who were then serving 'to accept no gift or sacrifice from a foreigner'. Josephus continues:

This action laid the foundation of the war with the Romans; for the sacrifices offered on behalf of that nation and the emperor were in consequence rejected. The chief priests and the notables earnestly besought them not to abandon the customary offering for their rulers, but the priests remained obdurate (BJ II.409.0).

Everyone agreed that sacrifices were integral to the function of the temple. They were essential to the religion of Judaism, and withholding sacrifices for the Romans was the final sign that a true revolt, rather than just another round of rock-throwing, was at hand. The notion that the temple should serve some function other than sacrifice would seem to be extremely remote from the thinking of a first-century Jew.

But could the sacrifices continue without the changing of money and the selling of birds? It is hard to see how.6 The money changers were probably those who changed the money in the possession of pilgrims into the coinage acceptable by the temple in payment of the half-shekel tax levied on all Jews.25 The word 'levied' itself requires interpretation, for payment of the tax was voluntary, being enforced only by moral suasion.26 Yet we know that Jews from all parts of the Diaspora paid it out of loyalty to the Jerusalem temple.27 The desire of the authorities to receive the money in a standard coinage which did not have on it the image of an emperor or king is reasonable, and no one ever seems to have protested this. The money changers naturally charged a fee for changing money,28 but they can hardly have been expected to secure enough Tyrian coinage to meet the demands of worshippers and to supply their services for free. The buyers and sellers were similarly required for the maintenance of the temple service, and they provided a convenient service for pilgrims. If a Galilean, for example, wished or was required to present a dove as a sacrifice, it was more convenient to sell the dove in Galilee and buy one in Jerusalem which was certified as unblemished than to carry the dove from Galilee to the temple. A charge was made in Jerusalem for the service, but this was doubtless to be preferred to the alternative: bringing one's own dove from Galilee and running the risk of having it found blemished after the trip. The charge for inspection would be made in any case. The most important point to recognize here is that the requirement to present an unblemished dove as a sacrifice for certain impurities or transgressions was a requirement given by God to Israel through Moses.31 The business arrangements around the temple were necessary if the commandments were to be obeyed. An attack on what is necessary is not an attack on 'present practice'.

If there were the circumstances, was there anything at all about the temple which could give rise to attacks on 'present practice' as distinct from the temple service itself? As it happens, we know of attacks which rest on a distinction between 'practice' and 'ideal' and which have in view the purity of the temple. Will these help us fit Jesus into the mould of a religious reformer, bent on cleansing the temple? It seems not. The attacks otherwise known rest on charges about which the Gospels are silent: the suitability of the priests for their office. Such charges appear already in the biblical period. Thus in Malachi 3 the 'messenger of the covenant' will 'purify the sons of Levi' until they present 'right offerings'. This may have been taken in an eschatological sense subsequently, but the thrust of the chapter itself is that the Levites were impure (3.3) and that all Israel was robbing God by withholding part of the tithes (3.6–10). They should mend their ways or face destruction.

Such accusations continue in the later period. In the days of the Hasmonaen, there were objections to their combining the offices of priest and king32 and against their 'usurping' the high priesthood.33 The author[s] of the Psalms of Solomon also objected to the contemporary priests because they served the temple in a state of immorality and impurity. They are accused of committing adultery, robbing the sanctuary, and offering sacrifice when impure because of having come into contact with menstrual blood (8.9–14). God duly punished them (the Hasmonian priests) by sending the Romans (8.15–19). The Dead Sea Sectarians accused the 'Wicked Priest' of committing abominable deeds and defiling the temple (1QpHab 12.8f). He also 'robbed the Poor of their possessions' (ibid. 12.10; cf. 9.5), but this apparently refers to his actions as king, as is clear in 8.8–11 (cf. 11.4–7). Similar accusations are seen in the Covenant of Damascus:

Also they convey uncleanness to the sanctuary, inasmuch as they do not keep separate according to the Law, but lie with her that sees 'the blood of
her flux’. And they marry each man the daughter of his brother and the daughter of his sister... (CD 5:6–8; cf. 4:18).

The charge of impurity in part reflects such halakic disputes as the duration of a woman’s impurity following her menstrual period, and there were other halakic disputes. Thus the Dead Sea Sect would have followed a different calendar from that used in Jerusalem, with the result that all the sacrifices were, from their point of view, on the wrong day (see again 1QpHab 11:7). We should also suppose that the Pharisees quarrelled with the Sadducean practice because of halakic disagreements.

Criticisms of anyone who handles money or goods is easy and obvious — so much so that the priests of the second temple are still assumed to have been dishonest. Many New Testament scholars quite readily suppose that such concerns lay behind Jesus’ demonstration.

If Jesus were a religious reformer, however, bent on correcting ‘abuse’ and ‘present practice’, we should hear charges of immorality, dishonesty and corruption directed against the priests. But such charges are absent from the Gospels (except for Mark 11:17), and that is not the thrust of the action in the temple. On the contrary, the attack was against the trade which is necessary for sacrifices and in which the priests and without mention of the halakot which they follow. Thus far, it appears that Jesus’ demonstration was against what all would have seen as necessary to the sacrificial system, rather than against present practice.

If the saying in Mark 11:17 and par. were Jesus’ own comment on why he ‘cleansed’ the temple, however, we would have to accept that it was indeed trade and sacrifice which bothered him, possibly because dishonesty was involved. In that verse the conflated quotation from Isa. 56:7 and Jer. 7:11 says that the temple should be a house of prayer (Mark has ‘for all the Gentiles’), while ‘you’ have made it a den of robbers. The saying, however, is quite correctly rejected by most scholars as an addition. Roloff regards v. 17 as an addition because of the introductory ‘and he taught them and said’. A. E. Harvey has recently proposed that the quotations in Mark 11:17 cannot represent a saying of Jesus. ‘House of prayer for all the Gentiles’ could hardly be extracted from the Hebrew version which Jesus would have used. He adds that ‘robbers’ cave’ is inappropriate, since ‘robber’ always means raider, never swindler. That these and other scholars who reject v. 17 nevertheless think that Jesus opposed present practice, not the temple itself, shows how deeply embedded is the view that Jesus opposed corrupting externalism. They must take it that the mere fact of buying and selling, without any charge of thievery, was seen by Jesus as in contradiction to the purity of the temple.

If one overlooked the ‘thievery’ part of Mark 11:17 and focused on the ‘house of prayer’ part, one could argue that Jesus was against sacrifice itself. This view has occasionally been championed, and it could be supported by citing the quotation of Hos. 6:6 in Matt. 9:13 and 12:7, ‘I want mercy and not sacrifice.’ As Davies points out in correctly dismissing this view, Matt. 5:23–24 and Acts 2:46 become inexplicable on such a view of Jesus. We have here the same problem which we shall meet in discussing Jesus’ view of the law. If he actually explicitly opposed one of the main institutions of Judaism, he kept it secret from his disciples.

There is one last possibility for seeing Jesus as bent on purification and reform: he wanted the trade moved entirely outside the temple precincts. If any trade was conducted inside the temple precincts, it was conducted in the court of the Gentiles. We shall immediately consider the question of whether or not it was precisely the Gentiles for whom Jesus was concerned, and we now limit our attention to the fact that the court of the Gentiles was within the temple precincts. Did Jesus differ from his contemporaries simply by wishing to extend the holy area to the outermost court? To my knowledge, no one has proposed this precise interpretation, although one might do so. Such a view could have been suggested by the last sentence of Zech. 14:20f.:

And on that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, ‘Holy to the Lord’. And the pots in the house of the Lord shall be as the bowls before the altar; and every pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the Lord of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and take of them and boil the flesh of the sacrifice in them. And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day.

In a context in which all the cooking utensils in Jerusalem are to be ritually pure, so that they can be used in preparing sacrificial meat, there will be no traders in the house; the entire area will be purified.

It is very unlikely that we have here the motive behind Jesus’ action. One passage, Mark 7:1–5 and par., depicts Jesus’ followers as not accepting an extension to lay people of the biblical purity laws which govern the priests. I doubt the authenticity of this dispute, but in any case there is certainly no evidence for attributing to Jesus a concern to extend the purity code in the way hoped by Zechariah.

This leads us to see once more that the notion behind the discussion of ‘purity’ in New Testament scholarship is a modern one. New Testament
scholars who write about Jesus' concern for the purity of the temple seem to have in mind a familiar Protestant idea: 'pure' worship consists in the Word, and all external rites should be purged. In first-century Judaism, however, a concern to extend purity would almost certainly have involved extending the rites, such as washing, connected with it. I think that we should drop the discussion of Jesus' action as one concerned with purifying the worship of God.  

I shall shortly propose an alternative explanation, and one which seems to fit better into the probable outlook of Palestinian Jews of Jesus' day. We should first of all note that other views have been advanced. Principally to be noted are Brandon's view that Jesus' action was part of a carefully planned attempt to take the leadership of the country by arms and Davies' view that what was at stake was the status of Gentiles. On the latter view the key is given by the fact that trade was conducted in the court of the Gentiles. Since that was the area that was cleansed, Jesus must have been 'concerned with the right of, and the hopes of Judaism for, the Gentiles as with the Temple itself'. Both of these views rest on reconstructions of Jesus' activity which are informed by numerous points of evidence, and it would be out of place to discuss them fully in this chapter. Brandon's view, in fact, will get no full airing at all, since I consider that it has been sufficiently refuted; it cannot in any case be said to have influenced many.  

Jesus' attitude towards the Gentiles, on the other hand, will be discussed in more detail in ch. 7. Meanwhile, it will have to suffice to say that Jesus does not seem to have made a definite gesture in favour of including Gentiles in the kingdom, although he may well have envisaged their inclusion at the eschaton. The evidence to be discussed below will show Jesus not to have been directly concerned with the Gentiles. In light of this, the place of the trade, and consequently of Jesus' action, should be seen as coincidental and not determinative for the meaning of the event. Any public action must have been performed in a place in which activities related to the temple were carried out and to which Jesus had access. In order to derive the meaning of the event directly from the place where it was carried out (presumably the court of the Gentiles), or from the particular activity which was attacked (the trade necessary as a preliminary to sacrifice), we would have to think that Jesus selected the place and the activity from among several available. This, however, seems not to have been the case. Jesus might have gained access to the Priests' Court, and thus to a place more directly connected with the preparation of sacrifices, had he pretended to have a sin- or guilt-offering to present; but apart from the employment of such a ruse there would seem to be nothing other than the trade in the court of the Gentiles which he could have attacked.

The proposal that Jesus' action was in favour of the Gentiles, however, has the merit of understanding it as symbolic, a point to which we shall return. There is one other frequently met scholarly assertion about the significance of Jesus' action at the temple which should be noted. It is generally thought that Jesus' action would have been primarily resented by the temple hierarchy, those who had a vested interest in the profit derived from the sale of bird-offerings and the exchange of money. Thus, for example, Trautmann argues that Jesus objected to the Sadducean priesthood for combining politics and economics with the temple and also opposed their theology of atonement by means of sacrifice and the cult as if other Jews did not believe in atonement through sacrifice. We have seen that a distinction has often been made between Jesus' attack on the law, which is believed to have been directed against the Pharisees and scribes, and his attack on the temple trade, directed against the priests and the Sadducees. This distinction, which is often made sharply, is quite misleading. The law was generally revered, while the temple was the focus of religious hope and devotion throughout Judaism. I earlier pointed out that there is no indication that Jesus' action was directed only against some particular practice. Now we must note that it would not have been offensive to only one group. More than just the priests thought that the sacrifices were ordained by God and atoned for sins. We shall return to this point later in this chapter and also in ch. 10, when assessing Jesus' opponents and the points of opposition.

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

There is another frequently met interpretation, however, which I regard as entirely correct. Jesus' action is to be regarded as a symbolic demonstration. The question, of course, is what the action symbolized. We have already considered and rejected the principal proposal, that it symbolized the inclusion of Gentiles.

Let us first consider how the action must have looked to others. Jesus did not actually bring all buying and selling to a halt. As Hengel has pointed
out, any real effort to stop the trade necessary to the temple service would have required an army, and there is no evidence of a substantial martial conflict. It is reasonable to think that Jesus (and conceivably some of his followers, although none are mentioned) overturned some tables as a demonstrative action. It would appear that the action was not substantial enough even to interfere with the daily routine; for if it had been he would surely have been arrested on the spot. Thus those who saw it, and those who heard about it, would have known that it was a gesture intended to make a point rather than to have a concrete result; that is, they would have seen the action as symbolic.

The discussion of whether or not Jesus succeeded in interrupting the actual functioning of the temple points us in the right direction for seeing what the action symbolized but did not accomplish: it symbolized destruction. That is one of the most obvious meanings of the action of overturning itself. Some have seen this, but the force and obviousness of the point are obscured as long as we continue to think that Jesus was demonstrating against the Sadducees for profiting and in favour of purifying the temple of externalism. Had Jesus wished to make a gesture symbolizing purity, he doubtless could have done so. The pouring out of water comes immediately to mind. The turning over of even one table points towards destruction.

Professor Moule has proposed to me that overturning one or more tables is not an entirely self-evident symbol of destruction. He quite correctly points to the broken pot of Jer. 19.10. Would breaking something not have been a better symbol? Perhaps so. I must leave to others the assessment of 'overturning' as a self-evident symbol of destruction, though it appears to me to be quite an obvious one. My view, however, depends in part on further considerations.

Let us continue by pursuing the question of how the action would have been understood by others. The import to those who saw or heard of it was almost surely, at least in part, that Jesus was attacking the temple service which was commanded by God. Not just priests would have been offended, but all those who believed that the temple was the place at which Israel and individual Israelites had been commanded to offer sacrifice, to make atonement for their sins. Further, it is hard to imagine how Jesus himself could have seen it if not in these terms. We should suppose that Jesus knew what he was doing: like others, he regarded the sacrifices as commanded by God, he knew that they required a certain amount of trade, and he knew that making a gesture towards disrupting the trade represented an attack on the divinely ordained sacrifices. Thus I take it that the action at the very least symbolized an attack, and note that 'attack' is not far from 'destruction'.

But what does this mean? On what conceivable grounds could Jesus have undertaken to attack – and symbolize the destruction of – what was ordained by God? The obvious answer is that destruction, in turn, looks towards restoration. This will be better seen when we consider the sayings about the destruction of the temple, which complement and help us understand the action.

The sayings about the destruction of the temple

The first form in which the reader of the Gospels meets a saying about the destruction of the temple is in the form of a simple prediction, with no implication of a threat:

As he was leaving the temple, one of his disciples exclaimed, 'Look, Master, what huge stones! What fine buildings!' Jesus said to him, 'You see these great buildings. Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.' (Mark 13.1f.)

To this prediction all three synoptists append the 'little apocalypse'. It is likely that the saying was originally independent of this entire context (both the introduction, which, as Bultmann observed, seems designed to elicit the saying, and the attached apocalypse), but it would seem likely that Jesus said something of the sort and applied it to the temple. For one thing, other traditions contain the charge that he threatened the temple. One of these is the trial scene:

And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, 'We heard him say, “I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.”' (Mark 14.57f.)

At last two [false witnesses] came forward and said, 'This fellow said, “I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days.”' (Matt. 26.60f.)

The reports of what was said at the trial scene are notoriously difficult to verify. In fact, it may even be wondered whether or not the entire 'trial' before the high priest and others is largely fictional. Even if the entire scene were composed after Easter, however, it would still seem likely that this specific accusation is based on an accurate memory of the principal point on which Jesus offended many of his contemporaries. One can imagine a subsequent Christian penning de novo the scene in which Jesus
is charged with blasphemy for claiming to be the Son of God (Mark 14.61–64), but it is hard to imagine a purely fictional origin for the accusation that he threatened to destroy the temple. For one thing, it leads nowhere. According to the evangelists, the testimony of the witnesses as to what Jesus said did not agree, and the charge was apparently dropped. For another, the implication of physical insurrection which the charge seems to contain would scarcely have been something that a Christian author would spontaneously have thought of. Luke drops the charge from the trial scene, and Matthew and Mark characterize it as false. Mark’s contrast ‘made with hands’, ‘not made with hands’ may also be an attempt to water down this implication.64

Most striking, however, is the reappearance of the charge in other traditions. In the crucifixion scene both Matthew (27.40) and Mark (15.29) (but again not Luke) depict the crowd as calling Jesus ‘the one who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days’. According to Acts 6.14 the charge against Stephen was that he said – even after Jesus’ death and resurrection – that ‘this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place’ (the temple). If we could be absolutely sure of the historicity of this charge against Stephen, it would be clear that Jesus had spoken so firmly that Christians continued to expect the imminent destruction of the temple. It is noteworthy that the author of Acts says that the charge against Stephen was brought by false witnesses (Acts 6.13). This is further evidence of early Christian reluctance to admit the accusation, and it helps confirm that Jesus actually said something which was taken as a threat.

Finally, we should quote John 2.18–22:

> The Jews then said to him, ‘What sign have you to show us for doing this?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews then said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?’ But he spoke of the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.

In John’s account, this exchange immediately follows the ‘cleansing’ of the temple. This passage is especially striking. We see here the characteristic Johannine device of having Jesus say something which his interlocutors understand on one level, which gives the evangelist the opportunity of explaining the true meaning, which resides on another level. For our purposes, however, the statement of John 2.19 shows how deeply embedded in the tradition was the threat of destroying and the promise of rebuilding the temple. It was so firmly fixed that it was not dropped, but rather interpreted. John, it is to be noted, does drop the threat, ‘I will destroy’, in favour of the second person statement which implies a condition, ‘If you destroy’. The change is necessary for the evangelist’s explanation that the temple is Jesus’ body. Jesus could not have said that he would destroy his own body.65 It is reasonable to see the change in subject as John’s and to suppose that John had the tradition contained in Mark 14.58, Matt. 26.61, Mark 15.29, Matt. 27.40, and Acts 6.14: Jesus threatened the destruction of the temple (and perhaps predicted its rebuilding after three days).

We seem here to be in touch with a very firm historical tradition, but there is still uncertainty about precisely what it is. Did Jesus predict the destruction of the temple (Mark 13.1f. and parr.) or threaten it (Mark 14.58 and elsewhere)?66 Did he mention destruction and rebuilding, or only the former? The christological use of the prediction that it would be rebuilt after three days is evident, but even so Jesus may have predicted just that, for the application to the resurrection is not always explicit (e.g. Mark 15.29 and parr.). If Jesus either threatened or predicted the destruction of the temple and its rebuilding after three days, that is, if the saying in any of its forms is even approximately authentic, his meaning would be luminously clear: he predicted the imminent appearance of the judgment and the new age.

The saying and the deed would then correspond. Both point towards the destruction of the present order and the appearance of the new. We should probably think that his expectation was that a new temple would be given by God from heaven, an expectation which is not otherwise unknown during the period, even if it may not have been universal.67 In this case the characterization of the temple as ‘made without hands’ could be original, rather than a spiritualizing interpretation. But if (following Mark 13.1f.; Acts 6.14) there was no prediction of a rebuilding, the meaning would be only slightly less concrete. Jesus either threatened or predicted that God would put an end to the present temple: that is, that the end was at hand. If he said ‘I will destroy’, he saw himself as God’s agent.

We have thus far not attempted to determine the original form of the saying, nor is it likely that this can be done with certainty. Some possibilities, however, can be excluded. We should first observe that the existence of the threat form (‘I will destroy’, Mark 14.58; implied by Mark 15.29 and Acts 6.14, and probably by John 2.19) makes it virtually incredible that the entire saying could be a *vaticinium ex eventu*, a ‘prophecy’ after the event.
After the temple was in fact destroyed by the Romans in the year 70, the Christians would not have composed a threat by Jesus that he would destroy it, nor would they have turned an existing prophecy that the temple would be destroyed into such a threat. If we had only the prediction, we could believe it to be a vaticinium, though perhaps not a very likely one, but we cannot explain the origin of the double form in this way. One would then have to suppose that the prediction was composed after it was fulfilled in 70, that an evangelist or someone in the pre-Gospel tradition creatively turned the prediction into a threat and made it the object of a charge before the high priest which failed for lack of agreement in the testimony, that one of Luke's sources for the early chapters of Acts independently arrived at the same charge (for Luke can scarcely have composed it, having twice dropped it in the Gospel), and that the fourth evangelist found the threat form of the saying to be so well known that it had to be taken account of. All of this, especially the change from a prediction based on facts to a threat which became the object of a charge, strains the imagination too much. It is better to believe that Jesus said something which lies behind the traditions. But did he predict a military disaster? It is not inconceivable as a sagacious man he saw where zealotism would lead the nation one generation later, but there is no reason to think that this sort of commonplace (if you fellows keep up your trouble-making, it is bound to lead to disaster) lies behind the double tradition of prediction and threat as we have it. Even if we push the prediction back to Jesus, it is unlikely that the threat form derived from a simple prediction of disaster. It seems far better to suppose that Jesus either threatened the destruction of the temple, with himself playing a role, or predicted its destruction in such terms that the prediction could be construed as a threat, than that he made a general prediction that foreign arms would some day take Jerusalem and destroy the temple. It is hard to know how such a prediction could have led to the traditions in the Gospels and Acts.

If Jesus did not predict the conquest of the temple by foreign arms, and if he himself was not planning armed insurrection, then it follows that he must have either predicted or threatened the destruction of the temple by God. In this case there would still be the question, though it probably cannot be resolved, of his own role in the destruction. Mark 13.1f. and parr. give him no role, while the other passages, including John 2.18f. by inference, do. Even if he said 'I will destroy', however, he could only have meant that he would act as God's agent and do so in the context of the arrival of the eschaton.

Finally, we can note that whatever Jesus said became public in some way or other. Mark has the prediction of destruction made to one disciple (13.1), while Matthew has 'his disciples' (24.1). Luke gives the saying a wider setting (21.5). Here as elsewhere we must suppose that the settings are secondary. The public nature of the statement is implied by its being used in charges against Jesus and Stephen.

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

Rolloff took the 'cleansing' of the temple and the prediction of its destruction to be 'obviously contradictory' to each other in a way suitable to the words and deeds of a prophet. Jesus both saw the temple as the place of God's presence which should be purified for present use and predicted its destruction. Others have interpreted the action as 'cleansing' and have then allowed this meaning to submerge the force of the saying about destruction. Thus Bornkamm wrote that the temple 'cleansing' is 'more than an act of reform to restore the temple service to its original purity'. Jesus was also 'cleansing the sanctuary for the approaching kingdom of God'. Here the threat to destroy is dropped and thus the radical connection with eschatology.

On the hypothesis presented here the action and the saying form a unity. Jesus predicted (or threatened) the destruction of the temple and carried out an action symbolic of its destruction by demonstrating against the performance of the sacrifices. He did not wish to purify the temple, either of dishonest trading or of trading in contrast to 'pure' worship. Nor was he opposed to the temple sacrifices which God commanded to Israel. He intended, rather, to indicate that the end was at hand and that the temple would be destroyed, so that the new and perfect temple might arise.

Our hypothesis receives partial confirmation from the embarrassment of Matthew and Mark about the threat to destroy and the embarrassment of all three synoptists about the action in the temple. Matthew and Mark explain that the threat to destroy was testified to only by false witnesses (Matt. 26.59f; Mark 14.55f); and all three synoptists, by use of the quotation about a 'den of robbers', make it appear that Jesus was quite reasonably protesting against dishonesty (Mark 11.17 and parr.). They attempt to make the action relatively innocuous, and they deny the force of the saying—while reporting both. Despite their efforts, we should take both the action and the saying at full value. We see immediately behind
the surface of the Gospels that Jesus threatened (or predicted) the destruction of the temple and that he acted to demonstrate it.

Our interpretation has the additional advantage of making sense of the acceptance of temple worship by the early apostles (Acts 2.46; 3.1; 21.26). They did not think that Jesus had considered it impure, but only that the days of the present temple were numbered.

The only question which remains outstanding at this point is whether or not Jesus’ contemporaries would have clearly understood the prophetic symbolism. I have previously urged that pious Jews, not just the supposedly profiteering priestly class, would have been offended at the action in the temple. This follows both from intrinsic probability and from the sequel – Jesus was put to death, apparently with the approval of many in Jerusalem. But would the crowd have understood without ambiguity that Jesus intended to symbolize the impending eschatological act of God? We recall here the question of whether or not the meaning of the symbolic action was self-evident. To this question no certain answer can be given. The chapter which immediately follows argues that there was current in some circles the expectation of the destruction and rebuilding of the temple. Thus it is at least reasonable that the intent of Jesus’ action was clear to his contemporaries. Even if he was understood, however, the action and saying were still highly offensive. Jesus still attacked the functioning temple, where the sins of Israel were atoned, and the crowd could simply have disbelieved his eschatological prediction or resented his personal self-assertion. To attempt a real answer to the question posed in this paragraph, however, would be to press hypothetical reconstruction too far. In the subsequent chapters supporting evidence for the interpretation of Jesus’ word and deed will be presented. I doubt that we can ever securely know how well Jesus was understood by how many of his contemporaries.

Our discussion of the temple starts two lines of enquiry which must be pursued: to what degree Jesus is to be fitted into Jewish views of the end of the age and the restoration of Israel, and what was Jesus’ stance towards other institutions, groups and realities within Judaism. The two prongs of our enquiry have been often studied and, furthermore, are interrelated. It has often been proposed, for example, that he opposed the Pharisaic interpretation of the law and even ‘abrogated’ the law in principle in the name of the coming kingdom of God. For the present, however, we shall follow each path separately, beginning with other evidence that bears on the question of Jesus’ relationship to the hope for restoration. We must first, however, turn to Jewish literature to see what the ramifications of an expectation of a new temple might be expected to be.

1. JESUS AND THE TEMPLE

1. Bultmann (History, p. 16): Mark 11.15, 18f. come from the editor; v. 17 is an added saying which has replaced another, which may be preserved in John 2.16. One may conjecture that 11.27–35 followed 11.16 immediately, though probably not as part of the same unit. Roloff (Der jüdische Jesus, p. 93): the oldest form of the narrative was Mark 11.15f., 18a, 28–33. Vincent Taylor (The Gospel According to St. Mark, 1959, p. 461): the original unit is 11.15b–17. Mark added vv. 15a, 18f. Boismard (Symposie

originally followed the ‘cleansing’ scene. Verses 17f., 19 are later insertions. The casting out of the vendors (11.15) was originally followed by a saying better preserved in John 2.16b. Note also Goguel’s view, n. 4 below.

It should be noted that Mark 11.16, absent from both Matthew and Luke, plays little role in these analyses. It is my own view that this sort of general prohibition (see I. Abrahams, Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels I, 1917, reissued 1967, pp. 84f.) does not accord well with overthrowing the tables and the like and is probably a later addition, even though it usually passes unquestioned. It may also be doubted that the admonition is appropriate to the temple at Jerusalem, in view of the placement of the gates. In any case, it plays no role in our analysis.

2. For a list of scholars regarding Mark 13.2 as inauthentic (because a weakened form of 14.48, which was embarrassing), see G. R. Beasley-Murray, A Commentary on Mark Thirteenth, 1957, p. 23. The passage is often accepted as authentic, however, it being noted that in fact the temple was destroyed by fire (see Taylor, St Mark, p. 501).

Lloyd Gaston (No Stone on Another, 1970, pp. 12f., 65, 244, 444f.) has correctly noted that only the redactional framework of Mark 13.2 and parallels mentions the temple, and he proposes that the prophecy of destruction is found in its original form in Luke 19.44, where it refers to the destruction of Jerusalem. He gives (p. 64 n. 18) a bibliography of scholars who combine Mark 13.2 with 14.48 and 15.29 and consider that Jesus did predict or threaten the destruction of the temple—the view taken here. Gaston’s view is discussed further in n. 5 and in the next chapter.

3. For both views, that Mark 14.58 is authentic and that it is inauthentic, see Taylor, St Mark, p. 566. Taylor regards the passage as authentic.

4. M. Goguel, Jesus and the Origins of Christianity, vol. I, The Life of Jesus, pp. 412–15, argued that the act and the saying do not form a unity (cf. n. 1), but he proposed that the saying against the profanation of the temple was authentic and that the act of overthrowing the tables was unhistorical and had been created on the basis of the saying. Scholarship has not, however, followed Goguel’s proposal. The action against the buyers and sellers and the frequent accusation that Jesus threatened to destroy the temple are mutually supportive.


We should note in addition the intriguing proposals of Lloyd Gaston in No Stone on Another. He considers that the origin of the threat to destroy the temple is actually to be found in Stephen’s position and does not come from Jesus. Jewish opponents of Christianity picked up Stephen’s threat and employed it against the Christian movement. Mark 14.58 and 15.29 (and parallels) are then considered to be a defence against Jewish accusations. He believes that the accusation that Jesus threatened to destroy the temple is no more historical than the accusation that Jesus committed blasphemy by claiming to be Son of God (Mark 14.61–64 and parallels); that is, both accusations are later Jewish accusations against the church (pp. 65–6). The two halves of Mark 14.58 and 15.29 (the threat to destroy and the promise to rebuild) are to be taken separately. The threat to destroy goes back only to Stephen (p. 161), while the promise to rebuild the ‘temple’ goes back to Jesus but refers to the founding of the eschatological community as the ‘temple of God’ (pp. 226f., 241, 243). It was only the opponents of Christianity who combined the two traditions, and they apparently coined the ‘temple’ because it was necessary to answer the charge (p. 145f., 162). Gaston considers it conceivable that ‘a saying against the temple was important in Jesus’ condemnation’ (p. 68), but is more impressed by the absence of the charge in Luke and John (p. 68 n. 4).

4. Jesus’ own attitude towards the temple as a place of cult was one of indifference (pp. 102, 240f.). I shall argue that the threat of destruction appears in too many strata and coheres too well with the ‘cleansing’ of the temple to be denied to Jesus, and I follow the majority of scholars in taking the multiple attestation to indicate authenticity. It should be noted that Gaston finds no background in contemporary Jewish thought for the expectation of the destruction and renewal of the temple, and this buttresses his view that the threat is inauthentic. We shall see in the next chapter that the threat and implied renewal do have a setting in Jewish thought.

5. There is some debate about what took place within the temple precincts and what was relegated to the area outside. According to J. Klausner, Jesus of Nazareth, p. 314, the Pharisees would have permitted no selling or money-changing in the temple, although the Sadducees, then in charge, may have permitted the use of the outer court. See also Abrahams, Studies, pp. 86f.: commercial money-changers would not have been allowed in the temple precincts, but those who turned the profits over to the temple would have been permitted inside for one week, from 25 Adar to 1 Nisan. The buying and selling of sacrificial victims ordinarily took place outside. We cannot set the question of precise location, but we may assume that trade was allowed only in the court of the Gentiles— if anywhere in the temple confines. To the degree to which the view that there was never any exchange of money in the temple precincts rests on Berakoth 9.5 (and parallels), it may now be dismissed. Jeremias has better explained that mishnah as applying to visitors to the temple area (tourists and the like), who are prohibited from carrying money, not to those who came to offer sacrifice. See J. Jeremias, ‘Zwei Misszelten: 1. Antik-Jüdische Münzdeutungen. 2. Zur Geschichtlichkeit der Tempelreimigung,’ NTSt, 25, 1977, pp. 179f.


7. Ibid., p. 370.

8. Ibid., p. 88.


10. Ibid., p. 88.

11. Ibid., p. 84.

12. Cf. Klausner, Jesus of Nazareth, p. 314: the money-changing was necessary (he compares the sale of candles by Christians), ‘though such behaviour arouses indignation in the truly devout’.


15. Roloff, p. 95.

16. Ibid., p. 96.

17. Roloff, p. 97. One may note here Bousset’s view (Jesus, pp. 105f.): ‘Jesus attached no value to any outward forms. In exorcising himself ‘for the holiness and purity of the Temple service’ he still did not give it any true value. The action just shows his dislike of ‘pseudo-holiness and hypocrisy’. Roloff agrees on what Jesus did: purify the service; but he assigns real value to it in Jesus’ eyes.

18. Jeremias, Proclamation of Jesus, p. 145. It should be noted that Jeremias accepts Mark 11.17 as authentic, and thus his critical view corresponds to the motive which he attributes to the Gospels.

19. Aulén, Jesus, p. 77.

which the Essenes would have cleansed the temple, beginning with the High Priest and continuing with a reform of the whole cult. Jesus cannot be seen here as a religious reformer, cleansing the temple of abuses."

29. We noted above (n. 18) that Jeremias, for example, accepts Mark 11.17 as giving Jesus' words. Cf. also Albert Nolan, Jesus before Christianity (1980), p. 102: the issue was only the 'abuse of money and trade', Nolan continues by stating that there is evidence for fraud and theft, citing Jeremias, Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus, pp. 33f. Those pages, however, contain no such evidence, nor do I know of any.

30. See above, n. 1: further the Ergänzungskritik to Bultmann's Geschichte, ed. G. Theissen and Philipp Viethauer, 1971, p. 25. The authenticity of Mark 11.17 is doubted also by Georg Klimkeit, Die Umdeutung des Kultus in der Querungsmengde und in dem Neuen Testament, 1971, p. 209. Note also the view of Maria Premutti, Zeichenhaft Handlungen Jesu, 1980. She never doubts that 'cleansing' is the right term, though she argues persuasively against the authenticity of Mark 11.17 (pp. 87-90).

31. Roloff, Der Isid, Jesus, p. 93.

32. Harvey, Constraints, p. 132 and notes.

33. For references, see W. D. Davies, The Gospel and the Land, p. 349 n. 45 item 1. See especially the sensitive treatment by Moule, Birth, pp. 21-5.

34. Davies, loc. cit.

35. For the sake of argument, we presently accept the view that the trade, or part of it, was conducted in the court of the Gentiles. See n. 6 above and Davies' defence of this location, The Gospel and the Land, p. 356f.

36. Compare, however, the argument of J. D. M. Derrett, 'The Zeal of th Temple and the Cleansing of the Temple', Downside Review 95, 1977, pp. 79-94. He proposes that the casting out of merchants is something to which the prophets looked forward, citing Zech. 14.21 and other passages which do not appear to be directly relevant.

37. One could conceivably think that Jesus wanted to purify the temple, but simultaneously to redefine purity in such a way as to eliminate the standard distinction between sacred and profane. The redefinition would involve purging externals (sacrifice) in favour of internals (prayer). One may think, for example, of Käsemann's view that this is what Jesus did in Mark 7.15: it is not food which makes impure, but what comes out of the heart (see the Introduction, p. 34). I have not noted that anyone explicitly argues this case with regard to the temple, but the widespread discussion of Jesus' cleansing of the temple as cleansing or purifying the temple may rest on such a view. I would regard such a proposal, were it to be made, as being too improbable to discuss. Cf. the comment on the inner/outer distinction in the next note.

38. I am not arguing that no Jew of Jesus' day could have made the inner/outer distinction which is often attributed to him. On the contrary, Philo's writings contain this sort of distinction, and it may also be seen in Rom. 2.28ff. It is more than slightly difficult, however, to find this kind of distinction in literature of Palestinian provenance. Most to the point, I know of no clear example in the synoptic Gospels.


40. Davies, The Gospel and the Land, pp. 350ff. n. 46. So also Dodd, Founder, p. 147; Pesch, 'Der Anspruch Jesu', p. 56. According to the latter, the key passage is the quotation of Isa. 66.7 in Mark 11.17, but we have already seen that the verse is most probably a later addition.

41.Trade in the court of the Gentiles: see above, no. 6 and 45.


43. See especially Hengel, Was Jesus a Revolutionist?, ET 1971.
54. Gaston (No Stone on Another, p. 87) has strongly objected to drawing far-reaching conclusions from the possibility that the 'cleansing' took place in the court of the Gentiles.

55. Trautmann, Zeichenhafte Handlungen, pp. 120–22.

56. Examples are given throughout the section on the 'State of the Question' in the Introduction. Recently see Jeremias, Proclamation, p. 145; Meyer, Aims, p. 338; H. W. Bartsch, Jesus, Prophet and Messias aus Galiläa, 1970, p. 48; Boismard, Synopte II, p. 408: it was the sacerdotal caste which became exasperated at seeing Jesus pose as a religious reformer with regard to cultic practice.

57. Thus, for example, Rolf, Derirdische Jesus, p. 93; Brandon, Jesus and the Zealots, p. 338; cf. Meyer, Aims, p. 170: 'Jesus' act was symbol-charged'; Gaston, No Stone on Another, p. 86: the action was symbolic.

58. Hegel. Was Jesus a Revolutionary?, pp. 16f. Cf. Dodd, Founder, pp. 144f. 'The force which effected it was simply the personal authority which made itself felt when Jesus confronted the crowd.'

59. See the next note.

60. In favour of this interpretation of the action, see for example R. J. McKelvey, The New Temple. The Church in the New Testament, 1969, p. 66 ('It points to the coming of the kingdom of God'); pp. 71f. ('The new age would have its temple . . .'); James D. G. Dunn, Unity and Diversity in the New Testament, 1977, p. 324 (Jesus' disciples understood the action as pointing towards 'eschatological renewal centred on Mount Zion and on an eschatologically renewed or rebuilt temple'); Trautmann, Zeichenhafte Handlungen, pp. 124, 126f., 129, 386. On p. 130 she argues that the action was not 'prophetic', since there was no appeal to the Lord, which I take to be a distinction without much of a difference. Trautmann's position is interesting, since she holds that Jesus intended to purify the temple of present corrupting practice, but yet manages to see that the action points towards a new temple. The real force of the event stands out even more sharply when it is not confused with another, competing interpretation.

61. Note the setting of Jer. 19.10 in a lengthy spoken prediction of destruction.


63. See ch. 11 below.

64. The principal alternative for understanding Mark's meaning has been well argued by Donald Juel, Messiah and Temple: The Trial of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, 1977. His chief conclusion is that the author of Mark had in mind the Christian community as the temple not made with hands (see, for example, pp. 168f.). See also Dodd, Founder, pp. 89f.; Klinzing, Umdeutung, pp. 201ff. (with bibliography). Klinzing (pp. 204) also argues that the phrases 'made with hands' and 'not made with hands', absent from Matthew, are secondary additions.


66. Thus Bultmann: a saying about the temple goes back to Jesus, but we must remain uncertain about the form (History, pp. 126f.; Ergänzungshäfte, pp. 46f., with bibliography). In the Ergänzungshäfte he corrected his earlier view that the saying has a mythological basis and correctly placed it in the framework of Jewish apocalyptic (in the sense of eschatology). Dieter Lührmann's discussion of the sayings is quite instructive. He points out that Mark regarded the threat of Mark 14.58 as inauthentic, but accepted the prediction of 13.2. One can be certain that there was a saying and suspect that the version in 14.58 is closer to the original. See Lührmann, Markus 14.55–64, Christologie und Zerstörung des Tempels im Markusevangelium, NTS 27, 1981, pp. 457–74, here 466–9.

67. See the next chapter.