

## Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Proper 28 – Year B

**RCL Readings**<sup>1</sup> – Daniel 12:1-3; Psalm 16; Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-8

**ACNA Readings** – Daniel 12:1-4a(4b-13); Psalm 16; Hebrews 10:31-39; Mark 13:14-23

**Seasonal Introduction.** The Christian calendar revolves around two principal feasts: Christmas (involving Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany) and Easter (involving Lent, Easter, and Pentecost). Then there is a large section in the middle called ordinary time. This season often focuses on the growth of the Church, ending in a season known as Kingdome tide which concludes with the feast of Christ the king. During this time we read and hear the bulk of the teachings of Jesus in relation to the kingdom of heaven and how we are called to live as disciples of the Messiah.

**Common Theme.** Biblical passages that reference the end times are always difficult to exegete. Very often, we take a few verses from this passage and a few from another passage and velcro them together to create a continuous narrative. If only it was that easy!

Prophetic warnings of the future are found in both the Old and New Testaments and we should embrace their warnings seriously and honestly, but with the confidence that God is in control. Enduring through times of trial is one of the themes in the readings this week. Some of the passages refer to people enduring a current difficult period. Others prophesy of a future time of distress. Despite the frustration felt at what seems to be a hopeless situation, our texts will remind us that everything is in the hands of a loving God. He hears prayers. He endures alongside His people. Even the Messiah did not shy away from suffering and persecution.

**Hebraic Context.** Biblical eschatology, or the doctrine of the end times, does not originate with Christianity. It is found in the pages of the Hebrew Bible which often used the term אחרית הימים (*acharit hayamim*) “the last days”. The term itself is deliberately vague. Many questions are unanswered in the text such as: how long are the ‘days’ of the ‘last days’, are they concurrent, will there be a pause within the last days with time to repent, where does the temple and the messiah fit in, do we have a personal role in the last days, and, how can our actions hinder or quicken the onset of the apocalypse?

The roots of Jewish eschatology are found in the pre-diaspora prophets and writings such as Isaiah and Joel and some of the Psalms. However, the visions and doctrines concerning the end times during the exile through the 2nd Temple Period exploded, as seen in Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, and Malachi.<sup>2</sup> These spoke about future events such as the ingathering of the exiles, the coming of the Messiah (or messiahs), and the resurrection of the dead—many times within the timeframe of the last days.

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<sup>1</sup> Alternate RCL readings: I Samuel 1:4-20; I Samuel 2:1-10

<sup>2</sup> Apocalyptic literature also flourished, such as: The War Scroll (1QM), II Esdras, II Baruch, and the Apocalypse of John (Revelation).

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Traditions often developed in opposition to each other reflecting the uncertainty of how to interpret the prophetic Scriptures concerning the end of days. For example, Rabbi Yohanan said that the coming redeemer (the son of David) would only come in a generation that is entirely righteous or one that is entirely guilty. He proceeded to quote Isaiah 60:21 in favour of a generation that will be righteous, “Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land forever.” Rabbi Yohanan immediately followed that up by quoting from Isaiah 59:16 regarding a generation that was guilty, “He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede.”<sup>3</sup>

Jewish sages saw that the Bible spoke of a beautiful redeemed world at the last days but also of days of disaster and destruction. The role of the Jewish people as a light to the nations could then be interpreted to play a function in redeeming the world for righteousness to flourish as a pathway for bringing the messiah. In modern Judaism, there is one tradition that says if everyone observed the Sabbath just once all together then the messiah would come!<sup>4</sup> This understanding placed an emphasis on our behaviour in the world as we enter the last days. Regardless of how the last days will come about or when, we are called to wait expectantly for it—not that we do nothing as we wait, but actively live and work to be found righteous, along with the whole of the church and hopefully even our neighbours who join with us.

**Daniel 12:1-3.**<sup>5</sup> Daniel was a noble Jewish youth of Jerusalem who was now a captive in Babylon, along with the surviving remnant from Nebuchadnezzar's invasion and conquest. Daniel was about to speak of a “time of trouble, such as never has been” and yet Israel was already in trouble, taken into exile. Daniel was taken from his home and family, likely quite young, into captivity, was forcibly made a eunuch, and made to serve his captors in the court of Babylon.<sup>6</sup> What could be worse?

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<sup>3</sup> Sanhedrin 98a.11

<sup>4</sup> Likely developed from *Shabbat* 118b.4, “Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai, ‘If only Israel would keep two Sabbaths in accordance to the *halakha*, redemption would be at hand.’”

<sup>5</sup> ACNA includes: Daniel 12:4-13

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah told Hezekiah that “some of your own sons, who will come from you,... shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.” Because of this prophecy and the statement in Daniel 1:3-4 where youths from the royal family and nobility were taken, a Jewish tradition stated that Daniel may have been of royal blood, one of the descendants of David. And yet, even as a noble man that had been horribly abused, during his amazing rise to power and influence Daniel never tried to instigate a rebellion. Instead, he faithfully served four pagan emperors.

This is an amazing lesson in humility and service to overlords that is, perhaps, seen in the teaching of Jesus where He taught His disciples to carry the pack of a Roman two miles even if requested to carry only one mile. Sometimes our cultural adaptations and adoration of things like personal and national freedom and self-worth overshadows Biblical mandates. This, in turn, can diminish our testimony. Christians are to conquer “by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.”

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Scholars variously believe that this “time of trouble” in Daniel’s vision may be the backdrop to the tribulations mentioned in Mark 13:19, Revelation 7:14 or the “time of Jacob’s trouble” in Jeremiah 30:7.<sup>7</sup> But Daniel did not elaborate on the statement. Instead, amidst this heavy thought of prophetic doom, there was hope. The angel Michael, noted to be the protector of the people, is said to “arise” although, again, nothing further is mentioned as to what assistance Michael would provide.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the impending tribulation, deliverance was assured for all those found written in the book. For the third time in a few sentences, Daniel did not elaborate on the nature of the deliverance but simply proclaimed deliverance was assured. Likewise, Daniel did not give the book a name.<sup>9</sup> However, Daniel 12:2 is one of the rare expressions of personal resurrection in the Hebrew Bible. “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”<sup>10</sup> There are many questions left unanswered in Daniel 12. But Daniel had a chance to learn what it all meant.

Daniel saw two angelic divine figures, one of whom stood above the waters of a river.<sup>11</sup> The angelic figures were discussing the vision that had been shared with Daniel asking about the

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel stated that, “there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time.” Jesus, in Mark 13:19, strongly echoed that statement, “For in those days there will be such tribulations as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be.”

<sup>8</sup> The angel Michael is often associated with spiritual warfare. In Revelation 12, we see that he fights, defeats, and casts the Devil out of heaven. In Jude, he clashes with Satan over the body of Moses. In the War Scroll (1QM), from the Dead Sea community, Michael is mentioned three times as leading the fight against Satan and those who follow him. In the vision of Daniel, Michael takes a similar position of leadership as Joshua who stands and leads the people to war.

Satan has sometimes been heralded as the opposite of God and Jesus, but he is not. Satan is a fallen angel and his true opposite is the angel Michael, another created being.

<sup>9</sup> Although most scholars confidently assume that this book refers to the Book of Life as referred to in Revelation.

<sup>10</sup> Some commentators argue that the word רבים (*rabbim*) in Hebrew can mean “all”. This is more likely to be a theologically backed argument than a literary one as רבים is not used to mean “all” anywhere else in Scripture. Jesus, at Passover, also took the cup and said “this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins”. The question is, then, who are the non-many? If we do not all participate in the resurrection, who doesn’t and why not? Daniel made it clear that both righteous (to everlasting life) and unrighteous (to shame and everlasting contempt) will awake. Who is left?

<sup>11</sup> I once attended a rabbinic discussion in which a rabbi pointed out this verse that reveals a divine figure in the context of the end of days standing on water. He concluded that the Messiah will walk on water. He looked at me and we had a short chat because of his statement as I could only agree with him and he realized what that sounded like—Jesus on the Galilee.

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timing of the end. The nature of the end-times, the last days and the looming apocalypse can certainly make for interesting, if not intense, debate.

Instead of being told the answers to his many questions, Daniel is told to go his way “for the words are shut up and sealed until the time of the end”. Full revelation, as much as we might desire to know everything now, will not come until the end. Daniel was not to spend all of his remaining time and energy speculating and worrying about things he couldn't know. We would do well to focus on the task at hand.

**Psalm 16.**<sup>12</sup> David likely wrote the psalm during one of his times of troubles as it begins with a call for preservation.<sup>13</sup> David mentioned two kinds of people, those who declare of God, “You are my Lord” and those who run after other gods. David was often pursued by enemies, he needed to take refuge in God. But in Psalm 16, David also acknowledged all the good he had. All of that good came from God.

David knew God as, “my Lord.” Yes, God was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God was the LORD who met Moses at the burning bush. God was the God of Boaz and Samuel. But God wasn't simply a historical figure from the past, He was constantly working in David's life: preserving Him, giving an inheritance, providing counsel, and showing the way of life.

David also declared his loyalty to God. Many recognized God, at least as a god. But David would rely only on the LORD—he needed no other gods.<sup>14</sup> This is an important distinction between knowing God and setting the LORD always before us.

David, in Psalm 16:10, declared his belief that he would not remain in Sheol. While the full understanding of the resurrection and world-to-come did not seem to be well known in David's time, several times he seems to have referred to life beyond that on this earth.<sup>15</sup> Paul reminded his listeners, in Acts 13:35, that resurrection was and had been a Jewish teaching and God's power to raise someone from the dead should not come as a surprise. But David did die, was

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<sup>12</sup> Psalm 16 is a *Miktam* of David, similar to Psalms 56-60. Unfortunately, we don't know the meaning of the word *miktam*. The Septuagint doesn't do much to elaborate the meaning as מִכְתָּם is translated simply as στήλογραφία (*stylus* and *graphia*). It could indicate that the Psalms were originally written on clay or stone rather than parchment.

<sup>13</sup> Psalms 56-60, the other *miktam* Psalms, were also Psalms written when David was in direct conflict or troubled by an enemy,

<sup>14</sup> It was common in Israelite culture to have “hearth gods”, someone a worshipper could turn to if they needed something specific in their life: Baal might send the rain, Tammuz may provide a bountiful grain harvest and fertility, Astarte would provide victory in love or war if the proper libations offerings were given.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel 12:2 is one of the most complete understandings of the resurrection in the Tanakh.

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buried, and rotted in the ground. And so Paul stated that David was talking about Jesus, who did not see corruption.<sup>16</sup>

**Hebrews 10:11-25.** Hebrews 10 continues to contrast the Messiah with the Levitical priesthood. They offered daily sacrifices that would not take away sin<sup>17</sup> but the Messiah, Jesus, only had to present Himself as a sacrifice before God once,<sup>18</sup> and it was efficacious even unto sin. Jesus no longer needs to continuously stand at the altar because His duty is already completed as the

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<sup>16</sup> During the later 2nd Temple period, the majority of Psalms were viewed with some idea of messianic expectation, regardless of whether the Psalm had any obvious prophetic references. While David seems to have been referring to himself in Psalm 16:10, the way Paul used it in Acts 13:35 in reference to Jesus' resurrection would not have been a surprise to anyone as it followed common hermeneutic practice of the day.

<sup>17</sup> Sacrifices as a means to remove sin was never the case. The Jewish people understood that repentance was always the way to return to God (although some may have tried to make use of rituals to replace God's requirements, even as we so often continue to do). According to Leviticus, sacrifice was only efficacious for unintentional sin.

<sup>18</sup> Similar to *απαξ* (*hapax*) and *εφ'απαξ* (*ephapax*), which are often interpreted in Hebrews, and thus translated, with a theological understanding of "once for all" more than its simple literary meaning of "once", many Biblical translations will interpret the word *διηνεκής* (*dienekes*) in Hebrews 10:12 theologically as once "for all time" or "in perpetuity" even though the same word is used in Hebrews 10:1 for "by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year". These interpretations are often quite useful and even necessary in translation work, although they can also be misleading without knowing the literary use of the word.

Josephus, in *Antiquities of the Jews* 1.303, wrote, "Now Leah was sorely troubled at her husband's love to her sister; and she expected she should be better esteemed if she bare him children: so she entreated God **perpetually**."

Josephus used it twice more in *Antiquities of the Jews* 15.300 "in the first place, there were **perpetual** droughts, and for that reason the ground was barren, and did not bring forth the same quantity of fruits that it used to produce; and after this barrenness of the soil, that change of food which the want of corn occasioned produced distempers in the bodies of men, and a pestilential disease prevailed, one misery following **upon the back of another**."

Strabo, in his *Geography* 3.1.3 wrote of the Pyrenees, "Its length is about 6,000 stadia; the greatest breadth is 5,000; while there are parts considerably less than 3,000, particularly in the vicinity of the Pyrenees, which form the eastern side. This chain of mountains stretches **without interruption** from north to south, and divides Keltica from Iberia.

But Appian, in *The Civil War* 1.0.4 used the same phrase as Hebrews 10:12, "Having overpowered by war his principal rival, who had been surnamed the Great on account of his brilliant military exploits, he now ruled without disguise, nobody daring any longer to dispute him about anything, and was chosen, next after Sulla, dictator for **life** (ἐξ τὸ διηνεκές)."

Gaius Caesar was made dictator "for life" i.e. until he died. But Jesus, having made a sacrifice once "for life" then ascended into heaven. This is the precise argument that the author of Hebrews made earlier in Hebrews 7:23-24, "The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but He holds His priesthood permanently, because He continues forever."

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sacrifice, now He can sit at the right hand of the God (where, as High Priest, He also continuously intercedes for us).

The author then brought in a verse from Psalm 110:1, which has an eschatological tone, “He sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until His enemies should be made a footstool for His feet.”<sup>19</sup> This is a return to Hebrews first argument that Jesus is greater than the angels (Hebrews 1:13) as well as Jesus’ power to rule (Psalm 110:2) and His position as a priest of Melchizedek (Psalm 110:4). Hebrews 10:14 may also be an expansion of Psalm 110:3.

As was their style, the author of Hebrews continued by quoting Jeremiah 31:33. The actual words of Jeremiah 31:33 states that the covenant would be made with the house of Israel (in both the Hebrew and the Septuagint) but here, it simply states “This is the covenant that I will make with them.” Why there was this change has caused quite a lot of debate in commentaries but the author of Hebrews assumed their readers to have a very high literary understanding of the Scriptures. Nonetheless, whether the author was referencing the House of Israel alone or including more, such as in Psalm 25:14 “the friendship of the LORD is for those who fear Him, and He makes known to them His covenant,” salvation has always been a universal theme in the Hebrew Scriptures. The prophets of Israel had foretold a time when the Gentiles would seek the Lord and come to Jerusalem.

Regardless, the laws of God are not dismissed and done away with, rather they take their rightful place on our hearts—which is where they were always meant to be. Moses stated in his closing statement regarding the necessity to “Love the LORD with all your heart, soul, and might” that the people must engrave the words of God on their hearts (Deut 10:6).

Having given extensive substance on which people’s faith could be placed, the author turned towards the practicality of how that would change our lives. First, we should draw near to God. We should hold fast the confession of our hope. And we should stir one another up to love and

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<sup>19</sup> It’s not readily clear who the enemies of God and His Messiah are. The author of Hebrews seems to use it more for a literary argument than to explain who these enemies might be. Are they rebellious Jews who engaged in idolatry, giving their loyalty and love to false gods? Are they skeptics and atheists who deny the existence of God and reject the salvation offered by Jesus? Are they simply the foreign nations who fought against Israel? Psalm 110:5-7 would seem to argue this. But perhaps it encapsulates each of these. We too were once called enemies of God but now, by His offering, Jesus can perfect even us and put His law on our hearts and minds. The subjugation of the enemies is concurrent with the salvation offered by the single sacrifice of Jesus and is applied in a universal fashion to both Jews and Gentiles.

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good works.<sup>20</sup> Once again, the author returned to an earlier note about the end times when the enemies of Christ would be subjected beneath Him.<sup>21</sup>

**Mark 13:1-8.** During His earthly life, Jesus spent a lot of time regularly attending the pilgrim festivals and worshiping His Father in the temple. Jesus wasn't antagonistic towards the temple—nor its function. He seems to have had a high appreciation of the temple in Jerusalem calling it, “my Father's house”. But that wouldn't stop the coming judgment.

The gospel opens with the disciples being suitably impressed with the grandeur of Herod's Temple. It was said in antiquity that there were three wonders of Israel: a sea in which all things float, a day of the week in which no work was done, and a magnificent temple without a single statue.<sup>22</sup> Josephus added that the outside of the temple was covered with gold leaf so that when the sun shone it was dazzling to behold.<sup>23</sup> However, while the disciples spoke about the beauty of the temple, Jesus spoke a prophecy that this beautiful temple would be utterly destroyed.

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<sup>20</sup> Hebrews calls those who follow the Lord “brothers”. The household of faith shares a kinship that is greater even than the small differences between cultures and peoples such as the Gentiles and the Jews who follow Jesus the Messiah. This should speak powerfully to our world today that seems to see distinctions of ethnicities, colour, nationalities, and ideologies more and more.

<sup>21</sup> The prophet Amos warned us not to wish for the ‘last day’ as it will be accompanied by trials and tribulations. The end times should not scare us into inaction but instead provoke us to more and greater acts of love and kindness, proclaiming the Gospel ever louder and with greater clarity. Part of our meeting together in worship as believers is to encourage each other that Jesus is indeed coming soon.

<sup>22</sup> Seneca, according to Augustine's *City of God* 6.11, had a low opinion of the Sabbath, “Seneca, among the other superstitions of civil theology, also found fault with the sacred things of the Jews, and especially the sabbaths, affirming that they act uselessly in keeping those seventh days, whereby they lose through idleness about the seventh part of their life...” Tacitus, in his *Histories* 5.4-5, was of a similar mind to Seneca writing of the “base and abominable” ways of the Jewish people who not only chose to rest on the seventh day but extended their “indolence to give over the seventh year as well to inactivity”—the year of rest for the land.

The Jews were, according to Tacitus, “the worst rascals among other people, renouncing their ancestral religions...the Jews conceive of one god only, and that with the mind alone: they regard as impious those who make from perishable materials representation of gods in man's image; that supreme and eternal being is to them incapable of representation and without end. Therefore they set up no statues in their cities, still less in their temples; this flattery is not paid their kings, nor this honour given to the Caesars.”

Strabo in his *Geography* 16.2.42 spoke of a lake in which, “water was so very heavy that there is no use for divers, and any person who walks into it and proceeds no farther than up to his navel is immediately raised afloat.” Tacitus also wrote concerning the geography of Israel in *Histories* 5.6 of “a lake of great size: it is like the sea... Its lifeless waves bear up whatever is thrown upon them as on a solid surface; all swimmers, whether skilled or not, are buoyed up by them.”

<sup>23</sup> Josephus' *The War of the Jews* 5.5.6

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The disciples, after some time to ponder the question, asked Jesus when this might occur.<sup>24</sup> If such an important building was doomed for ruination, then it might be important to know when, how, and why. The temple represented a centralization of Israelite worship and communal gatherings. Here the word of the Lord was proclaimed. God's name and glory were attached to a place, the holy mountain of God. However, this was the second temple. The great Temple of Solomon had been destroyed. Even before the temple of Solomon was destroyed, the place where the Tabernacle had once kept had been sacked and demolished by the Philistines.<sup>25</sup>

The theological question for the Jewish sages was, why? Why would the Lord allow the place where His name, His honour, and glory were attached to be destroyed at the hands of pagan Gentiles? They would, naturally, think that their gods were more powerful than the living God. After the destruction of Solomon's temple, the exile to Babylon prompted a deep theological introspection as to the reasons for the temple's fall.

The Israelites acknowledged they had forsaken the Lord and that they were guilty of idol worship.<sup>26</sup> Upon returning from Babylon idolatry was never a major issue again. Jesus rarely had to speak about idolatry in His arguments.<sup>27</sup> Instead, He was more concerned with greed—money or mammon—and commonly criticized the hypocrisy of the temple leadership who took rather than gave. Now Jesus warned His disciples of leaders who would lead them astray instead of towards God.

The disciples asked two questions: when will it happen and what will be the signs? The Gospel of Mark only records Jesus answering the what. While we might think of these as two independent discussions they are really one question in parallel. Jesus began by warning the

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<sup>24</sup> Jesus and the disciples were just leaving the Temple when the disciples first spoke. But they walked across the Kidron Valley and onto the Mount of Olives, which provides an excellent view of the temple and its precincts, before they continued the discussion. Jesus privately discussed the destruction of the Temple, the abomination of desolation, and false Christs and prophets from the Mount of Olives. (See also ACNA reading: Mark 13:14-23)

<sup>25</sup> God told Israel they were to “seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes to put His name and make His habitation there.” But neither God nor Moses told them where God's habitation would be. The Tabernacle was first set up in Shiloh of Ephraim after Joshua and the people were able to conquer Canaan. It stayed there until the time of Eli and Samuel. However, according to Jeremiah and archaeological studies, the Philistines didn't stop when they took the Ark of the Covenant but proceeded to go to Shiloh itself where they sacked Shiloh and the Tabernacle—the place where God met the people of Israel. Only in the Psalms does David return to the writing of Moses and declare that Jerusalem was the place that God had chosen. And from the time of Samuel until Solomon there were only temporary dwelling places for the Ark of the Covenant.

<sup>26</sup> The Talmud, in *Yoma* 9b, described the traditional theological reason for the destruction of the Temple, “Why was the first Temple destroyed? Because the three cardinal sins were rampant in society: idol worship, licentiousness, and murder.”

<sup>27</sup> Rather, it was Paul who had to speak on idolatry with the Gentiles.



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disciples of false messiahs and prophets—those who would seek to lead them astray (and would succeed in many cases).<sup>28</sup>

Jesus also reminded us that the world will experience troubles. Although we long and pray for peace, there will be war. There will also be political troubles as well as geological ones: earthquakes and famines (perhaps even from changes in the climate and human interference, such as war.) Interestingly, Jesus says “This must take place”. Why they must happen and to what end, however, is not explained. We should be careful to not be distracted by these wars and catastrophes—neither being led astray because of them nor leading others astray.<sup>29</sup> As both Peter and Paul stated, when we are brought before the courts, it shouldn't be because we have done something wrong but because we are blameless and walk uprightly.<sup>30</sup> In such a way, the church (especially in persecution) will only grow

**Hebraic Perspective.** God declared “You shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes to put His name and make His habitation there.” That search ended when God said in II Chronicles 6:6, “I have chosen Jerusalem that my name may be there.” Since David's conquest of the Jebusite city, Jerusalem has been the spiritual centre for the Jewish people and is even called holy. The construction of the *בֵּית־הַמִּקְדָּשׁ*, (*Beit HaMikdash*) the Temple of Solomon, cemented Jerusalem as the focal point of pilgrimage, prayer, worship, and religious learning.

While it was always acknowledged that God was everywhere and that one could pray and worship Him outside of Jerusalem, the Temple had the capacity of drawing people together to be with the Lord in one place.<sup>31</sup> One should not discount how important politically or spiritually Jerusalem and the Temple came to be for Jewish people.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See ACNA gospel reading of Mark 13:14-23 for Jesus' continued talks on false messiahs and prophets.

<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, at least anecdotally, whenever I hear people speak about wars and rumors of war, it is in the context of fear and anxiety—which is precisely the opposite of what Jesus warned us of.

“Such-and-such is happening (war, hurricanes, or famine), surely Jesus is coming back” or “So-and-so is surely the antichrist!” or “This is the beginning of the battle of Gog and Magog”. There are many antichrists in this world, death and disease are the enemies of God, and there will be persecution of believers. But Jesus has already defeated death and we are (or at least should be) hated for His name's sake.

<sup>30</sup> See I Peter 3:13-17 and Ephesians 2:12-16

<sup>31</sup> A centralized religious system is often disparaged in countries who culturally are used to personal freedom but Deuteronomy 12:5-14 elaborated that this was a better system than everyone doing what was right in their own eyes. The temple would be the exclusive location for burnt offerings and, just as importantly, the temple would be where people could come together to rejoice, worship God, and eat in fellowship before God.

<sup>32</sup> According to tradition, the Temple stands over the foundation stone of the world. The rock, now under the Dome of the Rock, is the traditional starting point for creation (likely from combining Job 38:6 regarding the creation of the world, “On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone?” and

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During the dedication prayer offered by Solomon in 1 Kings 8:41-43, it was not only Jews who would come and pray at the Temple. Gentiles would be attracted to the monotheistic faith of Israel. The Temple would be a house of prayer for all nations. “Likewise, when a foreigner, who is not of Your people Israel, comes from a far country for Your name’s sake (for they shall hear of Your great name and Your mighty hand, and of Your outstretched arm), when he comes and prays towards this house, hear in heaven your dwelling place and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you, in order that all the people of the earth may know Your name and fear You.”

Herod the Great spent a great deal of effort, time, and resources in creating one the ancient wonders of the world. The beauty of the Jerusalem Temple is well documented. The Jewish historian Josephus says that the Temple was covered on the outside with gold plates that were so brilliant that when the sun shone it was blinding. Where there wasn’t gold, there were blocks of limestone of such a pure white that, from a distance, it looked like there was snow even in summer. No wonder the disciples were impressed with the buildings around them.

The tension in the first centuries was that while Jerusalem and its Temple were extremely important, the Jewish people already knew that it also wasn’t exclusively important. Synagogues already existed as gathering places for those who could not attend worship in Jerusalem. Daily prayers were, and had been, prayed outside of Jerusalem and in the Diaspora for centuries. Pharisees taught the Word of the Lord amongst the people, independent of Temple leadership. Groups like the Dead Sea community even outright rejected Temple leadership.

Nonetheless, the Temple was the place of messianic expectation. The prophet Malachi had declared, “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.” Jesus loved His Father’s house and called it a place of prayer for all nations. His teaching on the fall of this sacred building is set amidst this tension around the nature, purpose, and future of the Temple.

### ACNA Readings

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Psalm 50:1-2, where God “speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty God shines forth.”)

This is also where it was said the soil was gathered and formed to make Adam the first man (this tradition can also be seen in Paul’s argument in Romans 5 regarding Adam and Jesus). Mount Zion is also associated with the Mountains of Moriah where Isaac was bound by Abraham. The site is intricately involved in the sacred history of the Jewish people and even the world. It cannot be dismissed as just another cultic site even though today it can be difficult for many of us to grasp just how central the Temple was to ancient Jewish life.

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**Hebrews 10:31-39.** The followers of Jesus, both Jews and Gentiles, have known times of persecution and distress throughout history. But surely that is better than deliberately sinning, enjoying this life by trampling on others, and coming under the judgment of God. The writer of Hebrews encouraged his readers to endure, keeping their eyes on the prize—which includes greater possessions in the world-to-come.

Hebrews 10:37 skillfully blended the texts from Isaiah 26:20 and Habakkuk 2:3 that encouraged the faithful to persevere because the wait for the Lord will be short; “Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay.” As is the nature of prophetic scripture, the prophets did not elucidate greatly on the mystery of who is this coming one? Hebrews implies the one coming is the “righteous one” mentioned in Habakkuk 2:4 where we read “the righteous shall live by his faith [faithfulness]”.

This verse is quoted three times in the New Testament. The question is in the personal preposition; who is the “his” implied in “his faithfulness”? There are several options here. “His” could refer to God. God is faithful and because God is faithful the righteous ones of the Lord will live and endure. Romans 1:17 quotes this verse in reference to God faithfully having salvation for both Jews and Gentiles.<sup>33</sup> Another possibility is that “his” could refer to the righteous or just person themselves. Paul uses the quote this way in Galatians 3:11 where the person's faith justifies them rather than the works of the Law.

Hebrews 10:38 provides a third option as the author continuously speaks about the Messiah, the His surely refers to the coming one who is the righteous one of the Lord. Messiah was faithful. He did not shrink back from the path set before Him to endure the cross. Through His faithfulness, we will live a life everlasting. This is the hope that we have and that we proclaim to a fallen world so desperately in need of some hope. Hebrews is asking the readers to remain faithful, enduring times of trial. The coming Messiah, the righteous one, had to endure times of trial too. He was faithful and did not shrink back. Because of His faithfulness He has become the source of eternal salvation which is the rich reward spoken about by the author of Hebrews.

**Mark 13:14-23.**<sup>34</sup> Like many prophecies and warnings, we still cannot state with certainty what the abomination of desolation that Jesus mentioned was, despite being discussed in Christianity since the disciples first asked the question “...when will these things be, and what will be the

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<sup>33</sup> We so often quote Ephesians 2:8, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...” For some reason we so often attribute the grace as coming from God but the faith as our own. Here too, both grace and faith should more likely be attributed to God. This doesn't mean we aren't also called to be faithful in good works, as in Ephesians 2:10, but He was faithful first.

<sup>34</sup> See RCL reading of Mark 13:1-8 for the context of this Gospel reading.

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sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?”<sup>35</sup> However we understand it, the point is to “be on your guard”. Jesus stated that when the abomination took place, and it would, it would be terrible.

The warning given here was directed specifically towards the Jewish people—it is those “who are in Judea” who were to flee to the mountains. This warning, at least initially, was quite local concerning a time that would be more brutal than any time before it. However, the warning continued. After the abomination of desolation there would be many who would rise up against the elect but, instead of simply delivering them over to be beaten and put to death, they would be more devious. False messiahs and prophets would seek to deceive the elect.

The power of the enemy, the Devil, is in lies and deceit. Many Christians throughout history have tried to set dates—writing books and accumulating followers. (They also often make quite a lot of money and gain fame through their predictions.) Some are honestly trying to understand the times but many are either deceived themselves or actively deceiving others.<sup>36</sup> This has

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<sup>35</sup> Eusebius, in *Ecclesiastical History* 3.5.4, spoke of the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D in relation to the abomination of desolation with further history on the subject through 3.8. Jerome, *Commentary on Daniel* 11:31, also understood the event in relation to both the desecration by Antiochus IV and the Roman destruction of the temple. Hippolytus, in *Commentary on Daniel* 4.53.1 spoke of two separate abominations, a destruction and a desolation. The desolation would be a “universal abomination when the Antichrist is near.” Most scholars agree that it was either the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. or something in the future when the final antichrist comes (while some would argue it very well might be both events).

<sup>36</sup> Even this past week, I had a discussion with someone who tried to explain to me, through select phrases from within these very verses, that such-and-such would happen in the next two years. He explained, of course, that we could not know the exact hour and date and that we should pray that the days will be shortened in order to endure...however! Two years! So spoke the Holy Spirit.

Having established that He had the Holy Spirit and constantly listened to the Holy Spirit, he spoke of how those in so many churches did not have the Holy Spirit—that they had broken communion with God. Particularly, the leaders of the church he had left (he no longer attended any Christian fellowships who would not listen to his words). He continued by explaining, by name, those who were false teachers and actively tried to divide me from the fellowship of godly (and yes, also flawed) brothers and sisters.

He continues to meet with others within that church, quietly dividing the church with any who would listen (which is, thankfully, very few). While it isn't always so obvious, Satan often seeks to divide churches, brothers and sisters through lies and insinuations. And Jesus even warns that some of them will be able to perform genuine signs and wonders. And yet the internet is full of these prophets with large groups of followers—indeed, it isn't simply the internet but also within some churches. Living in Jerusalem, rarely does a month go by where a prophet (or three) tries to inform me of what will happen—strangely enough, very few are willing to speak about how to live humbly and righteously when I bring it up and every single one has spoken about leaving the church at some point in their conversation.

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resulted in some cynicism from both skeptics and believers with the failed date setting and is very unhelpful when communicating the Gospel of salvation through the Messiah.<sup>37</sup>

False messiahs and false teaching will be a sign of the final days but not just the days of judgment. Jesus, John (in the epistles), and the early church all spoke of false teachers even in their own times.<sup>38</sup> When contemplating the Day of the Messiah, the Last Judgment, the rabbis asked a question: which day is better, a day of rain or the day of the Messiah?<sup>39</sup> They answer that it is a day of rain. For the rain falls on the just and the unjust. It is a blessing to everyone. The day of the Messiah is only a blessing for the righteous. For the ungodly, it will be a dark day of judgment indeed. And so, rather than fearing these false prophets and the message they bring, we should seek to show grace and be blameless to even those who persecute us rather than living our whole life, accomplishing nothing, while waiting for the coming of the LORD (even while we pay attention to the times).

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Cyril of Jerusalem spoke, in *Catechetical Letters* 15.9, in relation to the abomination of desolation “Hatred of the brethren makes room next for Antichrist; for the devil prepares beforehand the divisions among the people, that he who is to come may be acceptable to them. But God forbid that any of Christ’s servants here, or elsewhere, should run over to the enemy.” Likewise, the Jewish sages state that the second temple was destroyed because of senseless (or wanton) hatred. Division is a tool of the enemy whether through active false prophets or skepticism caused by these very same false prophets being so numerous.

<sup>37</sup> We must remember that, as powerful as his lies are, Satan is not powerful enough to stop the Gospel from going out to all the world. It can be comforting to remind ourselves that Satan has not been able to stop the message of Jesus. Instead of stopping the Gospel, he continues to try to twist the message and distort the truths of the good news. This is something we do have to be on guard against.

<sup>38</sup> See the Didache 6, 11-13, and 16

<sup>39</sup> Taanit 7a.2