Mark's Jesus on Wealth and Poverty: A Response to C. Clifton Black and Margaret M. Mitchell

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Let me begin with a word of gratitude to Professors C. Clifton Black and Margaret M. Mitchell[1] for their careful, detailed, and stimulating engagement with *Jesus and Materialism in the Gospel of Mark: Traveling Light on the Way*. They have raised important questions, many of which open up avenues for further probing and dialogue. Given the constraints of space I have selected a couple of questions from each reviewer to address in detail. Since these questions cover different topics from the book, I will respond to each reviewer in turn.

I. Wealth and poverty in apocalyptic tension

C. Clifton Black notes that *Jesus and Materialism in the Gospel of Mark*[2] concedes that the pericope on the Rich Man (Mark 10:17-31) presents a "difficult conundrum," "a difficult tension." Black, therefore, asks, "If Mark leaves us with an unresolved tension, then how confidently may we claim, with Moses, that 'this [rich man] has already pledged allegiance to another god, another master"? It is an important question.

I offer here several critical clues in Mark's text that may reveal that the rich man has succumbed to the power of wealth. First, Mark has interwoven a high Christology into the encounter between Jesus and the rich man. The story of the rich man is a call story, for in the end, Jesus asks of the rich man what he asks of his followers: "come, follow me" (Mark 10:21; cf. 1:17; 2:14). There is no compelling reason for the rich man to do so, except he is able to discern *who* it is who commands him to follow. The identity of Jesus, then, is as central to this call story as it was in the call of the disciples. The rich man's address of Jesus and Jesus' response are, therefore, not incidental to the encounter. The rich man runs up, kneels before Jesus, and addresses him as "Good Teacher." Jesus' response to this characterization is "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone" (10:18). His response forces the reader to acknowledge that Jesus shares God's divine nature.[3] If

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Second, the rich man may be the embodiment of the seed among thorns (cf. Mark 4:19). Like the seed among thorns, the cares of "this age" (*tou ainos*), "the deceitfulness" (*h apat*) of riches, and the "desires" (*epithumiai*) for things (lit. "the rest" [*ta loipa*]) (4:19) are choking the word and stymieing growth. These are apocalyptic terms and the apocalyptic background to these terms suggests that when it comes to wealth, we are dealing with something more sinister and powerful. Black is correct to note that Matthew and Luke are unequivocal in the choice between God and Mammon while Mark never explicitly indicates this. However, if interpreters going all the way back to St. Jerome of Stridon[4] are correct in identifying the rich man as the embodiment of the seed among thorns, then it is not farfetched to conclude that Mark has already laid the foundation concerning the power of wealth to engender desire, to deceive us, and to obstruct the believer's growth "in this age." And perhaps the devout rich man's inability to see this is a warning to all believers concerning wealth's capacity to deceive even the most devout among the community of believers.

Third, the rich man is the only minor character in Mark whose encounter with Jesus does not result in a positive outcome.

1. This is a version of my oral response given at the Society of Biblical Literature meeting in Denver, CO, on November 20, 2022, slightly revised for journal publication.
2. Robert E. Moses, *Jesus and Materialism in the Gospel of Mark: Traveling Light on the Way* (Minneapolis: Fortress Academic, 2022).
3. T. J. Geddert, "The Implied YHWH Christology of Mark's Gospel: Mark's Challenge to the Reader to 'Connect the Dots,'" *BBR* 25 (2015), 325-340, esp. 328-329.
4. Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew* 3 (FC 117, p. 220).

The rich man's initial actions—he ran up and knelt before Jesus (10:17)—places him alongside other minor characters in the second Gospel who also express their faith in observable actions: the leper (1:40-42); Jairus (5:22-24); the woman with a blood flow (5:31-34); and the Syrophoenician woman (7:25-30). All of these minor characters receive positive outcomes in their encounter with Jesus. This in turn also heightens the tension in our pericope, for the attentive reader expects a positive outcome in Jesus' encounter with the rich man who ran and bowed before him. And yet the reader is disappointed. Unlike the other minor characters in Mark, the rich man's story does not have a happy ending.[5] When one combines this knowledge with the high Christology pervading this encounter, it forces the question upon the reader: Why does this minor character alone fail? How can a person walk away from the direct call of one who has revealed himself to share in God's divine nature? It seems to me that a plausible answer to these questions is that the rich man has succumbed to the power of wealth. Perhaps, unbeknownst to him, he has already pledged allegiance to another god, another master (cf. Matt 6:24).

Black's second question concerns my treatment of the temple incident in Mark 11:15-19. He notes that I wade into the interpretive controversy, what he calls "the Sanders/Evans debate," and claims that I "side firmly with Evans" in his view that Jewish texts "suggest the belief that the Messiah would one day purge Jerusalem of corrupt leaders, a belief Jesus may have held." Black raises the question: "Wherein lay their corruption"? Black claims that I acknowledge Sanders' alternative—that Jesus was not attacking priestly abuses but symbolizing the temple's destruction—however, I never engage it or refute it. He suggests that Sanders' argument—that we do not hear Jesus direct "charges of immorality, dishonesty, and corruption…*against the priests*"—is worth pondering. I agree with Black on taking Sanders' argument very seriously. And despite my broad agreement with Sanders' overall goals, I do make some observations concerning areas where I find Sanders' argument unpersuasive (See *Jesus and Materialism in the Gospel of Mark*, p. 180 n53). It is also not entirely accurate, however, as Black claims, that I side firmly with Evans in this debate. Rather, I attempt to take a mediating position, which is best encapsulated in a quotation I offer from Jonathan Klawans. It was worth revisiting the quotation: "To suppose that priestly abuse never happened is to be naïve. To assert that abuse may have happened at a later date but not in Jesus' day rests on narrow readings of the evidence. Indeed, this view rests on having already interpreted what we seek to explain: to deny that there is any evidence for priestly corruption in Jesus' day is to assert that the New Testament accounts of Jesus' action in the temple cannot be read to that effect. On the other hand, to claim systematic abuse was endemic to the temple system is to deny any integrity to ancient Jewish temple-goers."[6] I agree with Klawans. To this end,

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it is significant that the book never adopts the term "cleansing" for the temple disruption as Evans and those who side with him do; for, like Sanders, I see in Jesus' action an act symbolizing the destruction of the temple. Like the Hebrew prophets, Jesus' action was a prophetic act predicting the temple's destruction. However, it is also important to observe that prophetic actions were often directed at concrete problems—institutional and national failures. Without the backdrop of a real problem that needs remedying, Jesus' action would be devoid of meaning. The temple authorities would have viewed his action as that of a lunatic, if it was not directed at a problem. The fact that they took it very seriously meant that they saw embedded in his action a serious critique of the temple that required a response. So, what was the problem that Mark's Jesus detected? I contend that Mark's sandwiching of the temple incident (11:15-19) between the cursing of the fig tree (11:12-14, 20-25) means we need to take seriously the probability that Jesus was displeased with the temple for failing in its obligation toward the poor. And in this failure, the temple leaders were culpable. Jesus' ministry to the poor may be the key to unlocking the extremely complex and puzzling temple incident. I will return to this point again in my response to Margaret Mitchell.

Black quotes in his review only the first half of Jesus' critique of the temple: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations" (Isa 56:7). But he does not include the second part "But you have made it a den of robbers" (Jer 7:11). The latter half

5. D. M. Rhoads, J. Dewey, and D. Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 100.

6. J. Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 228. Cited in *Jesus and Materialism in the Gospel of Mark,* 145.

of the quotation is significant, because Jeremiah 7 is a sermon against the temple and its leaders. In Jeremiah 7 the preservation of God's presence in the land and in his temple is dependent on God's people amending their ways and doing "justice" (*mishpat*) with one another (Jer 7:5). The prophet stands at the gate of the temple and declares the word of the Lord, "if you do not oppress the foreigner, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever" (Jer 7:6-7). Here I would like to draw attention to Mark Leuchter's research. Leuchter has demonstrated that in Jeremiah's temple sermon, Jeremiah "follows the phenomenological mandate of Deut 17:8-13 in order to make this point: the land itself is declared a מוקם [*maqom*] by a qualified Mosaic figure in a qualified sacral locale, and Jeremiah's Sermon constitutes the very טפשם [*mishpat*] discussed in Deut. 17.9-12."[7] Significant is the fact that in Deut 17:9-12 it is the priests who are charged with enforcing and teaching the people how to carry out this *mishpat*. To the extent that the land is devoid of such justice, the priests are legally answerable. In addition, the Jeremiah 7 sermon is repeated in Jeremiah 26. Jeremiah 26 is widely believed by scholars to be the same temple sermon of Jeremiah 7 from a different vantage point.[8] In Jeremiah 26, "the priests and the prophets" are explicitly identified together with the people as Jeremiah's audience (Jer 26:7). In sum, while I do not subscribe to the position that the temple incident was a "cleansing," I do think that it was a prophetic act symbolizing the destruction of the temple for failing in its obligations toward the poor; and embedded within this prophetic act was a critique of the temple leadership. Let me stress again my view that Jesus' ministry to the poor may be the key to unlocking the thorny temple incident.

II. The duty of the temple and modern applications

I am heartened to see that Margaret M. Mitchell shares my conviction that materialism in Western Christianity is an issue that demands our attention. She raises some important questions concerning how my reading of Mark may inform public theological and secular debates and policies concerning those experiencing poverty. I will return to this later.

I also find her clear articulation of the places where she shares broad agreements with me and places where she finds my arguments less convincing quite helpful. In the short space that I have, I would like to address Mitchell's question concerning the role of the temple in my broader argument and her question about the application of the book's insights to current issues.

Mitchell is not convinced about the book's "insistence—as

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a historical claim about second temple Judaism—that the main responsibility or duty of the temple in Jerusalem was to provide sustenance for the poor and vulnerable." Mitchell sees this as an overly broad generalization. Mitchell notes correctly that the temple was a very complex institution, "a carefully choreographed physical space with a set of ritual roles and behaviors." Any account of the temple must wrestle with its role as the locus for the sacrificial cult. I agree with Mitchell's account of the temple here. To this end, I should note that it is not entirely accurate as Mitchell claims that the book insists that "the main responsibility or duty of the temple was to provide sustenance for the poor and vulnerable." I myself would argue that such a claim concerning the temple is mistaken. The main responsibility or duty of the temple was to be the center of worship (with all its complex rituals and sacrificial systems) for the people of Israel. The book assumes the latter; it takes for granted this primary role of the temple. Thus, given passages such as Mark 1:44 (which Mitchell mentions), I would not characterize Jesus' attitude toward the temple and its leadership as "entirely negative." What I attempt to do is to situate Jesus' attitude toward the temple within a spectrum of Jewish sentiments regarding the temple. At one end of the spectrum would be the Qumran Essene community and at the other end would be the Sadducees. One of the reasons why an Essene community settled in Qumran was because they wanted to dissociate themselves from the temple. I see the Qumran position as extreme and my repeated discussions of the Qumran attitude toward the temple does not mean that I see Jesus as sharing in their view. As I make clear, "The appeal to the Qumran sectarians is not to suggest that Jesus held the same anti-temple and anti-priest views of this group, which was in all likelihood extreme.[9] There is no evidence that Jesus, like the Essenes, boycotted the temple. But the evidence from the Qumran sectarians demonstrates that certain aspects of temple practices were criticized by some Jews, though it needs to be acknowledged that the criticisms were diverse and came in varying degrees, ranging from the moderate to total rejection."[10] The Jesus I uncover in Mark does not seek to abolish the Mosaic Law. Rather, he practices it and calls for new ways to engage the Law that would be liberating for the marginalized. Such a Jesus would not have an "entirely negative" attitude toward the temple; rather, he would be willing to participate in some of the temple's cultic functions while also calling out what he saw to be failures within the temple and failures of its leadership.

Nonetheless—and this point is central to the aims of the

7. Mark Leuchter, "The Temple Sermon and the Term מוקם in the Jeremianic Corpus," *JSOT* 30 (2005), 93-109, here 103.

8. See, e.g., K. M. O'Connor, "'Do not Trim a Word': The Contributions of Chapter 26 to the Book of Jeremiah," *CBQ* 51 (1989), 617-630; H. G. Reventlow, "Gattung und Überlieferung in der 'Templerede Jeremias', Jer 7 und 26," *ZAW* 81 (1969), 315-352.

9. See, e.g., 1QpHab VIII, 8-XII, 9; CD V, 6-8.

10. Moses, *Jesus and Materialism in the Gospel of Mark*, 142.

book—in addition to its cultic functions, the temple also had obligations to the poor people in the land—at least the author of Mark is of this view.[11] Mark's sandwiching of the temple incident between the cursing of the fig tree is again significant for our understanding of Jesus' attitude toward the temple. Mitchell agrees that Mark is linking the impending destruction of the temple with the withering fig tree. She is less convinced about my emphasis on Jesus' hunger as he approached the fig tree. Mark is explicit, however, that Jesus came to the fig tree because he was hungry (11:12-13). It is worth noting that there are only two places in Mark's Gospel where the verb for hunger is used: Jesus' approach to the fig tree (symbolizing the temple) and David's approach to the House of God in the Sabbath controversy (2:23-28). David approached the house of God when he was hungry. Mark's choice of "House of God" may indicate that Mark has transformed the incident at Nob (1 Samuel 21-23) to one occurring in the temple. In his time of hunger, David approached the House of God and was nourished by a friendly priest in the temple. The same could not be said for Jesus, however. If the fig tree is symbolic for the temple, then Jesus did not find the temple to be a place where the hungry could be nourished. Rather, what he found was a busy place, too busy with commercial activity to even notice that a poor widow "out of her poverty had put all she had in the temple treasury" (12:44). How would the hunger of those like this poor widow be nourished? Would anyone even notice her amid the busy commercial activity? Let me offer a brief word about Isaiah 56:7 in this context. Mitchell observes that in quoting Isa 56:7 ("the house of prayer for all the nations") Mark is picking up on Isa 56:8 that God will gather the proselyte Gentiles to himself. Yes. But, in addition, I would include the observation that the Gentiles who come to the house of God and make it a house of prayer for all nations are "the foreigners" in Isa 56:6 who join themselves to the Lord. The Gentiles are "foreigners." This is significant because, as argued in the book, foreigners are in the Old Testament part of what the book terms the cluster of the vulnerable. Foreigners are often grouped with the poor, orphans, and widows as a vulnerable group whose wellbeing is of utmost concern to God (e.g., Lev 19:10; 23:22; Deut 14:29; 24:19-21; 26:12-13). Crucially, the Jeremiah 7 sermon from which the other half of Jesus' quotation in the temple derives also mentions the cluster of the vulnerable (Jer 7:6). Interpreters have often missed these important clues in the text. That the Gentiles who are gathered are "foreigners" who have joined themselves to God, that "foreigners" are often included in the cluster of the vulnerable with the poor, widows, and orphans, and that both the Isaiah and Jeremiah passages Jesus quotes in the temple hint at the vulnerable cannot be overlooked when interpreting Jesus' actions in the temple.

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Finally, we turn to Mitchell's important invitation to apply the teachings of Jesus uncovered in the book to our modern context. Having quoted my claim that Jesus' message endures and serves as a guide for followers of Jesus in various communities, including our time, Mitchell raises the pressing question of how this message may be concretely applied to our context. She notes that there are competing messages, as others draw on the Bible to oppose government programs geared toward those experiencing economic poverty. Mitchell cites the example of Ralph Drollinger, head of Capitol Ministries, who distinguishes between the poor and bums. Drollinger argues that, "In many cases the real needs of the *poor* are spiritual, not economical … and their plight stems from their character, not their environment." First a word about my ultimate goal in this project. My plan is to do at least three books focused on the Gospels under the umbrella theme "the poverties of affluence." *Jesus and Materialism in the Gospel of Mark* is the first in this series and the others would be similar in terms of focus on the Gospels. The hope is to include a fourth that synthesizes the information from the first three in order to address the sort of questions that Mitchell is raising here. Still, I would like to make a few comments concerning her important questions on contemporary relevance and application.

First, as noted, the overarching theme of this project is "the poverties of affluence." I think the quotation offered from Ralph Drollinger is a good illustration of what the project terms the poverties of affluence. Wealth often creates hubris and blinds us to the needs of those around us. Time and again, we see in the apocalyptic framework of Mark how those with rank and status are blind and lack discernment. The power of wealth and sin to deceive us (4:18-19) should be a caution to all of us in how our ability to adequately discern the needs of the poor may be compromised. We will be of no use to those experiencing economic

11. Related to this point is Mitchell's objection to the claim made in the book that there was a "true essence of the Law." I share in Mitchell's concern here, though I should perhaps emphasize, as noted on pp. 75 and 78-79, that what I am formulating as the true essence of the Law in Mark is similar to Matthew's "weightier matters of the Law," i.e., justice, mercy, and faith (Matt 23:23). The claim the book is making is that in approaching controversies concerning keeping aspects of the Law Jesus viewed justice, mercy, and faith as indispensable for faithful application of the Law.

poverty until we come to grips with our own poverties.

Second, while I think there may be some merit in pointing to Jesus' own poverty (2 Cor 8:9; Phil 2:7) and asking Drollinger if the poverty of Jesus stemmed from his character, rather than his imperialistic context, I would also want to be cautious and perhaps even hesitant to have a conversation with Drollinger *about* the poor. Dialogue about those experiencing economic poverty that does not also include the voices of the poor often results in us denying agency to those experiencing economic poverty. We subject them to a distant, comfortable gaze that is often objectifying. Here I think the community of care that I see in the ministry of Jesus offers us a template of how to relate to those experiencing economic poverty. As part of our own communities, those experiencing economic poverty are no longer a nameless, generalized group about whom we can theorize in the abstract, and for whom we practice impersonalized, disengaged giving. They are neither those whom we objectify and stereotype nor distant recipients of our charitable donations. They are our sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers, daughters, and sons (Mark 10:30). And while we may think that they are needy, our interactions with them would reveal to us that they have more to offer us than we have to offer them. They can assist us with our own poverties. So, in short, to Mitchell's question, "How would I respond to Drollinger?" I would say to him, "Let's go spend time with some poor people."

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