



**SOUTHWESTERN**  
BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

## **Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary**

### **BBHST 4203 Social and Cultural Settings of Palestine During the Roman Period**

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# **Jesus and his death sentence in the temple**

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## Introduction

Is Jesus sentenced to death because of his criticism of the established Jewish religion? Is his self-proclamation as God which shows us the Gospel of John sufficient to condemn him to death? Do Jewish priests have the power to condemn Jesus to death? What if they have it under what authority could they carry it out? All of these questions will be addressed in the following presentation, which is intended to present archaeological evidence to the historical novelty that Jesus of Nazareth is not assassinated because of his irreverent theology and his Old Testament hermeneutic freedom, but because of the danger he himself poses. to the religious and economic system of the Temple in Jerusalem which was controlled by the religious high priests of Judaism in Roman Palestine at the end of the third decade of the Common Era, at the time of the Emperor Tiberius.

The death sentence of Jesus by the Jewish religious leaders due to the denunciation he makes of the corrupt temple system is something more historical than theological. The Gospels do not emphasize as much the prophetic role of Jesus in the Temple (although it seems that the receivers of the Gospels are aware of the controversial context), but apparently, they emphasize the messianic-expiatory issue of Jesus and his sentence. For evangelists, Jesus has to die because he represents all the Old Testament prophecies where they point out that the Messiah has an expiatory role. Furthermore, for the New Testament writers, Jesus is sentenced to death for his irreverent hermeneutics of the God of the Old Testament and his message. However, the political and religious context give us a vision that is mentioned in the Text but is not as marked as the theological aspect. That is, the threat that a prophet supposes to the power of the religious leaders and the gains that they had with the power of the Temple.

The Religious Temple System was the only thing the Jews could say belonged to them in Roman Judea in the first half of the first century<sup>1</sup>. Everything else was controlled by the Romans, and by the king who they had established on their behalf as was Herod the Great, and his descendants. The main Jewish chiefs had no political power. They also did not have military power or even the power to sentence a person to death. Now, the Sanhedrin did have some authority and autonomy in local religious and civil affairs, although it was on a smaller scale. That is why the Temple System is the only thing that really belongs to them. Soggin mentions that the Temple not only defines his faith, but also his identity as a Nation<sup>2</sup>. This is why Jews value the Temple with their lives, therefore, they cannot allow a man like Jesus, a Galilean without much religious education, to put at risk the system that identifies them in the world and that allows them to have some control in a land that definitely belongs to us already.

To build the argument that Jesus dies for his irreverence to the temple we will use historical and contextual sources that will help us to see Palestine in the time of Jesus in a different way. Let us remember that Judea is not an independent state, but a vassal region of Rome, which is governed by a Roman citizen and vassal king as was Herod the Great and his sons. In addition, as the main source we will use the Temple Inscription which announces that any non-Jewish person is not welcome in the temple and the fact of entering its facilities would be worthy of death. Also, the same fate would fall on the Jews who corrupt the temple with their actions and impurities. This Inscription is one of the main sources to say that Jesus dies for his irreverent behavior in the temple, and above all, for his prophetic denunciation of the corruption and use of the fiscal system of the Temple of Jerusalem.

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<sup>1</sup> Gooman, Martin. Rome and Jerusalem, Vintages Book, New York, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Soggin, J. Alberto, Israel in the Biblical Period "Institutions, Festivals, Ceremonies, Rituals". T & T Clark, New York, 2001. Pag. 39

## Temple Tax

The Judea region was exempt from direct taxes to Rome. Furthermore, Flavius Josephus never mentions a cup of tax from Palestine to Rome. This is why most scholars conclude that Roman Palestine in Jesus' time was a tax-free area, which the Jews would take full advantage of. E. Gabba mentions that Herod's Judea was not to pay tribute<sup>3</sup>. This shows us that Roman Judea was a tax haven that many people could take advantage of. Thing that the main religious leaders in the time of Jesus did, since they, not being forced to pay tribute to Rome, could live only on earnings and income. Something in which the Tribute was directly related to the temple.

The Temple Tax consisted that every Jewish man between the ages of 20 and 50 had to pay half-shekel<sup>4</sup> to maintain the facilities and sacrifices of the Temple in Jerusalem once a year<sup>5</sup>. The Temple Tax is not born in the Times of Jesus but refers to the times of Moses. The Hebrew Bible says:

*... "The Lord also spoke to Moses and said:" When you take a census of the children of Israel ... this will be given by everyone who is counted: half a shekel ... everyone who is ... twenty years old or older, will give the offering to the Lord . The rich will not give more, nor will the richer give less than half a shekel, when they give the offering to the Lord to make atonement for the people. You shall take the money of the atonement from the children of Israel, and give it for the service of the Tent of Meeting; and it will be like a memorial for the children of Israel before the Lord, to make atonement for your people..."(Exodus 30; 11-16)*

There are other quotes in the Old Testament that testify to the Temple tax (2 Kings 12; 4-15, Nehemiah 10: 32,33) which corroborates that it is a practice that came from previous centuries.

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<sup>3</sup> Gabba, E. The finances of King Herod, in: A. Kasher – U. Rappaport – G. Fuks (eds.), *Grecce and Rome in Eretz Israel: Collected Essays*, Jerusalem 1990. 160-168.

<sup>4</sup> Green, Joel B. McDonald, Lee Martin, *The World of the New Testament "Cultural, Social and Historical Contexts"*. Baker Publishing Group, 2013, pag. 203.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas, Merrill *Diccionario Bíblico "Mundo Hispano"*, editorial Mundo Hispano, 1997, Page 233.

In Jesus' time a Tirt coin was used to pay the Temple Tax. Therefore, money changers were needed for those who had other currencies, especially the Jews who came from other parts of the diaspora. Those who went to Jerusalem made the payment in person, but those who could not go to Jerusalem sent the money a month earlier. This tax was paid in the Month of Adar (March) on the 15th, and the collectors went out all over Israel to collect it for 10 days. When Jesus arrives at the temple and sees that the Temple System is a business, he decides to report such corruption.<sup>6</sup> The Jewish priests lived from the temple, and most likely they have been enriched in such a way that the anger of Jesus is a prophetic denunciation of such corruption.<sup>7</sup>

## **What does Jesus do to denounce the Corruption of the Temple?**

The Gospel of Mark chap. 11: 15-18 tells us the following:

First, Jesus begins to drive out of the temple those who buy and sell the Temple. For Jesus, the temple has a specific function and should not be for commercialization. In addition, Jesus turns the tables of the money changers, who made a fortune by changing the coins of the Jews from the diaspora, since they had to offer or buy the animals for the sacrifices with local coins. The money exchange left good profits for the temple, since the change was never fair<sup>8</sup>. This practice made the Temple System function as a modern bank which makes profits from buying and selling foreign currency.

Second, and most alarmingly, Jesus quotes the same Jewish scriptures to prophetically denounce the corruption of the Temple System. Evans says the most challenging thing Jesus did was to

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<sup>6</sup> Green, Joel B. McDonald, Lee Martin, The World of the New Testament "Cultural, Social and Historical Contexts". Baker Publishing Group, 2013, pag. 203.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, Raymond E. La Muerte del Mesías (2 tomos), Pamplona, Editorial Verbo Divino, 2005 y 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Magness, Jodi, Stone and Dung, Oil and Spit "Jewish Daily Life in The Time of Jesus, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2011 Page. 101.

condemn the same religious leaders with the Scriptures that they taught themselves<sup>9</sup>. Thing that the same writers of the gospels did not ignore, who as good Jews knew the quotes mentioned by Jesus. The Gospel of Mark says that Jesus quotes Isaiah 56; 7 when he refers to the Temple as "House of Prayer". Furthermore, the second part of Jesus' sentence is a clear reference to the prophet Jeremiah who was always characterized by denouncing the corruption and bad practices of the priests of his time. Jesus in this case quotes Jeremiah 7; 11. Without a doubt this is one of the most serious denunciations that Jesus makes, since in the conscience of all the Jews it was that Jeremiah was the prophet who denounced the Temple System and then it was destroyed.<sup>10</sup>

Jesus is condemned to die after his prophetic action of denouncing the Corrupt Temple System. The same Gospel of Mark says that after Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers, drove out the merchants and taught the scriptures, the main religious leaders decided to end his life. Apparently, the memory of Jeremias and the destruction of the temple and the city was still present in the minds of the religious leaders. However, for priests it is easier to kill the one who prophesies than to repent to prevent the prophecy from being fulfilled. John's Gospel provides a scene that emphasizes this stance when he mentions that Caiaphas himself, the High Priest, mentions that it is better for Jesus to die before the entire nation is destroyed (John 11:50).

## Question

Is the behavior of Jesus in the Temple worthy of death? Obviously not in our context. However, in the context of Roman Palestine in Jesus' time, the unworthy behavior of Jesus in the temple might be enough to condemn him to death. To justify such a sentence, you have to go to the Inscription of the Temple Warning which is in the Istanbul Museum. This inscription not only

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<sup>9</sup> Evans Craig A., Jesus and his world "The Archaeological Evidence", Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky 2012, page. 89

<sup>10</sup> Craig A. Evans, Jesus and his world "The Archaeological Evidence", Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky 2012, pág. 89

helps us to know the context of the rigor of the Temple, but also helps us understand why Jesus' behavior was so reprehensible.

## Temple warning

The Inscription of the or The ΘΑΝΑΤΟΣ Inscription from Herod's Temple is an inscription that was along the balustrade outside the Temple in Jerusalem<sup>11</sup>. It consists of 2 blocks of filled stone which is written in Koine Greek. The first block was found in 1981 in the courtyard to the north of the Temple Mount by Charles Clemont-Ganneau and is 85 cm long, 57 cm. high and 37 cm. thick<sup>12</sup>. The second block was found in 1935 by J.H Illife at the Lion Gate in Jerusalem, although it is only a fragment. It is 50 cm long, 31 cm thick and 25 wides. The letters on this second block fragment were originally painted red<sup>13</sup>. The Second Block is in the Israel museum<sup>14</sup>.

The Temple Inscription is a warning to non-Jews who are outside the temple. Apparently, it was placed in King Herod's time almost at the end of the first century B.C. It was written in Greek and Latin so that everyone could read it. It should be noted that this type of inscriptions were found throughout the Empire in the different temples of the different cults. The Latin text appears to have been added later when Judea became directly ruled by Rome in 6 A.D.<sup>15</sup> The elaboration is thought to have been the idea of the Temple priests themselves, however their political purpose was to help Herod, since the King had the responsibility of ensuring that the sanction was carried out.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Magness, Jodi (2012). *The Archaeology of the Holy Land: From the Destruction of Solomon's Temple to the Muslim Conquest*. Cambridge University Press. p. 155

<sup>12</sup> Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and his world "The Archaeological Evidence"*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky 2012, pág. 90

<sup>13</sup> Llewelyn S.R and Harrison J.R, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity "A Review of the Greek and other Inscriptions and Papyri Published between 1988 and 1992*, Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2012, page. 136

<sup>14</sup> Gruyter, Walter, *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae-Palaestinae*, Jerusalem, Parte 1, 2010, pag. 42

<sup>15</sup> Llewelyn S.R and Harrison J.R, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity "A Review of the Greek and other Inscriptions and Papyri Published between 1988 and 1992*, Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2012, page. 137

<sup>16</sup> Llewelyn S.R and Harrison J.R, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity "A Review of the Greek and other Inscriptions and Papyri Published between 1988 and 1992*, Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2012, pag. 138

The inscription has been defined by many experts not only to prevent non-Jews from entering the temple, but to regulate faultless behavior within it. In this context, the Temple Inscription helps us understand that the behavior of Jesus which overturns the tables of the money changers and expels the people (no matter how many merchants they were) was an intolerable action within the Jewish circle.<sup>17</sup>

ΜΗΘΕΝΑΛΛΟΓΕΝΗΙΣΠΟ

ΡΕΥΕΣΘΑΙΕΝΤΟΣΤΟΥΠΕ

ΡΙΤΟΙΕΡΟΝΤΡΥΦΑΚΤΟΥΚΑΙ

ΠΕΡΙΒΟΛΟΥΟΣΔΑΝΛΗ

ΦΘΗΕΑΥΤΩΙΑΙΤΙΟΣΕΣ

ΤΑΙΔΙΑΤΟΕΞΑΚΟΛΟΥ

ΘΕΙΝΘΑΝΑΤΟΝ

#### Transliteration

No stranger is to enter

within the balustrade round

the temple and

enclosure. Whoever is caught

will be himself responsible

for his ensuing

death.

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<sup>17</sup> Llewelyn S.R and Harrison J.R, New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity "A Review of the Greek and other Inscriptions and Papyri Published between 1988 and 1992, Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2012, page 138



Does the Temple Inscription have historical support?

1. Josephus (37 - 100 A.D). Josephus' comments regarding the temple's warnings are almost certainly a reference to this Inscription. Josephus declares that no Gentile can enter the holy place of the Temple, apart from the law of purification for those who enter. Josephus says that these inscriptions were in Greek and Roman Language (J.W.5.193-94).
2. Philo (15 B.C - 45 A.D). Philo of Alexandria refers to the purification and warning laws of the temple (Embassy 212)
3. Rabbi Joshua Ben Hananiah (x- 131 A.D). Mention the rigor of the temple.
4. Hebrew Bible. (1 Kings 8; 41-43 - Number 1:51 - Numbers 3; 38 - Lev 10; 2, etc.) He mentions that the Israelites could not approach certain places and had to meet certain purification requirements.
5. Oxyrhynchus 840 Gospel (110-160). Although it is an apocryphal gospel, it tells the story of Jesus and the Temple priests who rebuke him because he does not wash his hands. Although it is not an accepted gospel and its historicity is questionable, it helps to understand the context of the Jewish thought of the time.
6. New Testament. The Book of Acts 21; 28 tells us that Paul is worthy of death because he had brought Greeks to the Temple.

## Conclusion

For the same reason, not paying tax, and the benefit they have of collecting taxes for the Temple, makes the Temple system so powerful and rich. Something that without a doubt Jesus himself denounces when he says: "They have made my house a den of thieves ..." (Matthew 21; 13). The priests and rulers were getting rich, and at last a prophet had come willing to denounce such corruption. For this, Jesus has to die. However, Jesus cannot die for religious and theological matters, since the ones in charge of the death penalty are the Romans, and they rejected these transgressions. For the same reason, the Jews had to cause Jesus to have a civil crime so that it fell into the hands of the Romans, which according to the Temple Inscription could have been the irreverent behavior of Jesus on his visit to the Temple.<sup>18</sup>

Now, saying that the Temple Inscription justifies the theory that Jesus is sentenced to death for his bad behavior can be unjustified. Evangelists are clear in saying that Jesus dies to fulfill the destiny of the Messiah. However, the Temple Inscription helps us to understand much better the religious context and the Temple system in the time of Jesus, who was the great enemy of our Lord.

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<sup>18</sup> Evans A. Craig, Jesus and his world "The Archaeological Evidence", Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky 2012, page. 92

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