

MARK 13: 14 – A CRYPTIC PROPHECY OF THE MESSIAH’S DEATH?

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Generally, current explanations of Mark 13:14 identify the “desolating sacrilege” or “the abomination of desolation” with the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. While certainly the agent of this desolation, the Roman action is not the cause. Both in Jeremiah 7, in various Second Temple documents, and in Josephus, it is Israelite action that precipitates divine judgment resulting in the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem. It is argued that in 13:14 the Markan Jesus, within the broad perspective of the Markan narrative, is defining prophetically the crucifixion of the Messiah, i.e., viewed by God as a sacrilege committed by the Jewish leaders and the action that precipitates the destruction or desolation of Jerusalem and the Temple.

As far as difficult texts in the New Testament go, Mk 13:14 and its reference to τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως (“the desolating sacrilege” or “abomination of desolation”) has to rank among the top ten. The variety of interpretations¹ suggested is quite staggering and to posit another seems foolhardy at best. Yet it is a *crux interpretum* that draws the attention of interpreters again and again to engage in fresh attempts to understand more clearly what the author intended.² Many contemporary interpreters, using historical-critical methods, seek a reference within Roman-Jewish relations as the basis for interpretation, particularly some militaristic Roman action related to the defilement of the Jerusalem temple. Or, as Joel Marcus recently proposed, the actions of Jewish Zealots to take over the Temple and High Priesthood position during the early years of the rebellion (67-68 CE) as reported by Josephus.³ In North America, particularly among theologically conservative commentators, this section of Mark 13 tends to be read in the

¹ Historical surveys of the interpretation of this text can be found in George Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days: The Interpretation of the Olivet Discourse* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendricksen, 1993); D. Ford, *The Abomination of Desolation in Biblical Eschatology* (Washington, DC.: University Press of America, 1979); W.A. Such, *The Abomination of Desolation in the Gospel of Mark: Its Historical Reference in Mark 13:14 and its Impact on the Gospel* (Lanham, Md.: Oxford University Press of America, 1999). Other scholars who make a similar case for this interpretation of Mar 13:14 include Peter G. Bolt, *The Cross From a Distance: Atonement in Mark’s Gospel*. *New Studies in Biblical Theology*, 18 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity 2004) and David P Scaer, *Discourses in Matthew: Jesus Teaches the Church* (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 380-84. See also comments by C. S. Mann, *Mark. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary. The Anchor Bible 27* (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 521-22.

² The question as to whether the historical Jesus actually said these words is a highly debated issue and so for the purposes of this article the narrator is the primary agent.

³ Joel Marcus, *Mark 8 – 16. The Anchor Yale Bible* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), 890-91.

context of the Messiah's second coming and the "abomination of desolation" is associated with the activities of an antichrist figure who emerges just prior to the parousia.⁴

A question that narrative critics⁵ would ask about this expression concerns the viewpoint of the narrator. Who is defining this βδέλυγμα that is characterized in some sense by the noun ἐρημώσεως? In the perspective of the first-century Jewish religious establishment (that probably would see it as a reference the actions of Antiochus Epiphanes in 168-166 BCE⁶), it will function as commentary upon a pagan defilement⁷ of the temple. And if the writer is assuming the historical situation in Judea ca. 65 CE, then how does he guide the narrator to express his understanding of this phrase?

If we ask ourselves what Jesus in this Markan context identifies as τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως which occurs in Jerusalem, we might discern a very different result. In the Markan narrative (13:1-2), Jesus, as the primary character, is giving this discourse to four of his disciples, as he comments upon imminent events.⁸ Frequently in this Gospel narrative Jesus disagrees

⁴ Frequently this is linked with Paul's reference to a "man of lawlessness" in 2 Thess 2:3ff who "sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God." An example of this exegesis is offered by D. Edmond Hiebert, *Mark. A Portrait of the Servant* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody, 1974), 323-24.

⁵ According to Rhoads "narrative criticism has come to be understood as the analysis of the story-world of a narrative along with the analysis of its implied rhetorical impact on readers....Narrative criticism's major contribution to biblical scholarship in general has been the establishment of the surface narrative of the text as a legitimate object of study." David Rhoads, *Reading Mark, Engaging the Gospel* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2004), 24. The storied meaning of the events expressed by the author through the narrator can only be fully understood "when we see them as narratives presented as being about real events" (p.28). The relationship between the story as narrated and historical events or characters must be established independently of the methods used by narrative criticism. However, the more we understand about first-century events, personages, movements, literary expression and ideas, the better we will understand how the story works. In my view narrative criticism can be employed in an integrative way with historical criticism and its careful use does not deny historicity.

⁶ This obviously stems from the prophetic visions of Daniel 8-11 and the way in which that author seems to relate the "desolating sacrilege" to the activities of Antiochus Epiphanes.

⁷ One of the key interpretative questions for discerning the intended meaning of this phrase in 13:14 is this: from whose standpoint is this action regarded as a βδέλυγμα? Is it the Jewish religious leaders, the main character in the narrative (Jesus), the narrator's religious community or, in the narrator's perspective, God himself?

⁸ I assume in this paper that Mark 13:14-23 describes actions within the broader scope of events previously outlined in 13:5-13. My reasons for this include:

- a. The parallelism between ὅταν δὲ ἀκούσητε (v. 7) which introduces repeated events occurring within human history and ὅταν δὲ ἴδητε (v. 14) which introduces a specific catastrophe which is signaled by τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως.
- b. In both cases the audience is second person plural and seems to address the four disciples with Jesus (v. 4), suggesting they will be observers of these events.
- c. The reference to οἱ ἐν τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ indicates a select group is being addressed because the event announced by τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως affects them particularly.
- d. The time reference which begins v. 24 suggests that the matters described in vv. 24-27 are separate from those referenced in vv. 5-23.

with accepted first-century Jewish expectations,⁹ especially their interpretations of Jewish scriptures, and charts his own course. However, as the hero in the narrative Jesus is aware of contemporary perspectives. We should expect that his comments will show similarities with ideas expressed in first-century Second Temple Judaism, because the narrative is set in that historical context.¹⁰ Narratologically, a Son of Man figure rejected by Israel's religious elite, because they consider him to be a religious fraud, could be considered a "sacrilege" in God's eyes. Hints of this occur in texts such as the Parable of the Tenant Farmers (12:1-10), in which the action of the tenants in killing the heir results in their destruction. Perhaps the statement in this comparison story receives further clarity in Jesus' discourse in Mk 13, where he indicates that the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish religious leaders results ultimately in the "desolation" of Jerusalem and the temple, i.e., their destruction, not merely their defilement. At first blush such a proposal sounds improbable, yet an argument can be made that this may well be the interpretation that the Markan author expressed through the story's narrator. Whether this also is what Jesus historically intended as the meaning, presuming the essence of his discourse is preserved, remains another important, but related question.

Contextually, such a proposed interpretation has much to commend it. For example, this text could be construed as another in the series of prophetic words predicting the suffering and death of the Messiah at the hands of the "elders, chief priests and teachers of the law" (Mk 8:31; 9:10-13; 9:31-32; 10:33-34) that form a significant part of the narrative fabric. The Markan author specifically reveals how difficult and radical this idea of a suffering and dying Messiah was for Jesus' disciples. However, this specific prophecy in Mk 13:14 would speak of the impact of this event not upon the Messiah or upon his followers, but upon those who perpetrate this act (it is the cause of their "desolation"), as well as evaluate their deed from God's standpoint ("sacrilege or abomination").¹¹ Mk 13:14, in this interpretation, would also continue the

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- e. Jesus' initial prophecy relates to the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem and the disciples ask "what is the sign whenever all these things shall come to pass?" (v. 4). It appears that the contents of vv. 5-23 speak to these matters directly.

⁹ Prime examples of this would be his understanding of John the Baptist as the promised Elijah, his definition of his messianic role as including suffering, and his declaration that the temple as operated by the Jerusalem religious authorities is a "den of thieves."

¹⁰ Sirach 10:12-13 says that "pride's beginning for a human is to rebel against the Lord, and against him who made him his heart rebels, because pride's beginning is sin, and he who clings to it will pour out abomination (βδέλυγμα. Therefore the Lord brought on incredible attacks and ruined him completely" (NETS). Sin produces abominations, that in turn generate divine destruction.

¹¹ Jesus' warning to the inhabitants of Jerusalem that the Lukan narrative describes in 19:40-44, as he enters Jerusalem, perhaps, serves as an example of this kind of prediction. Consider also Mt 23:38 where Jesus apparently warns the religious leaders that "your house is left to you desolate (ἔρημος)." However, there is a textual variant that omits ἔρημος (cf. Lk 13:35 and its textual issues).

series of judgment oracles in this narrative, including those that Jesus initiated in Mk 11 with his actions in the temple, as he declares its desolation.¹² Jesus' parable spoken to the religious leaders in Mk 12:1-12 (with its language of destruction in v. 9) further illustrates this kind of prophetic warning.

I will in this article argue that in the framework of the Markan narrative Jesus in 13:14 employs this phrase from Daniel to refer to his crucifixion as the Messiah. It is intended to be a cryptic prophecy regarding his death and its implications for Israel. This is the final rebellious act by leaders of God's covenant people that seals their judgment and results in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. This hypothesis does not deny that historically Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans or that the immediate cause of this desolation was, in fact, the action by the Roman general Titus in 70 CE. What the hypothesis proposes is that for the Markan narrator the role of Rome in this is incidental. The narrator seeks to establish that the sacrilege in God's eyes is the rejection of Jesus as Messiah by the Jewish leadership, not the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. It is this sacrilege that eventually results in the desolation of Jerusalem and the Temple that historically was completed in 70 CE through Roman agency.

General Narratological Considerations

Within the literary structure of this Gospel, chapter 13 serves as the climax to Jesus' teaching in the Temple and about its future that begins in 11:1, when Jesus enters Jerusalem. The writer, uniquely among the synoptic authors, frames Jesus' actions in the Temple with the cursing of the Fig Tree (11:12-14, 20-25). Jesus' actions towards the tree become symbolic for his actions in the Temple and his prophetic condemnation of its leadership and practices. The narrative continues with the condemnation of the Jewish religious leaders in the Parable of the Tenant Farmers (12:1-10). Because they "reject the stone," they in turn will be rejected as leaders of God's people. Now in his final, lengthy discourse, Jesus announces in specific detail that the Temple and thus Jerusalem will be thoroughly destroyed. His discourse responds to the question of the four disciples as to when such a tragic event will happen and what signs will indicate its imminence (13:4). Given the flow of the narrative, the narrator's placement of Jesus' final discourse brings to a

¹² Jesus' reference to Jer 7:11 ("den of robbers") in Mk 11:17 is taken from the oracle that prophesies the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians, but ultimately as an act of judgment against Israel by Yahweh. Mk 13 makes explicit that this new destruction is coming. N.T Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1996), 353 states that "the whole of the chapter [Mk 13] is to be read not only as a prediction of the destruction of the Temple, but also as an implicit claim that the destruction was coming about because of Israel's apostasy and the Temple's pollution."

head the warnings of judgment that will come if the Jewish leaders persist in rejecting Jesus as Yahweh's Messiah.

In this discourse about the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem, Jesus includes the following words (13:14):

ὅταν δὲ ἴδητε τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως ἐστηκότα¹³ ὅπου οὐ δεῖ¹⁴,
ὁ ἀναγινώσκων νοεῖτω, τότε οἱ ἐν τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ φευγέτωσαν εἰς τὰ
ὄρη.¹⁵

Now whenever you should see the abomination of desolation standing where *he* should not (let the reader understand) then, let those who are in Judea escape into the hills.¹⁶

Having warned his disciples (Mk 13:5-13) about the tragic rejection which they will experience as they share the Gospel message throughout the world, Jesus in the narrative turns his attention to those disciples who remain in Judea. He forecasts the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (v. 2), heralded and precipitated by this abomination of desolation, and urges his followers to flee Jerusalem and its Judean environs so that they will not be trapped in this incredible event, giving them advance notice about the false claims (i.e., false messiahs and false prophets in vv. 21-23) that are connected with it.

Structurally, within this discourse the temporal statement in v. 14 (ὅταν δὲ ἴδητε) parallels a similar statement in v. 7 (ὅταν δὲ ἀκούσατε).¹⁷ These two

¹³ H. B. Swete (*Commentary on Mark* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 1977 rpr.), page 305) indicates that many textual witnesses read εστος (with several reading εστος) which would be the perfect active participle, neuter nominative/accusative singular form. But this is rejected by NA28, being considered a variant entering the tradition under the influence of the Matthean parallel and a correction of a more difficult reading.

¹⁴ In Matthew's Gospel (24:15) this clause is replaced by the phrase ἐν τόπῳ ἁγίῳ. Werner Kelber, *The Kingdom in Mark. A New Place and a New Time* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Fortress Press, 1974), 119, identifies this as the temple. Most Matthean scholars would agree with him. Note that the phrase has no article and so does not define a specific "holy place." Further, this is the only use of this phrase in Matthew and it does not occur in LXX Daniel or in LXX Jeremiah 7. Jerusalem as a city can be described as holy. So we have to use the context to determine its meaning. In Jeremiah 7 and Daniel 9:27; 12:11 the location of the sacrilege that creates the abomination is associated with the physical temple. David Scaer, *Discourses in Matthew*, 382 argues that it is a reference to Golgotha, the place where Jesus was crucified. This is now the new "holy place," because Jesus is the new temple (Matt 12:6).

¹⁵ The parallel texts in Matthew and Luke read:

ὅταν οὖν ἴδητε τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως τὸ ρηθὲν διὰ Δανιὴλ τοῦ προφήτου ἐστος ἐν τόπῳ ἁγίῳ, ὁ ἀναγινώσκων νοεῖτω, τότε οἱ ἐν τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ φευγέτωσαν εἰς τὰ ὄρη,... (Matt 24:25-26a).

ὅταν δὲ ἴδητε κυκλουμένην ὑπὸ στρατοπέδων Ἰερουσαλήμ, τότε γινώτε ὅτι ἤγγικεν ἡ ἐρήμωσις αὐτῆς. Τότε οἱ ἐν τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ φευγέτωσαν εἰς τὰ ὄρη,... (Lk 21:20-21a)

¹⁶ My translation.

indefinite, temporal, adverbial clauses follow and define a more general warning by Jesus (vv. 5-6) to his disciples lest they be deceived by those who come “in my name claiming ‘I am he...’.” False understandings of messianic activity will continue, even as Jesus himself has corrected messianic misconceptions held by his own disciples (e.g., 8:31ff) and challenged current messianic expectations held by Jewish religious leaders (e.g., 12:35ff). Whenever his followers hear and see certain things, Jesus prophesies that at that point they should not confuse them with the events that will accompany the return of the Son of Man. It seems that Jesus deliberately tells them what they will hear and see so that they will not be deceived into thinking that these things are harbingers of the parousia. In v. 23 Jesus concludes this section of his address with the warning, "So be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead of time." As Jesus goes on to point out, conversely, no one knows when the parousia will occur - neither people, nor angels, nor even the Son of Man himself (vv. 32-36).

Interpreting the Phrase τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως

It is appropriate to ask how in the narrative the abomination or sacrilege itself relates to the desolation. The Hebrew phrase in Daniel 12:11 (אֲבֹמִיָּהוּ שֶׁיִּרְשָׁע) is a bound construction formed from two nouns. The NRSV translates this phrase as “the abomination that desolates.” Its translation in Greek Daniel reflects the Hebrew construction (τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως) and presumably reflects the same sense. The head noun βδέλυγμα refers to “someth. disgusting that arouses wrath, *loathsome* thing; someth. that is totally defiling, *abomination*, *pollutant*.”¹⁸ The genitive substantive ἐρημώσεως¹⁹ that qualifies the head noun can bear various interpretations. It could be a general, descriptive genitive, with the noun in the genitive characterizing the head noun in some sense. It may function as an attributive genitive, with the genitive noun defining a primary attribute of the head noun. This would warrant a translation such as “desolating sacrilege” (NRSV) or “a loathsome act that causes desolation” (NASB).²⁰ What is the

¹⁷ Seeing and hearing with understanding are critical, spiritual abilities in Mark's narrative (cf. 4:10-12; 8:14-21).

¹⁸ BAGD, 172.

¹⁹ The noun means “devastation, destruction, depopulation” (BAGD, 392). Desolation probably implies a destruction. See Robert H. Gundry, *Mark. A Commentary on his Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 772.

²⁰ The choice of the term “sacrilege” by the translators of the NRSV and the NASB suggests an action that arouses the wrath of God because it is a serious violation of what is sacred. Defining what act the Markan author has in mind is the critical question.

“desolation” referred to? The noun ἐρήμωσεως suggests the idea of depopulation.

If we should distinguish the 'sacrilege' from the 'destruction', as cause related to effect, then I would agree that the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple that Jesus references by this phrase in the narrative could be identified historically in the Roman attack in 68-70 CE. However, what would be the sacrilege perpetrated by the Romans? Is it simply the invasion of the land by Gentile forces? We gain no hint of this in anything that Jesus says in this discourse or in the larger Markan narrative. The Romans may be the means by which this desolation is accomplished, but the narrator does not seem to identify them as the cause. We still must identify what this sacrilege itself might be, that once occurring should be an unqualified warning that Jerusalem and its temple will soon be destroyed.

Further we need to ask in whose eyes, according to the Markan story, is this anticipated act a “sacrilege”? Is it the viewpoint of God, the Jewish religious leaders, the historical Jesus, the narrator, the early Christian community, or some other person or group?²¹ The usual interpretations of this entire phrase, relating it historically only to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, seem to presume the Jewish religious leaders' viewpoint, or perhaps the early Jewish Christian community's viewpoint. The Jewish religious leaders would certainly consider the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by Gentile forces as sacrilege. Presumably, since many in the early Christian community also were ethnically Jewish, they might have a similar perspective. But why would the Markan Jesus merely reiterate a perspective held by Jewish religious leaders? His interactions with them elsewhere in the narrative would not support such a direction. Normally he is challenging their interpretations of Scripture that relate to the Messiah and his actions.

Jesus' prophecy in the Markan context is expressing his evaluation of the predicted event, i.e., sacrilege. Jeremiah used this kind of language to describe sinful actions by Israel and he was speaking as God's prophet. If the complete phrase (“the desolating sacrilege”) defines a destruction that is an act of divine judgment triggered by some sacrilegious act, then presumably some other party is responsible for the sacrilege, not God. He brings the destruction in response to the sacrilege. But what act of sacrilege would evoke such a divine response, namely the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple? In the

²¹ It is very difficult to sort out such a question. What we do have is the text of Mark's Gospel, the narratological context, and data from contemporary Jewish writers (some of whose writings are included in the New Testament, e.g., Matthew's Gospel).

two previous cases within Israelite history in which the tabernacle²² and the temple²³ were destroyed, Israel's sin is the trigger but a pagan army was the agent used by God to accomplish judgment. This pattern is perhaps important in evaluating the author's intended meaning of this phrase in Mk 13:14.

The Use and Meaning of the Phrase in Greek Daniel

The phrase τὸ βδέλυγμα τῶν ἐρημώσεων²⁴ occurs in the Theodotonic Greek translation of Dan 9:27; 12:11 (βδέλυγμα ἐρημώσεως)²⁵ [cf. 11:31 (βδέλυγμα ἠφανισμένον)²⁶]:

...and by half of the week sacrifice and libation will cease, and in the temple there will be an abomination of desolations even until a consummation, and a consummation will be given for the desolation (9:27)²⁷

...and seed from him will arise and will profane the sanctuary of sovereignty. And they will abolish the regular offering and will render an obliterated abomination (11:31)²⁸ ...and from the time of the removal of the regular offering and abomination of desolation will be given - one thousand two hundred ninety days (12:11).²⁹

²² Shiloh's destruction and the capture of the ark by the Philistines are recounted in 1 Sam 4:10-11, 22. This fulfills the prophecy to Eli that the corruption of his sons as priests brings God's punishment (1 Sam 2:27-33). Ps 78:60-64 gives another account.

²³ Various accounts of the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians are given in the Old Testament. Cf. 2 Ki 25.

²⁴ This reading also occurs in the corresponding Hexaplaric text.

²⁵ The corresponding Hexaplaric text reads τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως, which is the form found in the text of Mark 13:14. This suggests that the form of the phrase in the Markan narrative may depend upon the so-called Hexaplaric form of the LXX Daniel text.

²⁶ The corresponding Old Greek text reads βδέλυγμα ἐρημώσεως.

²⁷ This is *A New English Translation of the Septuagint's* translation of J. Ziegler's edition of the Theodotonic text of Greek Daniel. Note should be made of the plural "desolations." The Septuagint text is only slightly different. The NIV translation of the Hebrew text for 9:27 is "...he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing of the temple he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him." The Greek text of Daniel is, of course, problematic. The text which is found in the majority of manuscripts is generally attributed to Theodotion, while the "Septuagint" text survives in two Greek manuscripts, supported by the Syro-hexapla translation (cf. S. Jellicoe. *The Septuagint and Modern Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 84ff).

²⁸ This is *A New English Translation of the Septuagint's* translation of J. Ziegler's edition of Old Greek Daniel. The Theodotonic text reads βδέλυγμα ἠφανισμένον, but the Septuagint text reads βδέλυγμα ἐρημώσεως. The translation of the Hebrew text in the NIV is "His armed forces will rise up to desecrate the temple fortress and will abolish the daily sacrifice. Then they will set up the abomination that causes desolation."

²⁹ This is *A New English Translation of the Septuagint's* translation of J. Ziegler's edition of the Theodotonic text of Greek Daniel. The NIV translation of the Hebrew text is "From the time that the daily sacrifice is abolished and the abomination that causes desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days."

In each case the phrase occurs in a setting which speaks of the cessation of temple worship in Jerusalem because of its desecration, as God's people are attacked and oppressed by presumably pagan opponents.³⁰ As J. Lust points out,

An investigation of the relevant texts shows that the abomination of desolation often replaces the “Tamid” or its altar. Since the Tamid is a sacrifice, our suggestion is that the “abomination” in question should also be a sacrifice or perhaps the altar for such.³¹

Marcus asserts that “in Daniel itself, the phrase is a coded reference to Antiochus Epiphanes’ erection of an image of a pagan deity, the Syrian god Baal Shemayin, on the altar of the Jerusalem Temple in 168 BCE.”³² The Daniel author never identifies precisely what historical event this phrase describes.³³ Whether he knew and refused to say or it remained an undefined part of his vision, it seems impossible to say.

In antiquity, subsequent Jewish interpreters suggested whom or what this metaphor in the text of Daniel represents. The author of 1 Maccabees understood this phrase to refer to Antiochus Epiphanes' desecration of the Jerusalem temple by the sacrifice of swine in the holy place (1:54), something offensive to Israel's God given the statements in the Torah regarding the uncleanness of pigs. The desolation that occurs relates to the inability of Israel to continue its worship practices in the Temple because it now is polluted and unusable for Jewish cultic purposes. However, the temple itself was not destroyed; neither was Jerusalem. Josephus supports the linkage of the abomination described by Daniel with a pagan altar: “The king also built a pagan altar upon the temple-altar, and slaughtered swine thereon, thereby practicing a form of sacrifice neither lawful nor native to the religion of the Jews.”³⁴ If the Markan Jesus used this expression to prophesy the destruction of the temple, then he is re-defining the sense of the phrase. Antiochus Epiphanes did not destroy the temple precinct in Jerusalem, rather he

³⁰ Many interpreters think that the Daniel author here is referring to the capture of Jerusalem by Antiochus Epiphanes and his desecration of the temple ca. 166-65 BCE.

³¹ J. Lust, “Cult and Sacrifice in Daniel, The Tamid and the Abomination of Desolation,” in *The Book of Daniel Composition and Reception, Volume Two* (VTSup LXXXIII (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 681-682.

³² Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 889.

³³ The author of 1 Macc (1:54) identifies this expression with the work of Antiochus Epiphanes, as he causes a “desolating sacrilege to be erected on the altar of burnt offering.”

³⁴ *Ant.* XII.251-53. In *Bell.* I.32-33 Josephus repeats this information recounting how Antiochus “plundered the temple and interrupted, for a period of three years and six months, the regular course of the daily sacrifices.” He put pressure on the Jews to sacrifice swine on the altar (34). However, Antiochus does not destroy the temple.

plundered it and acted to stop Jewish ritual, replacing it with Hellenistic religious ritual. If the narrator is redefining the term “desolation” used in the Daniel materials so that in Jesus’ discourse it describes the destruction of the temple, then we should ask whether the narrator also re-defines the term “abomination.”

In the case of Luke's Gospel (21:20), the author does not use the phrase τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως and seems to link ‘its desolation’ (ἡ ἐρήμωσις αὐτῆς) with the destruction of Jerusalem by a hostile power. In the parallel passage to Mk 13:14, Luke relates this desolation to “Jerusalem surrounded with armies.” This is the clue to know that Jerusalem's destruction is at hand. The anticipated destruction of Jerusalem and the temple through this military aggression, presumably by Roman armies, is certainly in view. But Luke does not identify specifically whether the presence of Roman armies is the abomination per se or some other event is the abomination that triggers this destructive enterprise.

Josephus, in *Bell. IV*, several times argues that it was the actions of a segment of Jewish people (he names them the Zealots) that polluted the temple and triggered fulfillment of “ancient prophecies” that “the city would be taken and the sanctuary burnt to the ground by right of war, whensoever it should be visited by sedition and native hands should be the first to defile (μιάνωσι) God’s sacred precincts” (*Bell. IV.388*). In fact, the death of the high priest Ananus at the hands of the Zealots was, according to Josephus, the initial act that culminated in the capture of the city. “The overthrow of the walls and the downfall of the Jewish state dated from the day on which the Jews beheld their high priest, the captain of their salvation (τὸν ἀρχιερέα καὶ ἡγεμόνα τῆς ἰδίας σωτηρίας αὐτῶν), butchered in the heart of Jerusalem” (*Bell. IV 318*).³⁵ To bolster his contention Josephus refers to “ancient prophecies.” L. Gaston³⁶ references Josephus’ note in *Ant. X.276* where he says that “in the same manner Daniel also wrote about the empire of the

³⁵ Joel Marcus argues that this is most likely the event that the Markan narrator is referring to (Joel Marcus, *Mark 8 – 10*, 889-890). However, two factors mitigate against this interpretation. First, Josephus writes the *Jewish Wars* in order to demonstrate that not all Jews supported the rebellion and that renegade Jewish elements are responsible for the tragic war. But the Markan narrator does not write with this same purpose in mind. His purpose, at least in general terms, is to explain how Jesus of Nazareth can be the Messiah even though he is rejected and crucified by the Jewish religious leaders. It is difficult to see why the narrator would regard Zealot action thirty-five years later, after Jesus died, as “the desolating sacrilege” that triggers the Temple’s destruction. Second, the Markan narrator does not seem to engage in such contemporizing explanations in other segments of the narrative. Perhaps a singular exception is the reference to Alexander and Rufus (15:21). But if the narrator could name these individuals, why would he not be more specific in defining the “desolating sacrilege” in 13:14 and “name names?”

³⁶ Lloyd Gaston, *No Stone on Another. Studies in the Significance of the Fall of Jerusalem in the Synoptic Gospels* (NTSup XXIII (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 460-461.

Romans and that Jerusalem would be taken by them and the temple laid waste (ὁ ναὸς ἐρημωθήσεται).” It would seem that Josephus considers the Romans to be direct agents responsible for the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem, but all of this is triggered in terms of divine agency by the actions of certain Jews, i.e., the Zealots, and the way they defiled God’s sacred precincts, including the assassination of the high priest Ananus.³⁷

In summary, Josephus, writing a decade or two after the Markan narrator, blames the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem upon the sinful actions of certain Jewish segments,³⁸ which in turn triggers the Roman response. Josephus’ specific identification of the murder of Ananus, the high priest, as the key act of evil is most interesting. To postulate then that the actions of Jewish religious leaders to execute Jesus Messiah so defiled Jerusalem and the temple (i.e., an abomination) that it triggered its destruction (i.e., that causes desolation) certainly fits well within some segments of first-century Jewish thought.

Problems with Current Interpretations of the Phrase in Mk. 13:14 and its Relation to Daniel Material

Many modern interpreters, following historical critical methods, also consider that the Markan Jesus refers by the entire phrase "the abomination that causes desolation" to the events surrounding the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, the consequent burning of the temple in 70 CE, and the concurrent devastation wreaked upon Judea. A major problem with this hypothesis is that Jesus' instruction to flee is operative as the people see this abomination.³⁹ However, if this abomination is completely and only defined by the encirclement of Jerusalem by the Roman armies or the destruction of the temple, then it is too late to flee Jerusalem, as well as the Judean environs.⁴⁰ The siege has begun and the Roman occupation is complete. Others suggest that the attempt by Caligula to install his statue in the temple is the referent, even though this never came to pass because the emperor was

³⁷ In the *Sibylline Oracles* 4.117 (dated towards the end of the first century, around 80 CE) we read “An evil storm of war will also come upon Jerusalem from Italy and it will sack the great Temple of God, whenever they put their trust in folly and cast off piety and commit repulsive murders in front of the Temple.” J. J. Collins, “Sibylline Oracles (Second Century BC – Seventh Century AD)” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Volume 1 Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, edited by James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1983), 387. Collins comments that the reference to violence against the temple “is most probably to the Romans, but possibly to the Zealots.”

³⁸ Joel Marcus, *Mark 8 – 16*, 890 says that “the occurrence that best fills the bill is the occupation of the Temple by the Zealots near the beginning of the war (winter of 67-68 CE), an event that was coupled with the revolutionaries’ usurpation of the high priesthood...”

³⁹ Joel Marcus, *Mark 8 – 16*, 890 also sees this as a problem when he comments: “the abomination of desolation is probably related to a desecration that *preceded* [his italics] the destruction of Jerusalem.”

⁴⁰ Roman forces devastated the Judean region prior to besieging Jerusalem.

killed in the midst of the controversy.⁴¹ Some think the reference might be to subsequent actions of Pilate, but it is hard to see exactly how these could be interpreted in this way. Focusing first upon identifying some Jewish historical event in the first century (apart from the crucifixion of Jesus) as this "abominable act" tends to limit attempts to understand it first in the context of the larger Markan narrative. I would also submit that none are entirely satisfactory explanations.⁴²

It is appropriate to ask what connection we should see between this phrase ("the desolating sacrilege") in Mark's Gospel and its usage in Daniel. Virtually all commentators consider Jesus' use of τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως in Mk 13 to be a specific reference to Daniel. The Markan narrator is not specific, but does suggest an Old Testament connection. Having said this, it still must be determined what the nature of this reference might be. It is not marked as a quotation in the usual way the Markan narrator identifies other quotations using various formulae.⁴³ The majority of such marked quotations occur in settings of religious conflict between Jesus and various Jewish religious leaders.⁴⁴ Specific quotes from and allusions to Jeremiah's prophecies would suggest that the Markan narrator sees the Jeremiah context as pivotal for understanding this expression.⁴⁵ In such cases Jesus appeals to recognized Jewish scriptural authority to support his argument, but often proposes an interpretation that is contested by contemporary Jewish religious leaders.

Another category of unmarked references to Old Testament materials also exists. For example, Jesus' language in Mk 4:12 reflects Isa 6:9-10. In NA28 "additional, less extensive parallels which arise in a passage are noted at

⁴¹ V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1981, repr.), 511. "Against this view is the fact that the threat did not mature." Cf. *Ant.* XVIII 8. Craig Evans (*Mark 8:27-16:20 Word Biblical Commentary 34b* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 319, reviews the various options usually suggested as historical fulfillments of this phrase and concludes: "None of these events, however, fits well the context of Jesus' warning in v 14.... Thus, none of these four events often cited as an explanation actually offers a parallel to v 14."

⁴² Later Christian interpreters, who understand this section of Jesus' speech as describing events yet to happen, involved in some way with the second coming of the Messiah, suggest that it refers to some horrendous, future sacrilege by Satan. This might be in a restored Jerusalem and rebuilt temple, or some other anti-Christian religious event or leader. However, as argued earlier, this kind of interpretation seems to violate the structural integrity of this discourse in Mark's Gospel, confusing the prophecy about Jerusalem's destruction with the Parousia of the Son of Man, the very thing that the author apparently wants to avoid.

⁴³ There are twelve contexts in Mark where we find such marked quotations: 1:2-3; 7:6-7, 10; 10:4, 19; 11:17; 12:10, 19, 26, 28ff, 36; 14:27.

⁴⁴ The exceptions are 1:2-3 (introduction to the narrative); 10:19 (conversation with the rich man); 14:27 (conversation with disciples).

⁴⁵ L. Perkins, "The Markan Narrative's Use of the Old Greek Text of Jeremiah to Explain Israel's Obduracy," *Tyndale Bulletin* 60.2(2009): 217-238.

the point at which they occur. The verse to which they refer is given first in italics [in the margin].”⁴⁶ We see similar situations at 11:9-10 (Ps 118:25-26); 13:24-26 (multiple texts); 14:62 (Ps 110:1; Dan 7:13); 15:34 (Ps 22:1), all marked by italics.⁴⁷ No quotation formula introduces these references and there is no indication in the text that this material is being intended as a quotation by the speaker in the narrative. The knowledgeable listener or reader would perceive the intertextual connections and understand that the speaker or narrator is making specific linkage with Old Testament material. However, the narrator apparently is not intending these words to be considered explicitly a quotation and has the opportunity in the narrative to use these words to communicate his own particular meaning, perhaps applying them in ways that were quite different from the understanding held by Jesus’ contemporaries.⁴⁸

In the case of 13:14 the phrase τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρήμωσης has no explicit quotation formula, but NA28 does put this expression in italics and references Dan 12:11 and 11:31. Jesus makes no direct statement that his use of this phrase is in some sense the fulfillment of the statement in Dan 9 or 11.⁴⁹ This is not to suggest that the Markan Jesus is ignorant of the Daniel materials, but only that we must understand his use of this phrase within the framework of the discourse, not by the way that Daniel or subsequent writers, such as the author of 1 Macc, used it. Of course, reference to earlier usage should be made to see whether this would give any clues to the intended significance of the phrase found in the Markan narrative. Methodologically, however, we should first seek to determine its significance as defined by the Markan narrator, and then we can ask how his use of this phrase relates to previous interpretation.

Some might see the clause ὁ ἀναγινώσκων νοεῖτω functioning in a way that is similar to a more conventional quotation formula, though there is no explicit mention of Daniel.⁵⁰ While this certainly is a possible understanding, it is by no means the necessary interpretation. The Markan author alternatively could be directing the reader not to correct the lack of grammatical concord

⁴⁶ NA28, 82*.

⁴⁷ There are two other contexts where words are set off, but not bolded, implying some incorporation of other material: 13:24-25; 15:24.

⁴⁸ Evans, 319 concludes that “Jesus’ appeal to Daniel’s ‘abomination of desolation’ should be understood in a typological sense. That is, the crisis of long ago, which threatened to bring Judaism and Israel’s national life to an end, will once again threaten Israel and Jesus’ followers.”

⁴⁹ Matthew in his narrative makes the Daniel referent explicit: τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρήμωσης τὸ ῥηθὲν διὰ Δανιὴλ τοῦ προφήτου. Matthew’s reference does not contradict my interpretation, but rather is to be viewed as a clarification, perhaps in a way similar to what we find in the Lukan parallel.

⁵⁰ See the discussion of this clause in L. Perkins, “‘Let the Reader Understand’ – a Contextual Interpretation of Mark 13:14,” *BBR* 16.1(2006): 95-104.

in the previous clause, or he may be urging that the reader interpret this phrase correctly, i.e., as Jesus intended and not as contemporary Jewish interpreters might claim. Elsewhere in Mark's narrative when the verb ἀναγινώσκω occurs (2:25; 12:10, 26), Jesus is critical of the way Jewish religious leaders have read and interpreted specific Old Testament episodes and legal materials. The verb νοέω is found in contexts where Jesus chides his disciples for their lack of understanding (Mk 7:18; 8:17). If the clause is to be taken as part of Jesus' speech to his disciples and if the narrator is using terminology consistently, then the primary way to understand it in the light of the previous uses of these verbs in the Markan narrative would be similarly as a warning to Jesus' audience to interpret this phrase correctly in the light of the Old Testament parallels and the significance of Jesus' ministry. Alternatively, if this is another of the author's editorial comments addressed directly to his reader, then most plausibly he is directing his reader to interpret this phrase correctly, particularly in relation to its Old Testament setting and its correct understanding with respect to its setting in his Gospel narrative.

In summary, Mark does not front the phrase τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρήμωσης with a quotation formula. The following clause ὁ ἀναγινώσκων νοεῖτω could be considered as a kind of quotation marker but, if so, this would be a highly unusual way for the Markan narrator to have Jesus make such a designation. This is, at best, an allusion to Daniel material, but perhaps, depending on how we view the attached clause, the Markan Jesus is urging a careful interpretation of this phrase in the light of both his role in the Markan narrative and his application of the appropriate Old Testament parallels, including Jer 7.

The Prophecy of Jeremiah and the Meaning of the Phrase τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρήμωσης

Most assume that if there is an Old Testament passage that the Markan Jesus is alluding to, it would be the Daniel material. Now there is no dispute that the phrase τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρήμωσης has its source in Greek Dan 9-12. However, it is possible that Jesus in his entire Mark 13 discourse, while using this Danielic expression, may be reflecting equally upon Jeremiah's temple speech (Jer 7).⁵¹ Jesus alludes to Jer 7 in his pronouncements made in the temple to justify his 'cleansing' of the temple (Mk 11:17). He deplores the activities permitted in the temple by the religious leaders who have turned it into a σπήλαιον ληστῶν (a phrase taken from Jer 7:11 (μὴ σπήλαιον

⁵¹ L. Perkins, "The Markan Narrative's Use of the Old Greek Text of Jeremiah to Explain Israel's Obduracy," *Tyndale Bulletin* 60.2(2009): 217-238 makes the case that the Markan author has incorporated Jeremiah material into his narrative at various points for a specific reason.

ληστῶν ὁ οἶκός μου...ἐνώπιον ὑμῶν “surely my house... has not become a den of robbers before you?” NETS).

Jeremiah's speech is an oracle of judgment against the temple and warns of its imminent destruction as an act of God's judgment. The cause of this response by God is πάντα τὰ βδελύγματα ταῦτα that Israel is committing, particularly in the temple precinct. Included in the list of their sins is "spilling innocent blood" (Jer 7:6). Jeremiah reiterates how God sent πρὸς ὑμᾶς πάντας τοὺς δούλους μου τοὺς προφήτας (“to you all my servants, the prophets”), but Israel did not listen and "hardened their necks" (Jer 7:25-26). This language is reminiscent of Jesus' Parable of the Tenant Farmers (Mk 12:1-10). The estate owner “sends his servants” to collect the rents, but the tenant farmers beat and kill the servants. The owner decides to destroy them for their actions. Jeremiah claims that the Israelites have ἔταξαν τὰ βδελύγματα αὐτῶν ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ, οὗ ἐπικέκληται τὸ ὄνομά μου ἐπ’ αὐτόν, τοῦ μιᾶναι αὐτόν (Jer 7:30 “they have arrayed their abominations in the house where my name is called on it, to defile it” NETS). These “abominations” are “detestable idols” the Israelites themselves have set up and worshipped in the temple itself. Presumably, they would be offering sacrifices to these idols as part of this worship process. He ends with the statement that, as a result, εἰς ἐρήμωσιν ἔσται πᾶσα ἡ γῆ (Jer 7:34 “all the land shall become a desolation” NETS).⁵²

The juncture of the terms βδέλυγμα and ἐρήμωσις, the reference to hardness or stubbornness, as well as the reference to God's prophets as his servants, juxtaposed with the failure of the people to listen, all within Jeremiah's oracle that foretells the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, indicates several key connections with Jesus' discourse in Mk 13. In his discourse Jesus similarly delivers an oracle of judgment against the temple. Just as Jeremiah's speech outlined God's impending action to destroy Solomon's temple in the sixth century BCE and names Israel's sinful actions as the reason for God's response, so too Jesus' speech defines God's impending action to destroy Herod's temple in the first century CE. However, in Jesus' discourse within the Markan narrative the cause for this impending judgment is wrapped up enigmatically in the phrase τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρήμωσεως.

Grammatical Anomalies in Mk 13:14

⁵² Evans, 319 also notes the potential connection with Jeremiah's material. “Daniel's language may have been inspired by Jer 44:22 (LXX 51:22):...” Of course Dan 9 begins with the note that the prophet is reflecting on Jeremiah's prophesy about the restoration and this leads him to petition God for the fulfillment of this prophecy.

When we consider the text of Mark's narrative, certain elements stand out. Although the noun βδέλυγμα is neuter accusative singular in case, the participle which modifies it (ἑστηκότα) is masculine accusative singular.⁵³ This anomaly sometimes gets explained as one of the author's grammatical gaffes. There are two contexts where a neuter noun (πνεῦμα, referring to a demon) is modified by masculine adjectival forms,⁵⁴ as in 13:14. The Markan narrator has just used the perfect participle in 11:5 idiomatically to describe people “standing there.” This is a very personal usage. It seems that he is using this participle similarly in 13:14. It is conceivable and perhaps probable that he intentionally wrote the verse in this manner, in order to ensure that his readers accurately understood the intent of Jesus' prophecy in the narrative, namely that he was referring primarily to a person, not an event.⁵⁵

Jeremiah condemned the Israelites because they “set up their detestable idols (LXX: βδελύγματα) in the house that bears my name and have defiled it (LXX: τοῦ μιᾶναι αὐτόν)” (7:30). The author of 1 Macc related Daniel's prophecy to the pagan altar built upon the temple's altar of burnt offering and, according to 2 Macc 6:2, Antiochus dedicated the Jerusalem temple to Ζεὺς Ὀλυμπιος, perhaps suggesting that a statue representing Zeus was also placed in the temple. The term “standing” in Mk 13:14 is used outside of Mark's narrative to describe the placement of statues⁵⁶ and some suggest that this may explain the lack of concord between the participle and the noun - i.e., that the Markan Jesus refers to a statue (masculine) when he used the term βδέλυγμα (neuter). However, this requires that we limit the sense of βδέλυγμα to idols, something that the

⁵³ *BDAG* in the entry for ἵστημι lists this occurrence in section C. “intr., perf. and plupf. – 2. to be at a place, stand (there), be (there), w. the emphasis less on ‘standing’ than on ‘being, existing’....” with the position indicated by an adverbial modifier of place. In this case the modifier is an adverbial clause. Note Mk 11:5 καὶ τινες τῶν ἐκεῖ ἑστηκότων. Joel Marcus, *Mark 8 – 16*, 890 indicates that “the participle *hestēkota* (‘standing’) is masculine in gender, despite its referent *bdelygma* (‘abomination’) being neuter, and this suggests that in Mark's eyes the desolating abomination is a *person* rather than an *event* such as the Temple's demise.”

⁵⁴ For example, in Mk 9:25-26 Jesus commands τὸ ἄλαλον καὶ κωφὸν πνεῦμα to leave the young boy. The command, of course, is given in second person singular form. Then the narrative describes how the spirit leaves, using the participles κράζας καὶ πολλὰ σπαράζας which are nominative masculine singular forms. We would expect neuter forms, as normally participles express concord of number, gender and case with their nominal referents. Swete, 198, in commenting on Mk 9:25-26 suggests that it is “a *constructio ad sensum* – the gender of the noun is overlooked in view of the personal action of the spirit.” Consider also 9:20 where Mark writes καὶ ἰδὼν αὐτόν τὸ πνεῦμα εὐθὺς συνεσπάραξεν αὐτόν where the gender of the participle ἰδὼν (masculine) lacks concord with the referent πνεῦμα. Compare the concord that occurs at 1:26.

⁵⁵ Alternatively, if this reflects Jesus' own meaning, then the Markan author presumably would want this to be preserved and not altered ignorantly within his narrative.

⁵⁶ Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2007), 610.

Markan narrative may not require. In the larger context of Jeremiah's prophecy this term describes God's evaluation of Israel's adoption of pagan worship practices, as well as sinful activities that contravene his covenant stipulations. From the context of the Markan narrative, we have no immediate warrant to identify βδέλυγμα exclusively⁵⁷ with pagan idols/statues rather than with other kinds of covenant transgression - i.e., spilling innocent blood.

Τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως as a Reference to Jesus' Crucifixion

I would propose that βδέλυγμα in the Markan narrative at 13:14 describes the Messiah's rejection and consequent crucifixion, viewed by God as a "sacrilege or abomination" that will result in judgment and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. The appropriateness of a crucified victim being called a "sacrilege or abomination" within a Jewish context may gain affirmation from the Temple Scroll. In 11Q19 LXIV it says that one who is on a cross, e.g., hanged on a tree, is cursed and defiles the land.⁵⁸ Such language picks up on earlier statements in Deuteronomy about people hanged on a tree and their corpses polluting the land unless they are properly buried very quickly. To refer to Jesus' death on a cross as a "sacrilege or abomination" then would fit into the normal perception of Jews in the first century about people hanged on crosses or trees - they were cursed by God and so become a "sacrilege or abomination."⁵⁹

If the messianic element is laid over this perception of a crucified victim as cursed, then for the Messiah to be killed in this way would be doubly sacrilegious. In the first instance there does not seem to be any concept in Second Temple Judaism prior to New Testament writings that a projected messianic figure would suffer and die. This is new. Peter's response to this

⁵⁷ This noun only occurs in the Markan narrative in this context. Matthew and Luke's Gospel also only used this noun in the parallel contexts.

⁵⁸ "If a man slanders his people and delivers his people to a foreign nation and does evil to his people, you shall hang him on a tree and he shall die. On the testimony of two witnesses and on the testimony of three witnesses he shall be put to death and they shall hang him on the tree. If a man is guilty of a capital crime and flees (abroad) to the nations, and curses his people, the children of Israel, you shall hang him also on the tree, and he shall die. But his body shall not stay overnight on the tree. Indeed you shall bury him on the same day For he who is hanged on the tree is accursed of God and men. You shall not pollute the ground which I give you to inherit." *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English (Penguin Classics)*, translated by Geza Vermes (London: Penguin Books; revised edition, 2004).

⁵⁹ Paul refers in Galatians to Jesus' death on the cross as "becoming a curse for us." Cf. Deut 21:22f. Martin Hengel in *The Pre-Christian Paul* (translated by John Bowden, London: SCM, 1991), 83 says that "The Temple Scroll from 11Q also applies this curse to those executed by crucifixion. Against this background, did not the proclamation that a crucified blasphemer who led the people astray was the Messiah of Israel itself inevitably look like blasphemy?" cf. 1 Cor 1:23.

idea incorporated into Mark's narrative (8:31-33) reveals how abhorrent this idea appeared. But for this to happen through a conspiracy formed and fomented by the Jewish religious establishment is astonishing. The characterization of the Jewish religious leaders insulting and mocking Jesus (Mk 15:27-32) as he is being executed by crucifixion illustrates how seriously they reject and dismiss him and his claims.

The events of betrayal, denial, desertion, and abandonment in the last chapters of Mark's narrative certainly illustrate in an ironic manner the fulfillment of Jesus' words (Mk 8-10) that he would be rejected. As soon as Jesus concludes his discourse in Mk 13, the narrative reminds us of the active conspiracy to destroy Jesus instigated by the chief priests and the teachers of the law (14:1-2). When Jesus at last responds to the High Priest's question, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One" (Mk 14:62) and admits that he is, the High Priest accuses him of blasphemy. In the Markan narrative God himself has affirmed that Jesus is his "beloved son" (1:11; 9:7). What God affirms, the High Priest calls blasphemy. The new but constant, ironic reference to Jesus as "the King of the Jews" in chapter 15, the insults and mockery of the Jewish leaders, the clamour for Barabbas' release instead of the true "son of the father", the extended description of these events as part of the crucifixion scene -- all of these elements serve to demonstrate the "sacrilegious" nature of this event from God's perspective. The darkness which descends upon the land during the noonday foreshadows the judgment of God which will come upon them. The fig tree has been cursed.

The Markan narrator in his story warned the religious leaders about the consequences of their conspiracy in the Parable of the Tenant Farmers (12:1-10). As indicated earlier Jesus, according to Mark's narrative, had offered a series of prophecies outlining what soon would happen in Jerusalem - his rejection, trial, death and resurrection. These expressions lead up to the entry into Jerusalem (Mk 11:1ff). Plainly, the events which follow are centred in the temple compound. Jesus enters into debates with the religious leaders, he arouses their animosity by his actions in the temple, and he prophesies, by reference to Isaiah and Jeremiah, that a new place and process of prayer for all the nations was being prepared.⁶⁰ Intercalating Jesus' actions in the temple with the cursing of the fig tree is another unique way that the Markan author emphasizes through narrative construction the impending judgment upon the

⁶⁰ Whether Jesus taught that the temple would be rebuilt, or was no longer relevant, or would be reused once cleansed properly, continues to be debated by Markan scholars. I am of the opinion that the evidence indicates the Markan Jesus prophesied the Temple's destruction, without any rebuilding program.

temple.⁶¹ In the midst of reaction to these events, Jesus tells the Parable of the Tenant Farmers, in which he warns the religious leaders that their murder of the owner's "beloved son" will bring upon them the wrath of the owner, and their death and replacement by other tenants (12:1-10). Those who sought to kill Jesus (11:18 ἀπολέσωσιν) shall themselves be killed (12:9 ἀπολέσει). Specifically, using the language of Ps 118:22-23, the Markan Jesus warns them that "the stone the builders rejected" will be exonerated by God, as this stone becomes the foundation of a new structure. Mark has used this same verb ἀποδοκιμασθῆναι (to reject) in 8:31 to initiate the first major prophecy of Jesus' death in Jerusalem. Jesus goes on to forecast the judgment of the religious leaders in 12:38-40 as he comments upon their mistreatment of widows.

The sense of outrage that the owner of the vineyard (Mk 12:1-10) feels at the tenants' mistreatment of his "beloved son" generates judgment against the tenants. Twice in his narrative the Markan author has explicitly noted God's assessment of Jesus as his "beloved son" (1:11-12; 9:7). For his beloved son to be rejected and mockingly executed in such a humiliating fashion could well be considered sacrilege or an abomination in the eyes of God, the 'owner' of the vineyard.

The Markan narrator may give us another clue to this interpretation by reporting that when Jesus died, "the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (Mk 15:38). The narrator's conjunction of Jesus' death with this event probably signals in his view the end of the temple as the spiritual centre of Israel, to be replaced by the visible body of Christ, the church, a temple not made with hands. However, it is also possible that the narrator wants his readers to understand the crucifixion to be the sign of God's impending judgment upon Israel by simultaneously tearing the temple curtain.⁶² Perhaps in this God displays his own displeasure at what the religious leaders have accomplished, just as the High Priest violently tears (διαρρήξας) his garments when he hears Jesus' confession at his trial (Mk 14:63).⁶³ The execution of the Messiah marks the end of God's patience with his own people and precipitates the actions that result in Jerusalem's

⁶¹ James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 340. "In narrating the episode of Jesus and the fig tree Mark exploits its symbolic import, seeing in the curse of the tree the fate of Jerusalem and the temple."

⁶² Jesus' cleansing of the temple (recorded in Mk 11) functions similarly in the view of many scholars.

⁶³ Many commentators, conversely, consider the rending of the temple veil to signal God's availability to human interaction, linking it with the "rending of the heavens" at Jesus' baptism (Mk 1:10). That σχίζω only occurs in Mark's narrative in these two contexts encourages us to see some connection between these two events. There may be connection, but this may be as diverse examples of divine intervention in human affairs.

desolation at the hands of the Romans (similar to the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in the sixth century BCE).⁶⁴

Josephus comments that as the Roman siege of Jerusalem reached its climax various prodigies occurred. In his view these events showed “that the Deity has fled from the holy places and taken his stand on the side of those with whom you are now at war.”⁶⁵ The abandonment of a city by its deity left its inhabitants without divine protection. Kloppenberg argues that the Roman ritual of *evocatio deorum* - i.e., “the ‘calling out’ of the tutelary deity or deities of a city prior to its destruction, the ‘devoting’ of its inhabitants to death, or more usually, slavery, and the razing of its buildings and temples,”⁶⁶ - was probably conducted by the emperor Titus at the beginning of the siege. Although neither Tacitus nor Josephus explicitly refer to this ritual, “we have expression of a key element of the theology of *evocation*, framed, to be sure, not from the standpoint of the conquering Romans, but from the standpoint of certain Jews,…”⁶⁷ Kloppenberg argues that Mk 13:2bc is in fact “an allusion to the *evocatio*.”⁶⁸ The inclusion of such language in Mark 13, if Kloppenberg’s proposal is correct, affirms that in the narrative Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple. For Kloppenberg this enables Mark to “create a narrative in which the fate of Jesus is correlated with the destruction of the temple.”⁶⁹

The warnings of impending judgment and destruction in Mk 11-12 bring to a climax previous statements by Jesus in the narrative. The hostility of the religious leaders recorded in Mk 2-3 that initiates the conspiracy for his destruction (3:6) arouses from Jesus the warning in 3:29 that “whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin.” Certain Jewish religious leaders charge that Jesus casts out demons because “he is possessed by Beelzebub” (3:22) and that precipitates this warning. Jesus’ allusion to Isa 6:9-10 in Mk 4:12 continues this theme. If people will not listen and respond to his Kingdom message, there will be no forgiveness possible. In Mk 7 Jesus has accused the Pharisees of letting go,

⁶⁴ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 656. “Jesus’ references to the temple hitherto in this gospel have concerned its destruction and replacement, and the tearing of the more visible and magnificent outer curtain would more naturally pick up this theme....the process of the temple’s destruction and replacement has indeed begun, even as Jesus continues to hang on the cross.”

⁶⁵ *Bell*. V.412.

⁶⁶ John S. Kloppenborg, “*Evocatio Deorum* and the Date of Mark,” *JBL* 124/3 (2005): 434.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 442.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 447.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 449.

setting aside, and nullifying the word of God (7:8, 9, 13) and replacing it with "your own traditions." Jesus quotes Isa 29:13 to justify his accusation.⁷⁰

Two Additional Issues in Interpreting Mk 13:14

There are two other elements in the context of Mk 13:14 that require comment. First, Jesus said the "abomination that causes desolation" will be visible. "Whenever you see...", then act, he urges (13:14). The event will be known in Judea, because he warns those "who see" and who live there to flee or escape. In other words, what the "sacrilege or abomination" represents is a harbinger of destruction, such that spiritually perceptive people, as soon as it appears, should prepare to take flight. The language of seeing and hearing in Mark's narrative refers not merely to physical sensations, but it implies an understanding of revelation. What will people "see," i.e., truly understand about God's purposes, when this "sacrilege or abomination" occurs? Jesus describes the nature of the tragedy, which this sacrilege foretells, as an unprecedented θλίψις (v.19). If Jesus is referring to his own death as a sacrilege or abomination,⁷¹ then he wants his followers to know that judgment against the Israelite leaders for the execution of the Messiah will soon follow (cf. Mk 12:1-10, 40) in the form of this unprecedented θλίψις. The use of hyperbolic, world-ending language, to describe an historical event can be paralleled in Old Testament passages.⁷²

Second, Jesus indicates some urgency is needed when people perceive that this "sacrilege or abomination" has occurred. If this is a reference to the Messiah's crucifixion which occurred in 33 CE and the Jewish-Roman war was not initiated until 66 CE, where is the urgency? Further, in the Markan narrative Jesus' followers are told that after his resurrection he will "go ahead

⁷⁰ Mark Elliott, *The Survivors of Israel. A Reconsideration of the Theology of Pre-Christian Judaism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.:Eerdmans, 2000), 57-114. He demonstrates from the Second Temple Jewish literary materials how one group within Judaism identifies other segments of Judaism as apostate and deserving of God's judgment. For example, in the Book of Jubilees we read: "All these shall come on an evil generation, which transgresses on the earth: 'The days are uncleanness and fornication and pollution and abominations...and there is no peace in the days of this evil generation.'" (23:14-15). The quotation is from Charles' edition found in *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English. Volume II Pseudepigrapha* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1973 repr.), 48. Elliott comments "That these verses refer to the author's Jewish contemporaries is scarcely veiled by the literary context of the chapter. The author describes the sins of his generation carefully" (88).

⁷¹ Cf. Deut 21:22f. If the Jewish leadership conspire to kill Jesus and urge crucifixion as the means, then they act to bring God's curse upon this individual. For Jesus to be executed in this way makes the claims of his followers appear blasphemous. Hengel, 83 says that "The Temple Scroll from 11Q also applies this curse to those executed by crucifixion. Against this background, did not the proclamation that a crucified blasphemer who led the people astray was the Messiah of Israel itself inevitably look like blasphemy?" cf. 1 Cor 1:23.

⁷² Consider T. Hatina's discussion of this phenomenon in *In Search of a Context. The Function of Scripture in Mark's Narrative* (London: Sheffield, 2002), 357ff.

of you into Galilee” (14:28; 16:7). In Mk 13:14 “those in Judea (not specifically Jerusalem) must flee to the mountains.” Apparently, in this Gospel, after the resurrection the remaining apostles will not be staying for an extended period in Jerusalem.⁷³ The writer does not reference Jesus’ instructions for them to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Spirit and then to proceed into his mission, as the writer of Luke’s Gospel does (Lk 24:45-53; Acts 1:1-4).

Presumably the Markan author is writing around the mid-60s of the first century CE. By this time the mission to the nations is well advanced, led by some apostles and the new leader, Paul. In Mk 13:14-17 the urgency may focus on the cause-effect relationship between the crucifixion of the Messiah and the destruction of Jerusalem. Once the first event has occurred, they know that the second will happen. Jesus does not want them to think that Judea will remain the centre for the expanding Messianic mission. Its destruction is coming and they should take steps to flee and relocate.

Additionally, Jesus may be emphasizing the need to interpret the prophesied event properly. When they see the Messiah crucified, they should realize that God’s judgment against Jerusalem and the temple is on the way. They should take advantage of the warning, make their preparations, and leave. Vigilance regarding these events is just as important as vigilance with respect to the Messiah’s second coming.

Implications for the Interpretation of Mk 13

If this hypothesis is correct, it has implications for the interpretation of Mk 13. First, it would suggest that vv. 5-27 have two distinct focuses, as Jesus responds to the disciples’ questions: “when will these things be and what will be the sign whenever all these things are about to be accomplished?” Their questions reflect Jesus’ prophetic declaration in v. 2 that “all these great buildings” will be destroyed, referring to the primary structures related to the temple complex. At this point in the narrative, the disciples have no comprehension of Jesus’ second coming because they are processing Jesus’ words within the framework of their Jewish understanding. Therefore we should expect that Jesus will address this specific question in his discourse.⁷⁴

⁷³ Perhaps Mark is aware that Jesus did not intend Jerusalem to serve for any extended period of time as the centre of the new Messianic movement, because he intends the non-Jewish world to be included among his people.

⁷⁴ There is insufficient space to engage in a detailed defense of this analysis. However, the point of it is to offer a brief explanation for the way the interpretation of 13:14 might fit into the structure of this major discourse.

In my view, vv. 5-6 introduces the discourse with a warning about future false claims by some that they are Jesus (λέγοντες ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι). No specific context is given for such claims. Jesus then warns them about two things, namely ὅταν δὲ ἀκούσητε (v.7 “now, whenever you happen to hear”) and ὅταν δὲ ἴδητε (v. 14 “now, whenever you happen to see”). The first warning (vv. 7-8) is followed by a description of appropriate response (vv. 9-13 βλέπετε δὲ ὑμεῖς ἑαυτούς “you, watch out for yourselves”). Similarly, the second warning (vv. 14-17) is followed by Jesus’ instructions for response (vv. 18-20 “now pray that this does not happen in winter”). The conclusion (vv. 21-23) picks up the initial concern about deception (vv. 5-6). Jesus then tells them προεῖρηκα ὑμῖν πάντα (v. 23 “I have told you all things in advance”). This entire section, in my opinion, focuses on the events that lead up to the destruction of the buildings that Jesus prophesies in v. 2. He reveals “the sign” that indicates when such things are about to happen and something of the horrendous impact when they occur.

The second part of the discourse (vv. 24-27) does not respond directly to the questions posed by the disciples in v. 4. Rather, Jesus goes beyond their query and shifts attention to the manner of his second coming—what will happen at that time “in those days after that oppression (θλίψιν)” (v. 24; cf. v.19). In my opinion, this “oppression” (v. 19) refers firstly to the great devastation associated with the destruction of the temple and by extension, Jerusalem. It may also have typological significance for what will happen prior to Jesus’ second coming.

In the last part of the discourse (vv. 28-37) Jesus offers two parables, both of which relate to the question of timing. In vv. 28-31 the Parable of the Fig Tree reinforces the idea that Jesus’ followers will know that “he/it is near the door,” because they see “these things happening” (v.29). This parable seems to reference the events described in vv. 7-23. This encourages the reader to understand that Jesus is referring to “these events” that are “at the door,” i.e., next in the sequence of God’s actions. Jesus indicates that he has told these disciples what signals their implementation so they will know the timing and sequence.

Jesus offers a second parable in vv. 32-37 about an Absentee Landlord and his Servants (vv. 33-36). In contrast to the first parable, he prefaces it with the statement that “no one has knowledge concerning that day or hour.” This seems to apply to the events expressed in vv. 24-27 and requires Jesus’ followers to demonstrate vigilance as they wait for his return, because he has not told them how to discern the time of his Second Coming.

If this analysis has any cogency, identifying τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως with Jesus' crucifixion and also discerning its function as the trigger for God's judgment upon those who reject Jesus at some point in the near future fits in well with the structure of the discourse. It also integrates appropriately with the writer's purpose, namely to explain how Yahweh could fulfill his covenant promises to Israel, even as he intends his Messiah to be crucified by the those in Israel who reject Jesus' claims and bring them to account.

Conclusion

We have argued that in Mark's narrative it is the execution of the Messiah through the deliberate conspiracy of the Jewish religious leaders that is the "abomination that causes desolation."⁷⁵ God views the actions of these leaders as an abomination and this valuation calls for a stern response, namely desolation that occurs because of destruction. While our sensitivities regarding anti-Semitism always raise caution lest we overstate matters, in the course of this Gospel's narrative the theme of judgment against Israel's leaders who reject Jesus cannot be denied. Jesus prophesies the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (13:2). His reference to the "abomination that causes desolation" (13:14) is a prophetic statement regarding the significance of his death in the light of his rejection as Messiah by the Jewish religious leaders. This is a strong statement by Jesus, but not out of line⁷⁶ with other similar warnings of judgment that occur consistently in the Second Temple literature, as one segment of Israel considers itself the true covenant people of God and condemns other segments within Israel for behaviour that contravenes this covenant and brings upon itself God's judgment.

This proposed interpretation of Mk 13:14 seeks to understand its significance primarily within the context of the narrative purpose of the Markan Gospel and is based on the following arguments:

1. The Markan narrator's use of Daniel terminology at 13:14 must be interpreted primarily from within the Markan narrative and with a view to its dependence upon Jeremiah's language and message.

⁷⁵ John Meier, *A Marginal Jew. Rethinking the Historical Jesus. Volume Two: Mentor, Message and Miracle* (New York: Doubleday, 1994. Meier notes (20-21) that Herod's execution of John the Baptist in 30 CE triggers divine retribution against Herod in 36 CE expressed in the defeat of Herod's army by Aretas IV (Josephus *Antiquities* 18. 119). Josephus is writing about 60 years after these events

⁷⁶ Josephus tells the story of Jesus ben Ananias (*Bell.* VI:300-309). Four years before the start of the war with Rome, this man stands in the Temple and says "A voice from the east, a voice from the west, a voice from the four winds, a voice against Jerusalem and the sanctuary, a voice against the bridegroom and the bride, a voice against all the people."

2. The Markan Jesus took other Old Testament terms and texts and gave them his own distinctive interpretation and he did the same in the case of references to this phrase in Daniel's text.
3. The frequently expressed interpretation that τὸ βδέλυγμα in Mk 13:14 refers to the Roman desecration of Jerusalem and the temple precinct does not fit the sense of Jesus' words in the narrative context.
4. Josephus, writing about twenty-five years after the composition of the Markan Gospel, assigns blame for the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple precinct to the actions of various Jewish groups, to which the Roman forces respond.
5. The Markan narrative provides many warnings and indicators about the consequences faced by the Jewish leaders who reject Jesus as Messiah.
6. We have argued that in the narrative framework Jesus expresses God's assessment of his execution as τὸ βδέλυγμα. It is perpetrated by Jewish religious leaders with the assistance of the Roman governor. By rejecting Jesus as God's Messiah, the Jewish hierarchy commits an abomination in God's eyes and this triggers a response that results in the desolation of Jerusalem.
7. The "abomination that causes desolation" becomes another prophecy about the Messiah's crucifixion, but this prophecy describes how God viewed the actions of the Jewish religious leaders to execute the Messiah and his intent to hold these leaders accountable.

In addition, it is argued that while the desolation referred to in Mk 13:14 historically may be the destruction of Jerusalem caused by the Roman response to Jewish revolution in 70 CE, the Markan narrative does not identify this Roman incursion per se. Rather the destruction is defined in standard Old Testament language of city siege and destruction.⁷⁷ The sacrilege that triggers this desolation, when defined narratologically, is, in fact, historically the crucifixion of the Messiah Jesus by the Jewish religious leaders. In making this argument we have sought to show how Jeremiah's temple sermon (Jer 7) used similar language to demonstrate the causes (in that context it was idolatry practiced by Jewish people in the temple) that brought about the destruction of Solomon's temple and Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians in the sixth century BCE. The contention is that such an interpretation is consistent with the Markan narrative and does not require some external, historical component for its understanding and interpretation. Mk 13:14 is in fact a cryptic prophecy that describes the death of the Messiah as a sign of imminent judgment.

⁷⁷ C.H.Dodd, "The Fall of Jerusalem and the 'Abomination of Desolation'," *JRS* 37 (1947): 47-54.

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