

Context: In the past section of Mark Jesus has bested the chief priests, scribes and elders in theological argument in the Temple (Mark 11:27-12:37). Jesus has denounced them (12:38-40) and acclaimed the worth of the widow's contribution to the Temple treasury (12:41-44). Jesus now leaves the sanctuary of the Temple, never to return. We can read it as Jesus abandoning the Temple as an act of judgment, comparable to the glory of God abandoning the Temple structure in Ezekiel 10. This is the first of three symbols of destruction of the Temple in this passage.

WHAT LARGE STONES AND WHAT LARGE BUILDINGS: The dramatic magnificence of the Temple was due in part to the towering structure made of stones that were 40 feet long, weighing 50 tons or more. Part of these walls exists today: the wailing wall. These retaining walls, outside the Temple reached 80 feet high, and 175 feet high on the south highest interior wall.

all will be thrown down.": The first destruction of the Temple was by the Babylonians who left the exterior retaining wall standing. The second destruction, by the Romans in 70 C.E., was utter with not one stone left standing on another.

HE WAS SITTING ON THE MOUNT OF OLIVES : the phrasing recalls that in Zechariah 14:4, part of a larger passage that mentions the Mount of Olives by name in a war focused on Jerusalem (Zech 14:1-5). This is similar in context to the "abomination of desolation" talked of in Daniel 9:27, 11:31 and 12:11 – which is alluded to in Mark 13:14.

Falvius Josephus Describes the Romans' Sack of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. in *The Wars of the Jews*, **Book 6 :: 1.** (409) Now, when Titus was come into this [upper] city, he admired not only some other places of strength in it, but particularly those strong towers which the tyrants, in their mad conduct, had relinquished; (410) for when he saw their solid altitude, and the largeness of their several stones, and the exactness of their joints, as also how great was their breadth, and how extensive their length, he expressed himself after the manner following:-(411) "We have certainly had God for our assistant in this war, and it was no other than God who ejected the Jews out of these fortifications; for what could the hands of men, or any machines, do towards overthrowing these towers!" (413) To conclude, when he entirely demolished the rest of the city, and overthrew its walls, he left these towers as a monument of his good fortune, which had proved his auxiliaries, and enabled him to take what could not otherwise have been taken by him.

Book 7, Chapter 1 :: Now as soon as the army had no more people to slay or to plunder, because there remained none to be the objects of their fury, [for they would not have spared any, had there remained any other work to be done,] Caesar gave orders that they should now demolish the entire city and temple, but should leave as many of the towers standing as were of the greatest eminency;... in order to demonstrate to posterity what kind of city it was, and how well fortified, which the Roman valor had subdued; but for all the rest of the wall, it was so thoroughly laid even with the ground by those that dug it up to the foundation, that there was left nothing to make those that came thither believe it had ever been inhabited. This was the end which Jerusalem came to by the madness of those that were for innovations; a city otherwise of great magnificence, and of mighty fame among all mankind.

When you hear of wars and rumors of wars: Scholars usually date the gospel of Mark to 70 C.E., during the Jewish revolt, which followed a long period of peace from Tiberius' rule in 14-37 C.E. to the end of Nero's imperial reign in 68 C.E. Is Mark having Jesus refer to this time, in the late 60s as the Jewish Revolt begins,

Mark 13:1-8, 24-37

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹ As [Jesus] came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, **WHAT LARGE STONES AND WHAT LARGE BUILDINGS!**" ² Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; *all will be thrown down.*"

³ When **HE WAS SITTING ON THE MOUNT OF OLIVES** opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴ "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" ⁵ Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁶ Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. ⁷

When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come.

⁸ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there

earthquakes: a famous earthquake in Asia Minor (today's Turkey) leveled 12 cities in one night of 61 C.E. Pompeii and Herculaneum (in Italy) were destroyed by an earthquake in 63 C.E.

birth pangs: or "labor pains" This was a popular image for divine judgment in the 1st Testament: See Isaiah 13:6-8, 26:17-19, 66:7-9 & Micah 4:9-10. It evoked the sudden suffering of a birthing woman before the promise of a new birth, a new day. The dramatic magnificence of the Temple was due in part to the towering structure made of stones that were 40 feet long, weighing 50 tons or more. Part of these walls exists today: the wailing wall. These retaining walls, outside the Temple reached 80 feet high, and 175 feet high on the south highest interior wall.

IN THOSE DAYS : This phrase in the 1st Testament refers to an eschatological event of importance. See Jeremiah 31:29, 33:15-16; Joel 2:29, 3:1; Zechariah 8:23. This coming of God's end is equated with a cosmic catastrophe, the climactic manifestation of the glory of God.

the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light: Amos 5:20 "Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?" In some later passages this metaphorical darkness is interpreted literally as a darkening of the sun, moon and stars. See Isaiah 13:10, 24:21 & 23, 34:4; Ezekiel 21:7-8; Joel 2:10, 21 & 3:15. The eschatological dimming of the cosmic lights of the firmament is a reversal of the work of creation. Yet it's not a reversion to the original chaos; rather hints at God's victory over it. Genesis 1:1-2 "1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep,"

powers in the heavens | with great power and glory: the latter seems to be the power of Jesus, the former the [demonic] powers of the celestial realm. One displaces the other.

the Son of Man coming in clouds: this imagery is drawn from Daniel 7:13-14 "13 As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being [son of man] coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. 14 To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed." Clouds are often associated with theophanies, experiences of the divine. See Deuteronomy 33:26 "There is none like God, O Jeshurun, who rides through the heavens to your help, majestic through the skies."; 2 Samuel 22:12 "He made darkness around him a canopy, thick clouds, a gathering of water."; Psalm 68:4 "Sing to God, sing praises to his name; lift up a song to him who rides upon the clouds— his name is the Lord— be exultant before him."; Ezekiel 1:4 "As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like gleaming amber." It's likely then that the son of man is a divine figure.

gather his elect from the four winds : this evokes the biblical notion that the dispersed people of God will at the end be gathered from the four corners of the earth. See Deuteronomy 30:4 "Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back." ; Isaiah 43:5-6 "5 Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; 6 I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth—"; Zechariah 2:6 "Up, up! Flee from the land of the north, says the Lord; for I have spread you abroad like the four winds of heaven, says the Lord." But Jesus tweaks this in picturing himself, rather than God, as the gatherer of the scattered people.

will be **earthquakes** in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the **birth pangs**.

24 "But **IN THOSE DAYS**, after that suffering,

the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,

25 *and the stars will be falling from heaven,*

and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

26 Then they will see '**the Son of Man coming in clouds**' with great power and glory. 27

Then he will send out the angels, and **gather his elect from the four winds**, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

the fig tree : using the growth of a plant as a metaphor for the manifestation of the reign of God is one of several links between Mark 13:28-29 and the parable of the Sower (and others) in Mark 4:1-34. The fig tree has also already been used as a symbol concerning the eschatological fate of Israel in Mark 11:12-14, 20-21.

the Son : this is the only time in Mark's gospel that he uses the word "son" without qualifying it as the "son of God." It seems to evoke a notion of subservience as opposed to mutuality between the son and the father. Compare it to 1 Corinthians 15:28 "When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all."

keep alert; : often translated as "don't fall asleep" As the time is unknown, even by the son, vigilance and perseverance are required by all.

doorkeeper: the doorkeeper's task were to exclude unwanted visitors and to admit others on their arrival, including the master, as the doors were locked from inside. See John 10:3 "The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out."

in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn : some scholars argue that these four time designations are modifications of the Romans watches of the night in which the first began at 6pm, the second at 9pm, the 3rd at midnight and the 4th at 3am. This replaced the 3 watch system of the OT.

keep awake : this command is repeated in 33 and 37 in which is it immediately followed by a reference to the Passover in 14:1 "It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread." The Passover was called a night of vigil, or night of watching. Exodus 12:42 "That was for the Lord a night of vigil, to bring them out of the land of Egypt. That same night is a vigil to be kept for the Lord by all the Israelites throughout their generations." Some Jews celebrated the Passover with the habit of staying up all night. Some Jewish scholars connect this "night of watching" with their hope for a future redemption at passover.

This passage is usually read in the normal lectionary cycle on the first Sunday in Advent as a reminder to stay awake and to be alert, looking for the Advent of the Messiah and the day of God's definitive recreation.

²⁸ "From **the fig tree** learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³² "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor **the Son**, but only the Father. ³³ Beware, **keep alert**; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the **doorkeeper** to be on the watch. ³⁵ Therefore, **keep awake**—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶ or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: **Keep awake.**"