

# Understanding “If Anyone Says to This Mountain...”

(Mark 11:20-25) in Its Religio-Historical Context

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Mark 11:20-25 stands among those texts most misunderstood by Christians in general and most exploited by New Religious Movements in particular, perhaps most notoriously by the Word-Faith Movement. The passage is best known for its promise that “if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him” (v. 23). Traditionally most Christians have taken this text to mean that if they ask for something in prayer and harbor no doubts, then God will necessarily grant their request. Not only does such a reading contravene divine freedom, but it also inverts the divine-human relationship by turning God into the servant of humanity rather than the sovereign over humanity. However, presupposing the truth of this misreading, the Faith Movement proceeds to retranslate *echete pistin theou* as “have the faith of God” or “have the God-kind of faith” and places a quasi-magical emphasis upon the function of speech. Consequently, Faith leaders both historically and presently find warrant in this text for the metaphysical concept that words constitute unstoppable containers for the force of faith, enabling all who infuse their words with the God-kind of faith to “write their own ticket with God” and so have whatever they say. As Gloria Copeland explained the passage quite recently on the nationally televised *Believer’s Voice of Victory*:

I can't think of anything that changed my life more after I was born again and filled with the Spirit than learning how to release faith, because this is the way you get anything – healing, money, the salvation of your children, the salvation of your husband or your wife – anything you're believing for, it takes faith . . . to cause heaven to go into action. . . . It says in Mark 11 . . . remember, now, the message was you can have what you say. You can have what you say. . . . Here's the Scripture. . . . For verily I say unto you, that whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed and be thou cast into the sea, and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those *things* which he saith shall come to pass, he shall have whatsoever he *saith*. I *say* – look at that, *say, say, saith, saith, say – I say* unto you, what things soever you desire when you pray, believe that you receive them, and *you shall have them*. Man!<sup>1</sup>

Appropriately, much attention has been paid by Christian scholars to showing that the text cannot substantiate its Faith exegesis. The standard response correctly points out that *echete pistin theou* is not a subjective genitive but an objective genitive, thereby depicting God as the object of faith and necessitating the translation “have faith in God.” Less frequent but equally incisive is the observation that even if *echete pistin theou* were a subjective genitive, the lack of a definite article before *pistin* would connote “faithfulness” not “faith,” thus precluding the translation “have the faith of God” and instead exhorting believers to “have God's faithfulness.” While this negative task of showing what the text does not mean has proven successful, the positive task of explaining what precisely the text does mean should be judged insufficient at best. For the prevailing scholarly interpretation largely concurs with the *prima facie* reading of lay Christians but simply qualifies the alleged promise of receiving whatever one prays for by God's will, often via the proviso in 1 John 5:14-15 that “if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us . . . and we have what we have asked of him.”

This interpretation is plagued by problems along three lines: pastoral, procedural, and hermeneutical. While the first two lines are comparatively minor and require only brief rejoinders, the hermeneutical

issues are critical and will occupy the bulk of this study. Pastorally, this interpretation has led some Christians to doubt the truth of God's Word when requests ostensibly consistent with the divine will fail to materialize. Procedurally, the prevailing view confuses the task of the systematic theologian (allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture in order to deduce valid doctrine) with the task of the exegete (grammatico-historically determining the meaning of the particular text intended by the original author and understood by the original recipients). It goes without saying that at the respective times when the pertinent statement was made and was recorded, Jesus and Mark could not have expected their audiences to draw upon an insight from an epistle not yet composed. But even more, given the Markan context and Johannine independence from the Synoptic tradition, it is far from obvious that Mark 11:20-25 and 1 John 5:14-15 are indeed discussing the same topic. Nor, it should be noted, is there any statement comparable to 1 John 5:14-15 from the Hebrew Bible that would have functioned as a limiter in the minds of the original hearers.

Hermeneutically, the prevailing reading grants the crucial presupposition of the identified misinterpreters that "this mountain" is a figurative expression for any obstacle because it fails to take into account both Jesus' first-century Jewish religio-historical context and the function of the pericope in the larger literary framework here utilized by Mark. This hermeneutical flaw, I will argue, is fatal and can only be positively remedied by a contextually grounded interpretation based upon precisely those historical and literary factors which the misreading overlooks. Turning to the historical Jesus research of N. T. Wright and the monograph on this passage by William R. Telford, it is precisely such an interpretation that this study endeavors to provide. In addition to exegetical accuracy, this interpretation will garnish the added pastoral benefits of upholding Scriptural reliability and the added procedural benefits of enhancing our apologetic against the pericope's abuses.

## *A Grammatical and Structural Analysis*

Our investigation shall appropriately begin with a careful examination of the pericope's grammar and its larger function in Mark's Gospel. We note at the outset that Jesus does not say "if anyone says to a mountain" but "whoever says to this mountain (*tō orei toutō*)," literally "to *the* mountain – *this one*," where Mark uses both the definite article *tō* and the demonstrative pronoun *toutō*. Since either of these alone plus *orei* would indicate a specific mountain, Mark's striking combination of the definite article with the demonstrative pronoun serves to intensify the identification and so permits no doubt that one particular mountain is in view. While some commentators have, as a result, associated the mountain with the Mount of Olives, this identification depends upon the dubious assumption that Mark has redistricted the saying from a pre-Markan Olivet Discourse tradition to its present location. This hypothesis will not stand because, as E. J. Pryke has meticulously demonstrated, the characteristically Markan grammatical and syntactical features of both chapters 11 and 13 indicate that neither derives from a pre-Markan *Urtext*.<sup>2</sup> So what mountain are Jesus and Mark designating? In his cataloging of the Synoptic sayings of Jesus containing the term "mountain" (*oros*), N. T. Wright observes, "Though the existence of more than one saying in this group suggests that Jesus used to say this sort of thing quite frequently, 'this mountain,' spoken in Jerusalem, would naturally refer to the Temple mount."<sup>3</sup> Telford concurs, noting that in Jesus' day the Temple "was known to the Jewish people as 'the mountain of the house' or 'this mountain.'"<sup>4</sup> This high initial probability for a Temple referent is reinforced by the fact that Mark 11:20-25 concludes an intercalation or ABA "sandwich-like" structure where A begins, is interrupted by B, and then finishes. Such a stylistic device renders the frame A sections (the two "slices of bread") and the center B section (the "meat") as mutually interactive, portraying A and B as indispensable for the interpretation of one another.<sup>5</sup> The intercalation focuses on Jesus' controversial Temple actions precipitating his crucifixion and runs as follows:

*A begins:* On the next day, after they had set out from Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Having seen a fig tree in leaf from a

distance, he came to see whether he might find something on it. But when he came to it, he found nothing except leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples were listening (Mk. 11:12-14).

*B begins and ends:* Then they came to Jerusalem, and having entered the Temple, Jesus began to drive out the ones selling and the ones buying in the Temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the chairs of those selling doves. He was not allowing anyone to carry things through the Temple, but he was teaching and saying to them, "Has it not been written, 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all the nations?' But you yourselves have made it a den of robbers." The chief priests and the scribes heard this, and they were seeking how they might destroy him; for they were afraid of him, as all the crowd were amazed at his teaching. And when it became late, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city (Mk. 11:15-19).

*A ends:* And passing by early in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look, the fig tree which you cursed has been withered." Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, if anyone says to the mountain – this one – 'Be lifted up and be thrown into the sea,' and does not waver in his heart but believes that what he says is happening, it will be so for him. For this reason I say to you, everything which you pray and plead for, believe that you received it, and it will be so for you. And when you stand praying, forgive if you have something against someone, in order that your Father in the heavens may also forgive you your transgressions" (Mk. 11:20-25).<sup>6</sup>

This literary device inextricably links the Temple with Jesus' mountain saying, as Wright declares: "Someone speaking of 'this mountain' being cast into the sea, in the context of a dramatic action

of judgment in the Temple, would inevitably be heard to refer to Mount Zion.”<sup>7</sup> Hence the intercalation verifies that “this mountain” indeed refers to the Temple mount. According to Telford, such usage harmonizes well with the meaning of the phrase “uprooter of mountains” in Rabbinic literature, where the phrase connoted either “a Rabbi with an exceptional dialectic skill . . . [who] was able to resolve by his wits and ingenuity extremely difficult hermeneutical problems within the Law” or someone who destroys the Temple.<sup>8</sup> An example of the latter is found in the Babylonian Talmud, in which Baba ben Buta advises Herod the Great to pull down the Temple and rebuild it. When Herod asks Baba ben Buta if such an action is licit in light of the *halakhah* that a synagogue should not be pulled down before another is built to take its place, Baba ben Buta replies: “If you like I can say that the rule does not apply to Royalty, since a king does not go back on his word. For so said Samuel: If Royalty says, I will uproot mountains, it will uproot them and not go back on its word.”<sup>9</sup> Hence Herod can pull down the Temple mount immune from any charge of illegal procedure. Since the context of the Jesuanic statement is clearly not exegetical, Telford maintains that consistency with expected connotation demands that Mark 11:20-25 is a Temple statement: “The double entendre . . . in B.B.B.3b . . . is a suggestive parallel to our Markan passage, for there too Mark has employed the mountain-moving image in its capacity to suggest in its context the removal of the Temple mount.”<sup>10</sup>

But what type of statement is directed at Mount Zion? In his magisterial commentary on Mark, Robert H. Gundry points out that this statement represents a curse analogous in meaning to Jesus’ curse on the fig tree: “[B]eing lifted up and thrown into the sea makes the mountain-moving a destructive act. Its destructiveness makes the speaking to the mountain a curse, as much a curse as Jesus’ speaking to the fig tree that no one should ever again eat fruit from it.”<sup>11</sup> However, the passive verbs *arthētai* (be lifted up) and *blēthētai* (be thrown) indicate that the denouncer lacks the power to personally carry out the curse but is invoking someone else to execute it. As Gundry reveals, this fact explains Jesus’ faith directive: “Because of the command to have faith in God, the passive voice in ‘be lifted up and be thrown into the sea’ means, ‘May God lift you up and throw you into the sea’ . . . The element of faith comes into this mountain-cursing because in

themselves the disciples . . . lack the power to speak a mountain into the sea."<sup>12</sup>

We already see a major dissimilarity between the Word-Faith reading and the true significance of this pericope: its central promise has nothing to do with blessings for the speaker but instead pertains to curses proclaimed against external things.

### *A Historical and Canonical Analysis*

In order to understand the passage in its historical context, we must now inquire as to the nature of Jesus' actions in the Temple. Although understood by previous generations of commentators as simply a cleansing, a virtual consensus has surfaced among Third Quest historical Jesus researchers across the liberal-conservative theological spectrum that, regardless of whether or not cleansing comprised part of Jesus' agenda, the major thrust of Jesus' action was to enact a symbolic destruction of the Temple.<sup>13</sup> In the summation of Craig A. Evans, "[A]t the time of his action in the temple Jesus spoke of the temple's destruction . . . not simply . . . calling for modification of the sacrificial pragmata or, having failed to bring about such modification, for sacrifice outside of the auspices of the temple priesthood."<sup>14</sup> Foremost among the evidence supporting this conclusion is Jesus' intentional evocation and deliberate performance of Jeremiah 7-8, a trenchant condemnation of corruption within Jewish society and unmistakable warning that the Temple must be destroyed as a result:

Thus says Yahweh Almighty, the God of Israel . . . do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the Temple of Yahweh, the Temple of Yahweh, the Temple of Yahweh' . . . But here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are safe' – safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? But I have been watching, declares

Yahweh. Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel. . . . Therefore, what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that is called by my name, the Temple you trust in, the place I gave to you and your fathers. I will thrust you from my presence, just as I thrust all of your brethren, the people of Ephraim. So you, neither pray on behalf of this people nor offer plea or petition on their behalf . . . for . . . my anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place . . . it will burn and not be quenched. . . . But are the people ashamed of their loathsome conduct? No, they have no shame at all . . . at the time when I punish, they shall be overthrown, says Yahweh. When I wanted to gather them, says Yahweh, there are no grapes on the vine; there are no figs on the fig tree, and their leaves are withered (7:3-4, 8-12, 14-16, 20; 8:12-13).

Jeremiah's coincidence of the Temple condemnation with the portrayal of its worshipers as a fruitless fig tree overtly furnishes the meaning of Jesus seeking fruit on the barren fig tree, subsequently cursing it, and finally cursing "this mountain." As Wright elucidates,

The cursing of the fig tree is part of his sorrowful Jeremianic demonstration that Israel, and the Temple, are under judgment. The word about the mountain being cast into the sea also belongs exactly here. . . . It is a very specific word of judgment: the Temple mountain is, figuratively speaking, to be taken up and cast into the sea.<sup>15</sup>

Viewing Jesus' actions against this prophetic backdrop, three features emerge as prominent:

(1) Jesus militates against the Temple not as the place where robbery occurs but as the den of robbers, namely, the robbers' lair where they return for safe haven after committing acts of robbery in the outside world. Moreover, both Mark's Greek word for "robbers" (*lēstēs*) and its Hebrew cognate *parisim* from Jeremiah refer not to "swindlers" but to "brigands" or "bandits" in the sense of "revolutionaries."<sup>16</sup> Barabbas, the leader of a murderous uprising in Jerusalem, was a *lēstēs*, as were



the two crucified alongside Jesus and scores of “holy rebels” described by Josephus.<sup>17</sup> Thus, economic impropriety is not in view here; in fact, no evidence exists from late antique Judaism of such exploitation transpiring in the Temple.<sup>18</sup> For the Temple required pure animals and birds for sacrifice, which were most safely purchased at a place near the sacrifice and where the priests could guarantee their suitability.

Moreover, the money changers were indispensable for turning all the many currencies offered into the single official coinage. Hence the text supplies no hint that anyone was committing financial or sacrificial misconduct.<sup>19</sup> Rather, as in the sixth century B.C. against the Babylonians, the Temple had become the talisman of nationalist violence housing those religio-political leaders who propagated a violent messianic scenario as the solution to the Roman problem. Since the Romans had made the Jewish people slaves in their own homeland and progressively enacted sanctions robbing them of their religious liberties bit by bit, the Sanhedrin, or “Men of the Great Assembly,” popularized an interpretation of the Hebrew Bible concept of *mashiach*, or messiah, along the lines of previous national deliverers. Like Moses, this messiah would be a compelling religious leader, but even greater than Moses, he would successfully enforce Torah upon all who dwelt in Palestine. Like Cyrus, he would be king of an empire who conquered his enemies with the sword, but surpassing Cyrus’ governance of a pagan empire, the Messiah would, after violently ridding the Holy Land of all Roman and other pagan influences, turn Israel into the superpower of the Ancient Near East, restore Israel’s borders to at least their original expanse following Joshua’s Conquest of Canaan (if not militarily extending these boundaries), and employ the new Israelite empire’s political influence to spread Israelite justice and the Jewish way of life throughout the Mediterranean world.<sup>20</sup>

Such a messianic “job description” stood in diametric opposition to the type of Messiah Jesus claimed to be. By embracing the Sanhedrin’s violent messianic aspirations, Jesus proposed that the Jewish people found themselves in a far deeper slavery than simply to Rome: they had voluntarily become slaves to the Kingdom of the World, the philosophical system of domination and oppression ruled by Satan according to which the world operates.<sup>21</sup> In Jesus’ assessment, the Sanhedrin, backed by popular opinion, were chillingly attempting

to become the people of God by capitulating to the worldly kingdom, aiming to employ political zeal and military wrath to usher in God's great and final redemption and perpetuate it throughout the globe. But Jesus saw that any attempt to win the victory of God through the devices of Satan is to lose the battle.<sup>22</sup> For by trying to beat Rome at its own game, the Jewish religious aristocracy had unwittingly become "slaves" and even "sons" of the devil, "a murderer from the beginning," whose violent tendencies they longed to accomplish (Jn. 8:34-44) and who were blindly leading the people of Israel to certain destruction (Mt. 15:14; 23:15; Lk. 6:39). Hence the Sanhedrin comprised the "robbers" fomenting revolution in the synagogues, streets, and rabbinic schools who holed themselves up in the Temple. By uncritically accepting their program, Jesus contended that Israel had abandoned its original vocation to be the light of the world which would reach out with open arms to foreign nations and actively display to them God's love.<sup>23</sup>

(2) In the underlying prophetic text, Jeremiah chastised the Temple for the inextricable combination of social injustice and idolatry committed by its worshipers. So what comparable idolatry linked with Israel's false messianic hopes led Jesus to stage his Temple demonstration? Jesus held that implicit idolatry proved far more damning than explicit idolatry, since the second is just as easily avoidable as the first is alluring with its subtlety and façade of godliness. After all, from the darkened perspective of the world, what could make more sense than a politically conquering and dominating Messiah? It would be far easier for a professed monotheist to steer clear of falling down to worship idols than it would be to steer clear of the even more unholy alliance with the World's "might makes right" methods of oppression, abuse, and discrimination in hopes of effecting God's victory over the World.<sup>24</sup>

(3) We call attention to Jesus' distinctive phrase "pray and plead for" (*proseuchesthe kai aiteisthe*) in the promise "everything which you pray and plead for, believe that you received it, and it will be so for you." While *proseuchomai* and *aiteō* are common Koinē Greek verbs found regularly throughout the New Testament, their conjunction is *hapax legomena* and so cries out for an explanation. Stumbling at the clause, most translators have paraphrased *proseuchesthe kai aiteisthe* as "ask for in prayer," despite its lack of grammatical warrant and the fact

that either *proseuchesthe* or *aiteisthe* alone would carry the proposed meaning, thereby doing nothing to explain the conjunction.<sup>25</sup> Hence this paraphrase should be rejected as lacking both plausibility and explanatory power. But once Jesus' intentional evocation of Jeremiah 7-8 is disclosed, then the meaning of *proseuchesthe kai aiteisthe* comes into sharp focus. It immediately becomes apparent that Jesus is here employing metalepsis, or allusion "to an earlier text in a way that evokes resonances of the earlier text *beyond those explicitly cited*,"<sup>26</sup> with God's command to Jeremiah, "So you, neither pray (*titepalēl*) on behalf of this people nor offer plea or petition (*tišā' . . . rināh ûtepilāh*) on their behalf" (7:16). For the second-person Hebrew verb *titepalēl* and the second-person Greek *proseuchesthe* are exact cognates meaning "to pray," and the Hebrew clause *tišā' . . . rināh ûtepilāh* (to offer plea or petition) is the virtual definition of *aiteō*, namely, "to ask for with urgency, even to the point of demanding – 'to ask for, to demand, to plead for.'"<sup>27</sup> Putting himself in God's place, moreover, Jesus commands his disciples to act in consequence of his pronounced judgment ("For this reason I say to you . . .") in the same way that God commanded Jeremiah to act in consequence of his pronounced judgment ("So you . . .").

Thus we have established that Jesus is recalling Jeremiah 7:16 in such a way that he is expecting his hearers to take the next logical step. But if the Temple administration in the first century A.D. is functionally equivalent to its corrupt sixth-century B.C. predecessor, and if God ordered the faithful not to pray or plead in behalf of the predecessor, then in what sense can Jesus exhort the faithful to pray and plead concerning the existing administration? Well, if the faithful cannot pray and plead *for* the Temple regime, it follows logically that they can only pray and plead *against* the Temple regime if they are to offer petitions concerning it at all. Just as Jeremiah responded to God's exhortation not to intercede for the religio-political system of his day by declaring God's destructive verdict against it, so in its context "to pray and plead for" means "under God's Kingdom authorization, to pronounce a divine judgment of destruction upon." Again we emphasize that if Jesus had intended for this to be a general word about prayer or how to pray for blessings, he would have used either *proseuchesthe* or *aitesthe*, not both; their unparalleled joint usage strongly indicates

that a radically different theme is in play, an inference certified by Jesus' undisputed outworking of Jeremiah 7-8. Moreover, such fits perfectly with Jesus' "mountain-uprooting" exhortation to invoke God's judgment upon the Temple: the fate befalling the Temple will also befall all other systems of religiously legitimated sin. For these historical and intertextual reasons, the phrase "everything which you pray and plead for" means "every unjust system operating in the name of religion which you, as God's ambassadors, proclaim divine judgment upon" and cannot plausibly be interpreted as "everything you ask for in prayer," thus precluding the fallacious inference that we will receive whatever we ask with sufficient faith.

### ***Positive Hermeneutical Solution: Piecing Together What the Text Actually Means***

Armed with the necessary background, we are now in a position to spell out precisely what Jesus meant in Mark 11:20-25 by his carefully crafted synthesis of word and deed as well as the passage's contemporary significance. Following his symbolic destruction of the Temple and Peter's observation that the fig tree he "had cursed" (*katērasō*) had withered, Jesus was poised to explain his acted parable to his disciples. When faced with exploitative systems claiming religious support that oppress and persecute God's people and deceive those whom God desires to save, his followers must have faith in their all-just and all-powerful God to vindicate them by overthrowing these systems.<sup>28</sup> God's justice, as corroborated by Jesus' actions, ensures a divine verdict of condemnation against these systems, and God's power guarantees that the verdict will be fully executed at the Day of Yahweh if not before. Knowing the mind and power of God on this score, Jesus therefore gives his followers the right to pronounce a sentence of divine judgment against both the Temple (the mountain – this one) and all other *prima facie* religious but *de facto* worldly institutions (everything which you pray and plead for). Further, notice Jesus' indication that the judgment is currently taking place (what he

says *is happening*; *ginetai*, present tense) and actually has already happened (you *received* it; *elabete*, aorist tense).

Here an illustration from modern jurisprudence is instructive. When a judge pronounces an irrevocable sentence, such as life without the possibility of parole, by the authority of the legal system, we consider the sentence as accomplished as soon as it is spoken due to its inevitability, even though the sentence is not immediately carried out in its entirety. Similarly, as representatives of God, our verdict is currently being carried out and has in fact already been accomplished, since we are merely proclaiming an inevitable sentence previously reached in the divine court. Thus we find another example of the “now but not yet” motif that runs throughout the fabric of Jesus’ Kingdom proclamation and the rest of the New Testament. While Jesus inaugurated the Kingdom of God with his first coming, it arrived only in part but in such a way as to guarantee its later coming in full; the final victory over evil has been won but not yet implemented. So we who live between Jesus’ first and second comings experience our triumph over the worldly kingdom as here in principle, which will be completely actualized when Jesus gloriously returns.

However, Jesus makes three important caveats regarding his followers’ vindication. All three concern essential attributes or, in Pauline terms, “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22) that one evinces if one belongs to the Kingdom of God. First, the speaker will be vindicated against the pertinent evil if “he does not waver in his heart,” namely, if the speaker makes no attempt to have one foot in the Kingdom of God, so to speak, while having the other foot in the Kingdom of the World, of which the evil is a part. In that case, the speaker is a hypocrite guilty of the very crime he is denouncing and thus will certainly not be among the company of the redeemed.<sup>29</sup> Second, the speaker will be vindicated if he “believes what he says is happening” and that “he received it,” which would naturally occur given the speaker’s faith in an all-just and all-powerful God. However, if the speaker has faith in a different kind of god or no god at all, then such confidence will obviously not materialize, showing the speaker’s separation from the true God. The third caveat, in addition to its admonitory function, simultaneously prohibits a possible misunderstanding of the Jeremiah subtext. A close reading of Jeremiah 7-8 reveals that God condemned the Temple leadership

as a collectivity (*hā'ām haōzeh*, “this people” singular not *'anāsīm ha'ēl*, “these persons” plural) – namely the institution or system they comprised – and not the concomitant individuals themselves; in fact, the subsequent chapters plead with those very individuals to repent and be saved. Hence Jesus’ disciples may only announce judgment against unjust religious institutions or systems and never the individuals who belong to them, as the latter act militates against the *raison d’être* of the Kingdom of God – being the forgiveness-of-sins of people. Rather, believers must always forgive *tinōs*, or “any individual,” who has wronged them, even (and especially) as they denounce the worldly institutions which unsuspectingly enslave those forgiven persons. But condemning individuals to destruction is to cut off the branch of grace one is sitting on, thereby illustrating one’s own spiritually lost state. In short, each of the three caveats is a different way of expressing the same point: “Only if you really are part of God’s Kingdom will your announced vindication against the systems of evil be ultimately realized; otherwise, you’ll unwittingly be found within the worldly kingdom and so face condemnation yourself.”

In conclusion, far from promising that a person can possess whatever they pray for with sufficient faith, Mark 11:20-25 encourages believers to exhibit sufficient faith in God to stand up against religiously legitimated sin. Believers should expose such affairs resting secure in Jesus’ promise that, if they resist compromise while maintaining lives of forgiveness, they will be vindicated against the wickedness on the Day of Yahweh. Instead of a stumbling block that incites doubt in biblical authority following unanswered prayer, the message of this text is both plausible in light of and consistent with the broad canonical panorama once understood contextually.<sup>30</sup> Examples of individuals who understood and embodied its message include the apostles before the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:29-32), Stephen (Acts 7:46-53), and Paul (Rom. 9:31-33), who remarkably knew the relevant pericope as part of the oral Jesus traditions that would later be enscripturated.<sup>31</sup> But, as we follow their example, we would do well to heed Paul’s poignant abstract of and admonition from this passage: “If I have all the faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing” (1 Cor. 13:2).<sup>32</sup>

## Notes

1. Gloria Copeland, *Believer's Voice of Victory*, 10 May 2007, emphasis hers.
2. E. J. Pryke, *Redactional Style in the Marcan Gospel: A Study of Syntax and Vocabulary as Guides to Redaction in Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 19-21, 145-46, 167-68, 170-71.
3. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, vol. 2 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Fortress: Minneapolis, 1996), 422.
4. William R. Telford, *The Barren Temple and the Withered Tree*, JSNTSup 1 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1980), 119.
5. John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 62-63.
6. For the sake of analysis, I have directly translated all biblical passages in this article from the Greek (UBS 4th / Nestle-Aland 27th) and Hebrew (*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*) primary texts in a woodenly literal fashion.
7. Wright, *Jesus*, 334-35.
8. Telford, *Barren Temple*, 110, 115, 118.
9. *Babylonian Talmud*, Baba Bathra 3b.
10. Telford, *Barren Temple*, 112.
11. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 653.
12. *Ibid.*
13. For verification see John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 357; Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1984), 174, 384; E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 257-69; Jacob Neusner, "Money-Changers in the Temple: The Mishnah's Explanation," *New Testament Studies* 35 (1989): 287-90; Ben F. Meyer, *Christus Faber: The Master-BUILDER and the House of God* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1992), 262-64; Craig A. Evans, "Jesus' Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51 (1989): 237-70; C. K. Barrett, "The House of Prayer and the Den of Thieves," in *Jesus und Paulus: Festschrift für Werner Georg Kümmel zum 70. Geburtstag*, eds. E. Earle Ellis and E. Grässer (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 13-20; Wright, *Jesus*, 413-28; Richard J. Bauckham, "Jesus' Demonstration in the Temple," in *Law and Religion: Essays on the Place of the Law in Israel and Early Christianity*, ed. B. Lindars (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1988), 72-89; Scot McKnight, "Who is Jesus? An Introduction to Jesus Studies," in *Jesus Under Fire*, gen. eds. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 65; Ben Witherington III, *New Testament History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 137.
14. Craig A. Evans, "Jesus and the 'Cave of Robbers': Toward a Jewish Context for the Temple Action." *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 3 (1993): 109-10.
15. Wright, *Jesus*, 422.

16. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2 vols. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 1:497-48; Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 473; Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, rep. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 829.
17. Josephus, *War of the Jews*, 2.125, 228, 253-54; 4.504; *Antiquities of the Jews*, 14.159-60; 20.160-61, 67.
18. Wright, *Jesus*, 419-20.
19. Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus*, 64.
20. Kirk R. MacGregor, *A Molinist-Anabaptist Systematic Theology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007), 269-70.
21. Jesus reinforces this point by thrice acknowledging Satan as the “*archē* of this world” (Jn. 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), where *archē* semantically comes from the domain of politics and denotes the highest ruling authority in a given region. The followers of the Way would later echo the acknowledgment of their Master in 2 Corinthians 4:4, Ephesians 2:2; 6:12, 1 John 5:19, and Revelation 9:11; 11:15; 13:14; 18:23; 20:3, 8.
22. Wright, *Jesus*, 595.
23. Telford summarizes: “For Mark, it is *Jerusalem and its Temple* that have fallen under this curse. Their *raison d’être* has been removed. . . . An eschatological judgement has been pronounced upon the city and its exalted shrine. For Mark and his community, Jesus himself was the agent of that judgement. Had he not after all *curse*d the barren fig-tree? . . . ‘[T]he moving of mountains’ expected . . . in the eschatological era . . . was now taking place. Indeed, about to be removed was *the mountain par excellence*, the Temple Mount” (*Barren Temple*, 231, 119; emphasis his).
24. MacGregor, *Systematic Theology*, 271-73.
25. A representative sample of instances where *proseuchomai* means “to ask for in prayer” includes Matthew 5:44; 6:5-6, 9; 24:20, Luke 6:28; 18:1; 22:40, Acts 8:24, and Rom. 8:26, and an analogous representative sample for *aiteō* includes Matthew 6:8; 7:7, Luke 11:9, 13, and John 14:13-14; 15:7, 16; 16:23-24, 26.
26. Richard B. Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel’s Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 2, emphasis his.
27. Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1:407.
28. Cf. Luke 18:7-8: “But will not God by all means bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I say to you, he will bring about their justice with speed.”
29. Cf. Luke 16:13/Matthew 6:24: “No servant is able to serve two masters. For either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and he will despise the other.” Also note Matthew 7:21: “Not everyone who says to me,



‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of the heavens, but only the one who does the will of my Father, the one in the heavens.”

30. As review editor David Cramer pointed out, the usage by the Word-Faith Movement, then, seems to be an ironic example of “religiously legitimated sin,” keeping the poor and oppressed in bondage to the false hopes of their “prosperity gospel.”
31. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 1041. Further, as Robert M. Grant illustrates (“The Coming of the Kingdom,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 67 [1948]: 301-2), our exegesis is consistent with the way Mark 11:20-25 was read by the Church Fathers, which cannot be said for the typical contemporary reading.
32. I.e., “If I have all the faith in God necessary to courageously and confidently proclaim God’s judgment against the most powerful injustices masquerading in the name of religion but do not have love, I am nothing.”