

November 15, 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time: Mark 13:1-8

The unnamed disciple in Mark 13:1 would have been impressed not only by the temple's splendor, but by what it represented: God's presence with Israel. Jesus' reply must have astounded him.

by [A. Katherine Grieb](#) in the [November 11, 2015](#) issue

Structurally, this week's Gospel passage divides into two sections: Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple (v. 1-2) and his discourse concerning the apocalyptic woes ahead for the nation of Israel (3-8). The first part responds to a comment by an unnamed disciple, while the second begins to answer the two questions posed privately by the inner group of Peter, James, John, and Andrew.

"As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!'" The Jerusalem temple, newly reconstructed by Herod the Great at great expense, was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The project began about 20 years before the birth of Jesus, and the inner sanctuary was completed quickly (in about 18 months, according to the Jewish historian Josephus, who provides us with detailed descriptions of the main building, the outer buildings, and their contents). But the temple took many more years to complete.

It occupied a platform of more than 900 by 1,500 feet—twice as large as the Roman Forum with its many temples and four times as large as the Athenian Acropolis with its Parthenon. The huge retaining walls that supported the temple were composed of great white stones as long as 40 feet, some of which still stand as part of the Western Wall.

The front of the temple itself was a huge square (150 feet each way), much of it decorated with silver and gold. Josephus reports that Herod used so much gold to

cover the outside walls of the temple that, in the bright sunlight, it nearly blinded anyone who looked at it. The combination of the temple mount, the platform of huge retaining stones, and the large stones of the temple itself raised the temple complex to a height that could be seen from miles away by pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem to worship there.

The unnamed disciple, perhaps a peasant from rural Galilee, would have been impressed not only by the temple's splendor, but by what it represented: the dwelling place of God at the center of the known world, the symbol of God's presence with Israel. So Jesus' reply must have astounded him: "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

This prophecy of the temple's complete destruction may well go back to the Jesus of history, since it exists in the New Testament in a variety of forms and contexts. In John 2:19 it is associated with Jesus' body; in Acts 6:14 it is part of the charge against Stephen. In Mark's Gospel, it is important to notice what Jesus actually says—and to distinguish between his words and those of the false witnesses at Jesus' trial (14:57–58) and the people who taunt him at his crucifixion (15:29), saying that he said he himself would destroy the temple and build another one in three days. Mark's Jesus uses what is probably a divine passive, predicting that God would allow the destruction of the holiest place in Israel.

This was hardly a new idea. Jeremiah and Micah had prophesied the Babylonians' destruction of the first temple. And according to Talmudic tradition, Jesus' contemporary Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai prophesied the second temple's destruction 40 years before it was burned and razed to the ground by the Romans in 70 CE. It is very probable that Jesus said something about the destruction of the temple that, perhaps in garbled form, sounded like blasphemy to his Jewish contemporaries.

This very public statement is followed by a private moment between Jesus and the inner circle of his disciples, the first four to be called (1:16–20), listed first among the 12 (3:16–17). Jesus sits, the typical posture for teaching, on the Mount of Olives, opposite the temple. Much has been made of Mark's "theological geography," and it is evident here: Jesus is opposing the temple leadership and its commercial practices (11:15–19), and he does so in the name of the Lord, who, as Malachi predicted, would "suddenly come to his temple" in judgment (Mal. 3:1–2). Also important is

Zechariah 14:1-5, which links the Lord's coming to the Mount of Olives with judgment against Jerusalem.

The disciples ask Jesus two questions: "When will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" The rest of chapter 13 consists of a long apocalyptic discourse by way of answers to these two questions, in reverse order. Jesus responds to the request for a sign by describing "the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be" (13:14) and by drawing a lesson from the fig tree (13:28). His answer to when this will be comes at the end: "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father," followed by the warning to "keep awake" in the meantime.

Before Jesus addresses the disciples' questions, he makes a prediction that reminds me of the film *The Road*. He warns the disciples that false messiahs (*christs* in the Greek) will come and "lead many astray." They will spread false rumors of wars to alarm people; there will also be real wars, earthquakes, and famines. All this is but the beginning of the end: the end of the age that is passing away and the birth pangs of the new creation that is being born. It will be a time to trust in God alone.