

Mark 11:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And he taught, saying unto them, Is it not written, My house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer? but ye have made it a den of thieves.

Analysis

And he taught, saying unto them, Is it not written, My house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer?—Jesus quotes Isaiah 56:7, emphasizing the temple's universal purpose: **for all nations** (πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, pasin tois ethnesin). God intended the temple as a place where Gentiles could worship, yet the religious establishment had filled the Court of the Gentiles with commerce, excluding non-Jews. Jesus' cleansing restores the temple's true purpose, anticipating the gospel's spread to all peoples (Matthew 28:19; Acts 1:8). The phrase **house of prayer** (οἶκος προσευχῆς, oikos proseuchēs) emphasizes communion with God, not commercial enterprise.

But ye have made it a den of thieves (σπήλαιον λῃστῶν, spēlaion lēstōn)—Jesus quotes Jeremiah 7:11, comparing the temple establishment to a robbers' hideout. The Greek lēstōn (λῃστῶν) means bandits or violent criminals, not petty thieves—Jesus accuses the priesthood of serious corruption. Jeremiah's original context prophesied the temple's destruction because of Israel's covenant unfaithfulness—Jesus invokes this warning, implying judgment is coming (fulfilled AD 70). The religious leaders used religion as a cover for exploitation: inflated prices for sacrificial animals, extortionate exchange rates, oppressing the poor. Jesus' confrontation cost Him His life—within days, these same leaders would engineer His crucifixion.

Historical Context

Isaiah 56:7, written around 700 BC, promised that God's house would welcome foreigners: "Even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer: their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon mine altar; for mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people." Yet by Jesus' day, the Court of the Gentiles—the only place non-Jews could pray—was crowded with commercial stalls. Jeremiah 7:1-15 (written around 609 BC) condemned Israel's false confidence in the temple while living unrighteously, warning that God would destroy the temple as He had destroyed Shiloh. That prophecy was fulfilled in 586 BC when Babylon destroyed Solomon's temple. Jesus' quotation implies the same fate awaits the Second Temple. Historically, Rome destroyed Herod's temple in AD 70, and it has never been rebuilt. Jesus' cleansing was not the first—Nehemiah excluded merchants on the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:15-22)—but Jesus' action was uniquely authoritative and triggered the plot to kill Him (v. 18). The "den of thieves" language suggests the temple leadership used religious positions for personal enrichment, exploiting worshipers economically.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Study Questions

1. How does Jesus' emphasis on the temple being 'for all nations' challenge ethnic or cultural barriers to worship and foreshadow the gospel's universal scope?
2. What modern parallels exist to transforming 'houses of prayer' into 'dens of thieves' through commercialization, manipulation, or exploitation of worshipers?
3. In what ways does Jesus' cleansing of the physical temple apply to His desire to cleanse the church and individual hearts from corruption and hypocrisy?

Interlinear Text

καὶ ἐδίδασκεν λέγων αὐτὸν Οὐ γέγραπται ὅτι Ὁ
And he taught saying it not Is it G3754 G3588
G2532 G1321 G3004 G846 G3756 G1125

οἶκος μου οἶκος προσευχῆς κληθήσεται πᾶσιν τοῖς
house My house of prayer shall be called of all G3588
G3624 G3450 G3624 G4335 G2564 G3956

ἔθνεσιν ὑμεῖς δὲ εποιήσατε αὐτὸν σπήλαιον λῃστῶν
nations ye but have made it a den of thieves G3027
G1484 G5210 G1161 G4160 G846 G4693

Additional Cross-References

Isaiah 56:7 (Prayer): Even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer: their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon mine altar; for mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people.

Jeremiah 7:11 (Parallel theme): Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, even I have seen it, saith the LORD.

Luke 19:46 (Prayer): Saying unto them, It is written, My house is the house of prayer: but ye have made it a den of thieves.

John 2:16 (Parallel theme): And said unto them that sold doves, Take these things hence; make not my Father's house an house of merchandise.

Hosea 12:7 (Parallel theme): He is a merchant, the balances of deceit are in his hand: he loveth to oppress.

Isaiah 60:7 (Parallel theme): All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered together unto thee, the rams of Nebaioth shall minister unto thee: they shall come up with acceptance on mine altar, and I will glorify the house of my glory.