

# APOCALYPSE NOW & NOT YET NOTES ON MARK 13



# **MARK 13**

As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!"

2 "Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

3 As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, 4 "Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?"

5 Jesus said to them: "Watch out that no one deceives you. 6 Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many. 7 When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. 8 Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.

9 "You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. 10 And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. 11 Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.

12 "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. 13 Everyone will hate you because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.

14 "When you see 'the abomination that causes desolation' standing where it does not belong—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. 15 Let no one on the housetop go down or enter the house to take anything out. 16 Let no one in the field go back to get their cloak. 17 How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! 18 Pray that this will not take place in winter, 19 because those will be days of distress unequaled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now—and never to be equaled again.

20 "If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect, whom he has chosen, he has shortened them.

# **MARK 13**

21 At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Messiah!' or, 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it. 22 For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. 23 So be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead of time.

24 "But in those days, following that distress,

" 'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light;25 the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'

26 "At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. 27 And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

28 "Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. 29 Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. 30 Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

32 "**But about that day or hour no one knows,** not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 33 Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. 34 It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

35 "Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. 36 If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping.

37 What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!' "

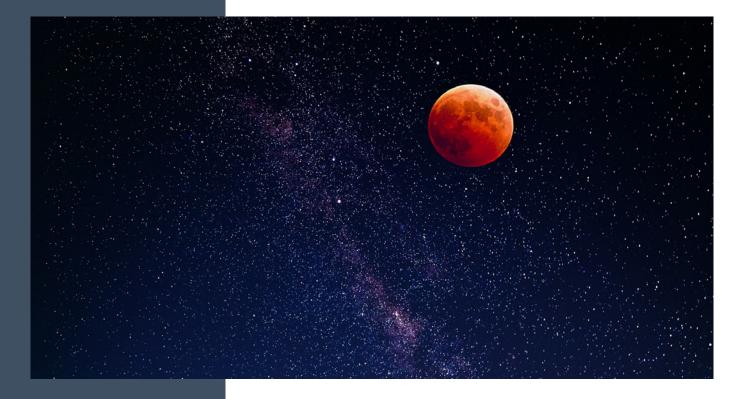
The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Mk 13:1-37.



Apocalypse is a Greek word that simply means "revelation." In biblical vocabulary, this is used to describe just that - a revelation of knowledge or a revelation of the gospel, or a peak behind the curtain about what God is doing behind the scenes in our world.

A tool to help us understand how the biblical writers used apocalyptic imagery is to think of a double exposure photograph. Consider above, I am standing on a mountain in Colorado at about 14,000 feet in elevation. I am superimposed over Mt. Rainier, also around 14,000 feet in elevation. I have superimposed these images in a way so as to juxtapose the peak of one mountain at the base of another. The mountain Colorado was training, and one day I hope to climb Mt. Rainier. Pause and consider how else this superimposition of images conveys meaning beyond just the two scenes.

The biblical authors use words to paint pictures much like the one above. Once scenario is often considered in light of a similar one, usually a scene in the distant future awaiting fulfillment. These scenes often have repeated motifs, and can be thought of as an act and re-enactment. One scene of judgment & restoration, such as Egypt in Exodus can be used to describe Babylon in Isaiah. Jesus develops several of these scenes in Mark 13.





Interpreting biblical apocalypse and prophecy is often very messy, and when handled inappropriately, can lead to fear, divisiveness, confusion, and sometimes event trauma.

We believe that good **hermeneutics** (how we interpret and understand biblical texts) can lead to peace and wisdom while besetting fear. Additionally, we hold our interpretation with confidence and openness. There are many people who agree and disagree with our view, and our aim is to be gracious theologians.

**Eschatology** (the study of the end times) is a decide-for issue, and should not be used to divide Christians since even Jesus doesn't know when the end will arrive. With that said, we believe a proper eschatology begins with the gospel, because the gospel is a message about Jesus' reign mediating the advancement of God's kingdom and promises on this planet.

#### SESSION BREAKDOWN

We broke this passage down into two main sections, and section one is broken down further into two main sections. We did this because the disciples are really asking Jesus two different questions: When will the temple be destroyed, and when will the end finally come?

We see this clearly in Matthew's gospel:

As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Mt 24:3.

In light of the two questions, session one will cover part one of his response to the first question, and session two will cover part 2 of his response to the first question, as well as his response to the second question. We'll first talk about the motif of "The Abomination of Desolation," and in session two we will address the "Cloudrider" and his response to the second question.

Youthful Daniel kneeling on bank of river Ulai; behind him, hand on shoulder, Gabriel as a boy indicating vision of two-horned ram. The Dutch painter and etcher Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1606–69) painted the Vision of Daniel ca. 1650

"When you see 'the abomination that causes desolation' standing where it does not belong—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains."

The abomination of desolation finds its roots in Daniel chapter 9. When Mark or Jesus include that note to "let the reader understand," it's an indication that the reader needs to go and meditate on Daniel 9. For the sake of time, we're including the last few verses of the chapter here:

26 After the sixty-two 'sevens,' the Anointed One will be put to death and will have nothing. The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood: War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed. 27 He will confirm a covenant with many for one 'seven.' In the middle of the 'seven' he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. **And at the temple he will set up an abomination that causes desolation**, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him."

The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Da 9:26–27.

It is our view that Daniel found its initial fulfillment in the Antiochene crisis of the 160's BC. We hold this view because the apocryphal books of 1 and 2 Maccabees match up very closely with much of Daniel's visions in Daniel 7 - 12.

The abomination of desolation is a specific instance of when King Antiochus IV desecrated the temple by sacrificing a pig on it and a few years later, wrote an edict that forced Jews to forego Jewish practices under penalty of death. Here are some excerpts from Josephus & 1 Maccabees:

However, in that citadel dwelt the impious and wicked part of the [Jewish] multitude, from whom it proved that the citizens suffered many and sore calamities. (253) And when **the king had built an idol altar upon God's Altar**, **he slew swine upon it**, and so offered a sacrifice neither according to the law, nor the Jewish religious worship in that country. He also compelled them to forsake the worship which they paid their own God, and to adore those whom he took to be gods; and made them build temples, and raise idol altars, in every city and village, and offer swine upon them every day.

Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 324.

And the king wrote unto his whole kingdom, that all should be one people, and that every one should give up his [religious] usages. And all the nations acquiesced in accordance with the command of the king. And many in Israel took delight in his (form of) worship, and they began sacrificing to idols, and profaned the sabbath. Furthermore, the king sent letters by the hand of messengers to Jerusalem and to the cities of Judah (to the effect that) they should practise customs foreign to (the traditions of) the land, and that they should cease the (sacrificing of) whole burnt offerings, and sacrifices, and drink offerings in the sanctuary, and that they should profane the sabbaths and feasts, and pollute the sanctuary and those who had been sanctified; that they should (moreover) build high places, and sacred groves, and shrines for idols, and that they should sacrifice swine and (other) unclean animals; and that they should leave their sons uncircumcized, and make themselves abominable by means of (practising) everything that was unclean and profane, so that they might forget the Law, and change all the (traditional) ordinances. And whosoever should not act according to the word of the king, should die.

Robert Henry Charles, ed., Apocrypha of the Old Testament (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), 1 Mac 1:4–50.

This series of events incited the Maccabean revolt, led by Judas "The Hammer" Maccabeus, resulting in Jewish victory over the Seleucid empire & rededication of the temple now known today as Hanukkah. This victory painted a portrait for the Jews of what the Messiah would look like: The Hammer.

The Antiochene Crisis is like that first exposure in the double exposure photograph, and now Jesus is about to paint a second exposure for us:

Jesus talks about plagues and wars and rumors and betrayal and persecution all as a buildup to the abomination of desolation.

"When you see 'the abomination that causes desolation' standing where it does not belong—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains."

Instead of advocating the way of the Hammer, Jesus tells them to flee when they see those signs. This is a pastoral warning that one day, the temple will fall, and when you see these signs, "flee Jerusalem; don't go back for anything."

Jesus claims that this all will happen, "...this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened." Biblically, a generation is understood to be 40 years (think of the wilderness generation from Numbers).

And sure enough, in AD 70, the temple was destroyed by Rome in an eerily reminiscent re-enactment of the attack of the Seleucid army, but this time, Rome prevailed. Here is a write up by Jonathan Hayes: "Jerusalem in Jesus' day was the capitol of a Roman province called "Judea," in which Roman soldiers were stationed. Roman tax collectors extorted Jewish people to pay for upkeep of the Roman Empire. As you can imagine, political tensions were really high between Jews and Romans. No major revolt happened during Jesus' ministry or even during the whole book of Acts. But later in the year 64, a new Roman governor of Judea became appointed named Gessius Florus. Florus did something that no Roman governor had ever done to the Jews: he stole money from the Temple to pay for his infrastructure projects, believing that any temple in Roman territory must be used for Roman purposes. That was the last straw for the Jewish community in Jerusalem, and that same year, several revolutionary factions emerged which took the ideology of the Zealots and spread it to mobilize most of the Jerusalem-area for war. Jesus in this passage warned the Christians living near Jerusalem to take to the hills and escape when they saw this happening, and the historian Eusebius tells us that this is exactly what the Jews who followed Jesus and Christians did.

The zealot revolutionaries took over Jerusalem and the surrounding area and forced the Romans to send an army of 60,000 troops. The siege began in the month of April, so perhaps the early Christians followed Jesus' command to pray for it to not take place in winter. But the historians that document this event for us explain that the siege was still extremely catastrophic, even by ancient standards. Each faction of zealots burned down the food storerooms that were built specifically for siege defense because they couldn't risk the other factions taking control of that food. The siege lasted for four months with dwindling reserves. People starved and resorted to cannibalism.

It must have truly felt like the end of the world to those that lived through this, which is why a certain Jewish zealot named Simon Bar Gioras became elected as the alleged messiah during the siege. The Romans took months to capture the city because of its ancient defenses and the Jews' resilience to keep fighting. But finally when the Romans won, they destroyed the Temple just as Jesus predicted. Thousands of Jews were killed or sold into slavery."



The Arch of Titus: A depiction of his troops sacking the Jerusalem temple after they burned it down. A second abomination of desolation. (Photo by Eric Lessing)

And so, we see the second photograph taking shape, superimposed over the first. That's not the end though, because the way apocalyptic genre works is that it's meant to be allusive, vague, and able to be recapitulated again and again. These two exposures are not the only ones, and as we traverse the path of history, each re-enactment gives us a glimpse of what the final Day of the Lord is going to look like.

For more on the Day of the Lord, see the Bible Project video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEBc2gSSW04

The meaning of this passage is a clear warning to the disciples that when they see the abomination of desolation taking place again, they are to flee.

But for us, its significance lies in our ability to discern false leaders and correctly interpreting contemporary events. The end is not yet. Don't be deceived! He told us all ahead of time. You will be hated, but the Gospel will first be proclaimed, and the Holy Spirit will be with us when we're on trial. Don't be anxious, and we are simply to endure to the end by loving God and loving others. Finally, don't follow the way of the Hammer and go astray after political ideologies, but follow the way of the Shepherd: Love God, love neighbor.



Jesus finishes his piece on the abomination of desolation by then turning to some truly apocalyptic texts:

See, the day of the LORD is coming

-a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger-

to make the land desolate

and destroy the sinners within it.

10 The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light.

The rising sun will be darkened

and the moon will not give its light.

11 I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins.

The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Is 13:9–11.

This text certainly does not feel peaceful or wise, but when situated in its context, it will give us the Fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1).

In this passage, Isaiah is prophesying the fall of the cruel nation of Babylon at the hands of the Medes. And indeed, Babylon fell quickly, maybe within in a month.

And the only language that Isaiah could use to describe it was with cosmic dissipation.

However, Jesus, in his polemic against the temple of Jerusalem repurposes the fall of Babylon language to refer to the fall of Israel, equating the Jewish kingdom with the Babylonian kingdom. In Jesus' eyes, Jerusalem has become indistinguishable from the arrogant, violent nations of the world.

In accordance with our photograph metaphor, think of the fall of Babylon as the first photograph, and the fall of Jerusalem as the second; act and re-enactment.

And following this,

"At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory."

So what's going on here? This text is rooted back in Daniel 7.

11 "Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire. 12 (The other beasts had been stripped of their authority, but were allowed to live for a period of time.)

13 "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was
one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He
approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.
14 He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations
and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion
is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his
kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Da 7:11–14.

This is an enthronement text.\*\* If we picture with Daniel someone like a human being taken from in front of Daniel and lead before the Ancient of Days to receive Divine Authority, we see a royal procession upwards toward heaven to be enthroned over all the nations. Some people use this text to talk about Jesus' return to earth, but if we simply look at the directionality of this text, we'll see that it's not referring to that. There are other texts that do, but this is not one of them.

Thus, the Cloudrider is the one who will be given authority over all the peoples of the earth, and they will bow down and worship him. But this text now poses a problem: What does Jesus mean when he says that this generation will see this event as well?

If you've been following along through Mark, you can pause here and go to chapter 14 to read this:

Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" 61 But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer.

Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"

62 "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

63 The high priest tore his clothes. "Why do we need any more witnesses?" he asked. 64 "You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?"

They all condemned him as worthy of death.

The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Mk 14:60–64.

If we use the Bible to interpret the Bible, which is a basic hermeneutical principle, we'll see that Jesus isn't talking about a literal Cloudrider motif - he's referring to his enthronement, where they put a crown of thorns and lift him up on the cross.

His crucifixion is his enthronement, where he's given authority over all the nations, and everyone within that generation did indeed witness this. And if you recall, upon Jesus' cruxifixion, darkness came upon the whole land, and the curtain separating the Holy of Holies tore in two: cosmic dissipation.

And finally, to address Jesus response to the second question, he was quite clear: he doesn't know when the end will be, but we are to be alert and on our guard, not asleep and lazy.

Why did Jesus not know? Perhaps it is because he doesn't want us obsessing over eschatology, which is a waste of our time. Jesus wants us preaching the gospel and being on our guard, not lost in obsessions that result in division. Perhaps it is because when God becomes incarnate, it is inappropriate to expect the fullness of omniscience to be manifested in the confines of a human mind. Perhaps both, and perhaps more reasons.

But what is clear is to endure to the end, and be on our guard.



Stele with Baal with lightning, with god mounted on horned altar and leaves bursting forth from Baal's mace. Eric Lessing.

\*\* The Cloudrider motif was a famous reference to Baal, the storm god of the Canaanites, and particularly the Ugaritic peoples north of Israel:

"What enemy has risen against Baal, what foe against the Cloudrider?" (CAT 1.3 III 47-IV2) (The Baal Cycle)

But the use of the Cloudrider motif here is a polemic against Baal, dethroning him and saying that the Son of Man will instead be the one to receive Divine Authority.

It would be a misunderstanding to say however, that the Israelites stole from the Canaanites. These motifs and symbols are shared ways for the Ancient Near Eastern cultures to conceive of and convey truth. They are using a shared symbolic vocabulary if you will.

I share all this to underscore my point that this is enthronement imagery because The Baal Cycle is an enthronement poem, how Baal becomes the King of the gods with authority from El. Thus, from a surface textual reading, and a socio-contextual comparison, Daniel 7 is very clearly a text where a divine-human figure receives authority to rule from a Divine Authority.

The significance of all of this boils down to how much we pay attention to Jesus' words and how we interpret apocalyptic literature. Jesus warned us about false prophets, so don't give our credit cards out to false teachers! He said to stay alert and be on our guard, so we need to respond appropriately.

As for interpreting apocalypse, if we meditate in how the prophets and how Jesus reapply apocalyptic texts, then instead of being laden with fear, we can be vigilant and use his wisdom to navigate a world of chaos and conflict.

Every day we're given reasons to give into fear and division, yet Jesus said that even when the sun goes dark and the moon turns to blood, we can stand firm and endure to the end, loving God and neighbor.

Jesus is a prophet who was vindicated in his prediction that the temple would fall, and vindicated in his status as the true Cloudrider by his resurrection.

The gospel in this apocalypse is that he is enthroned on the right hand of God as the ruling Christ, and that he is king over the tumultuous nations, and we can trust in his control even when the world seems like it's careening out of orbit.

#### FURTHER READING

32. Signs of the Times [Matthew] - Tim Mackie (The Bible Project). Accessed May 22, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJIxPL9A34M. (This is the sermon that started it all for me back in 2017 and started me on this deep dive into meditating on apocalyptic literature and how it applies to us today).

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