In previous posts, in answer to the question of whether I think that Jesus was a great moral teacher, I have said that I think the answer is Yes, but that there is a very serious caveat. Jesus’ ethical teaching is based on a view of the world that most of us today no longer hold. Jesus’ ethical teaching - just as all of his teaching - is deeply rooted in a form of Jewish apocalyptic thought that can be dated and localized to his time and place. Jesus thought that the culmination of the history of God’s people, Israel, was soon to come, that the climax of all human history was at hand, that God was soon to intervene in the course of history to overthrow the powers of evil that were in control of this world to bring in his good kingdom, here on earth. People were to live ethically in order to inherit that kingdom; and in fact, they were to begin to model the ethics of that kingdom in the here and now, so that when the cosmic judge of the earth came from heaven, they would be saved from the wrath of God that would strike the planet before the true people of God were exalted and made rulers of the earth.

So, the short story is that I do not subscribe to this apocalyptic view myself (though I once did, in its modernized form). I do not think there are actual cosmic forces in the world - the Devil, demons, cosmic powers of sin, and death, other principalities and powers that are wreaking havoc here. I don’t think that Jesus was right about when the end was going to come (during his disciples’ lifetime) or how it was to come (with the appearance of the Son of Man from heaven). I think that the entire framework for Jesus’ teaching was a form of Jewish mythology distinctive of Jewish thinkers in Jesus’ day, and that our modern world (again, except for modernized fundamentalist forms of apocalyptic thought) has a different way of looking at history, the powers who make things happen in this world, natural forces (that lead, for example, to disaster and devastation), and so on.

If Jesus’ basic world view (on which his ethics were built) does not translate into our modern world, does that mean that his ethical teaching, built on and rooted in that world view, also cannot be taken over into our modern world? If the ethics was rooted in a system we don’t subscribe to, don’t we need to abandon not only the underlying foundation but also the structure built on it?

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