

End of the World?

JESUS' Olivet Discourse in Mt 24–25 is difficult to interpret (cf. Mk 13; Lk 21). He speaks extensively about cosmic catastrophes, heavenly signs, and the future judgment of God. This has led some to think that Jesus was predicting his Second Coming and the end of the visible world. This interpretation appears to take Jesus' words seriously and at their face value. Nevertheless, it leads to a troublesome scenario: Jesus expected these world-shaking events to occur soon after his Ascension. After all, he told the disciples, "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place" (Mt 24:34). Was Jesus mistaken? Should we feel uncomfortable because the world is still with us almost two thousand years after he prophesied its frightful end?

A closer look at Jesus' words in the context of ancient Judaism reveals a better interpretation. Namely, Jesus was predicting the demise of the Jerusalem Temple—the architectural symbol of the Old Covenant. At the literal-historical level, Jesus' entire discourse is an extension of his cryptic comment about the Temple: "[T]here will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down" (Mt 24:2). Hearing this, the disciples were probably reminded of a similar event in the OT when God allowed the Temple to be destroyed in 586 B.C. as punishment for Israel's sins (2 Kings 25:8–10). Interpreting Jesus' words in this way does more adequate justice to the symbolism of his language and the testimony of history. Ancient sources confirm his prophecy: the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70, a tragedy that claimed the lives of more than 1 million Jews. From this perspective Jesus stands vindicated, since his words did come to pass within the lifetime of his contemporaries.

But how are the details of Jesus' strange language to be understood? Could he expect us to associate cosmic upheavals like national warfare (Mt 24:6–7), earthly catastrophes (Mt 24:7–8), the darkening of the sun and the moon (Mt 24:29), and stars falling out of the sky (Mt 24:29) with the collapse of a sacred building? The answer lies in biblical and traditional views of the Temple. Like many religions in the Near East, the Israelites regarded their Temple as a miniature replica or microcosm of the world; it was an architectural model of the universe fashioned by God. Conversely, the universe itself was a macrotemple, where God also dwells with his people. This is best summarized by the Psalmist, "He built his sanctuary like the high heavens, like the earth, which he has founded for ever" (Ps 78:69). Other indications of this Temple theology are found in OT parallels and Jewish traditions that link the Temple and the world closely together:

(1) The Place of God's Rest

After the week-long construction of the world, "God rested from all his work which he had done in creation" (Gen 2:3). Likewise, when God established order and gave the Israelites "rest" from their enemies (2 Sam 7:1), He commissioned the building of the Temple by Solomon as his "resting place for ever" (Ps 132:14; cf. 2 Chron 6:41; Sir 24:11; Is 66:1).

(2) Symbolism of Seven

God's creation of the world is described as the construction of a Temple (Job 38:4–6; Amos 9:6) that is completed and blessed on the seventh day (Gen 2:2–3). Similarly, Solomon built the Jerusalem Temple in seven years (1 Kings 6:38) and dedicated it in the seventh month (1 Kings 8:2) during the seven-day Feast of Booths (1 Kings 8:65).

(3) A House of Glory

Isaiah's vision of the Lord (Is 6:1–7) makes an implicit comparison: the Temple and the cosmos are mutually and interchangeably filled with divine glory. As the train of God's robe "filled the temple" (Is 6:1) and God's house is "filled with smoke" (Is 6:4), so the angels cry out "the whole earth is full of his glory" (Is 6:3).

(4) Jewish Tradition

Jewish writers of Jesus' day describe in great detail the Temple as a model of the universe. Josephus, Philo, and later rabbinic writings interpret the Temple's divisions, furniture, colors, and architecture as symbols of the cosmos. One tradition links the three divisions of the Temple with three realms of the world: heaven is the most holy place, the land is the holy place, and the sea is the outer courtyard and the bronze laver of water.

These considerations help make sense of Jesus' words in their historical context. With the dawning of the New Covenant, God had to clear away the central symbol of the Old Covenant, the Temple. The Church is God's new and spiritual Temple, built with the living stones of Christian believers (Mt 16:18; Eph 2:20–22; 1 Pet 2:4–5). In this light, the devastation of the Temple and the judgment of Israel in A.D. 70 can be seen as an overture to greater things. That is, the termination of the Old Covenant world prefigures the destruction of the universe, God's macrotemple, and the judgment of all nations by Christ (cf. 2 Pet 3:5–7). Thus Jesus' Olivet Discourse (Mt 24–25) is initially fulfilled in the first century as he said (Mt 24:34). But imbedded in Christ's words are spiritual truths that point forward to his Second Coming in glory and the end of the visible world. «