Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements

Mark 13/Little Apocalypse

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Introduction

Mark 13, sometimes called the "little apocalypse," has been the subject of intense scholarly discussion, much of it focused on how to characterize the chapter's form and content, which consists of groupings of sayings of Jesus that point in multiple directions for their sources and references. It has been argued that Mark 13 circulated as an independent text prior to its incorporation in the Gospel and/or was initially a response to the threat by the Roman Emperor Caligula to place a statue of himself in the Jerusalem Temple (for discussion, see, e.g., Beasley-Murray 1954; Theissen 1991, 125–65; Taylor 1996a, 1996b), but this has been disputed and this entry will focus on how the text is presented in Mark's Gospel and its historical context.

In terms of the apocalyptic content, Mark 13 is best characterized as an "apocalyptic discourse" (Yarbro Collins 1996, 8; see also Yarbro Collins 2007) rather than an apocalypse per se, which, by definition of the Society of Biblical Literature, would require a heavenly mediator who relates a vision and references to a new creation, not just an expectation of one, as in Mark 13 (see also Beasley-Murray 1990 and Nel 2023). Sometimes characterized as an example of epideictic rhetoric, Mark 13 consists of two prophetic dialogues at the most basic level: verses 1–2 and 3–37 (Yarbro Collins 1996, 8). The label "apocalyptic" is attached to Mark 13 because it refers to the social-political context from which apocalypses arose in antiquity, one in which Jews resisted Roman imperial rule and imagined a series of events characterized by trials and tribulations that would precede the coming of God in judgment and the establishment of God's reign. In the specific historical context of Mark 13, scholars typically argue that the author is responding to the appearance of prophets with claims to messianic status during the Jewish Wars with Rome that led to the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. These messianic claimants challenged the messianic identity of Jesus. Presumably, some in Mark's audience had accepted the claims of the false prophets, and he composed this chapter to address this problem in his community (Yarbro Collins 1996, 6). While most scholars agree with this outline of the historical events prompting the composition of Mark 13, some emphasize the meaning of its directives and their implications over whatever might be gleaned from trying to situate the discourse into a historical context.

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Issues of “The End”

The writer of Mark 13 addresses the problem of messianic pretenders in a manner characteristic of apocalyptic writers: he reworks earlier traditions for his own purposes. One important tradition he calls upon concerns the eschatological themes of the Hebrew prophets. Eschatology is a modern term that refers to themes in prophetic works, such as Ezekiel and Daniel, that feature references to “the end,” in which God restores Israel and inaugurates a new age when the righteous are rewarded and the wicked are punished. In the case of Mark 13, the author breaks down the prophetic discourse from Jesus into a three-part eschatological scenario consisting of a preliminary phase of evil (vss. 5b–6, 9–13), a second stage of divine intervention and judgement (vss. 14–23), and a third stage of a gathering of the elect by the Son of Man, described in theophanic terms (24–17) (Yarbro Collins 1996, 29). Verses 28–37 contain disparate teachings that inspire faith and serve as a warning to “keep awake” (vs. 37) for signs of God’s impending judgment.

Not all scholars agree with this characterization and model. For instance, Dean B. Deppe argues that Mark 13 is an example of paraenetic discourse or instructions for living in the present. Given the structure of Mark 13, its ties to the Passion narrative, and the Markan frame around chapter 13, he sees its central message as an exhortation for the disciples to endure. He calls upon the scholarship of R. H. Lightfoot to show that Mark 13 uses four temporal markers that are parallels to the four stages of Mark’s Passion narrative (see Lightfoot 1950). In this way, Mark describes the disciples’ call to endurance as an imperative to be watchful, unlike the disciples in the Passion narrative (see Geddert 1989). Furthermore, the author uses the term παραδιδομαι (*paradidomai*, “handed over”) in vs. 9 to predict the suffering of the disciples, which is the same verb used prominently in the Passion narrative to describe Jesus’s persecution (Deppe 2006, 93). Rather than recontextualizing eschatological themes pointing toward the future, Mark 13 in Deppe’s reading is present-focused and intended to show the audience how Jesus’s Passion and resurrection influence discipleship.

Similarly, Benjamin A. Edsall interprets Mark 13 as a “narrative of eruption,” as opposed to a narrative of decline in which things keep getting worse before “the end.” He argues that Mark 13 pictures the present age of the Markan audience as one of both abundance and suffering and when all the evil “boils over,” the “abomination of desolation” pictured in Daniel that is described in Mark as a “desolating sacrilege” (New Revised Standard Version 13:14) erupts that will lead to the arrival of the Son of Man and deliverance of the righteous. The present of the Markan audience is not the beginning of the end, in other words, but a dynamic mission in the face of opposition. Like others, Edsall looks to the structure of Mark 13 as critical to his interpretation. Following a setup in verses 1–4, the narrative describes two periods of tribulation in verses 5–14 and 15–23. “The end” is described in verses 24–37. The periods have overlapping dangers but call for two sets of actions from the disciples: to endure and to flee the abomination, or the evil among them that is precipitating God’s judgment. The chapter concludes with a warning to remain vigilant. The question from the disciples to Jesus at the beginning of the chapter, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” (v. 4), is answered through the lens of Daniel and the Son of Man figure described there in chapter 7 as “coming in clouds with great power and glory” (v. 26 and Daniel 7:13). The Son of Man, in Mark 13, is further described in terms of the coming of the master of the house. The disciples of Jesus and those of the Markan audience must be like the slaves in the master’s house and not miss the signs by being asleep on the job. These structural phases in Mark 13 point to a characterization of the present age of Mark’s audience and a merging of any future

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eschatological hopes with a present that is defined by a mission of vigilance and endurance in the face of opposition (Edsall 2018, 440–43).

Another scholar who finds the structure and symbols of Mark 13 more important than the extent to which it reflects a historical situation is Micah D. Kiel. He argues that the apocalyptic content in Mark 13 reflects a rhetorical agenda that is directed toward unsettling an audience that had become complacent (see also Juel 1994). While in general he agrees with scholars such as C. Clifton Black and Adela Yarbro Collins about Mark 13 as roughly an epideictic rhetoric that is shaped by a specific historical context, he finds Stephen O'Leary's perspective on apocalyptic rhetoric most helpful (see Black 1991, Yarbro Collins 1996, O'Leary 1994). O'Leary argues that rhetorical forms and apocalypticism influence each other rather than being mutually exclusive interpretive categories, and an author of an apocalyptic text constructs lines of argument from traditional materials using both rhetoric and apocalyptic topoi for his own purposes. He categorizes apocalyptic rhetoric in modes of tragedy and comedy, which unfold on a continuum. In the tragic mode, the end is calculated at a specific time and as precipitated by God's action against evil in the world. The comic mode, by contrast, leaves the question of the end unresolved and thus emphasizes the multivalency of symbols. Jesus's refusal to offer a timeline in response to his disciples' question in vs. 4 about when the end will come is one example, as is the lack of temporal markers about the signs and especially the command to watch in verses 32–36. In shifting attention away from whether and to what extent readers can discern the Markan historical circumstances, the "absolute necessity of history is replaced by an open horizon of possibility," Kiel writes (2017, 148). While most interpreters view Mark 13 through a tragic frame, Kiel sees the comic frame as allowing the author to emphasize the open possibilities of God's action (Kiel 2017, 157).

Prophecy and Revelation

As noted above, the author of Mark 13 reworks eschatological references from the Hebrew scriptures for his own purposes. In view of the themes of prophecy and revelation in Mark 13, the book of Zechariah is a key text. As K. R. Harriman and others have argued, Zechariah 13—14 is foundational for a Markan Jesus that embodies the coming God as one who possesses divine characteristics intrinsic to God's self-revelation (Harriman 2016, see also France 1971 and Hatina 1996). While Mark 13 has multiple references to prophetic works, such as Isaiah 13—14, Jeremiah 50—51, Ezekiel 4—7, and Daniel 7—9, Zechariah identifies the Markan Jesus as King and occupying the place of God in eschatological expectations. One crucial link is that in both Zechariah 13—14 and Mark 13, the setting is the vicinity of Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives. Furthermore, the presence and activity of false prophets are emphasized as a problem in both texts. In Mark, the charge is of false prophets speaking lies in the name of Jesus, a shift from Zechariah, where the lies are against God. In making this change from Zechariah, the author of Mark presents Jesus as sharing the divine name.

Conceptual and thematic links occupy an even more prominent place. For instance, in Zechariah, God promises to test and refine the remnant, thereby confirming them as his chosen people (Zechariah 13:8–9). In Mark, Jesus similarly tells his disciples they will face a trial and whoever perseveres will attain salvation (13:9–13). Another thematic link is the arrival of the Son of Man, which, in addition to its reference to Daniel 7:13, has associations with Zechariah 14:3–9. While the reference in Mark is closest to Daniel in terms of the Son of Man "coming in clouds," the Zechariah passage also pictures a warrior-king

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come to earth for judgment upon the wicked and bestowing vindication to the righteous.

The Christological implications of these and other verbal and thematic links are that Jesus moves to the center of the eschatological discourse and takes the place of God rather than acting as an external agent. Most importantly, in the Son of Man imagery, Mark reconfigures these references from earlier texts to present Jesus as such a figure, but one whose offer of salvation extends to those who believe in and listen to him (see also Leim 2013). Combined with the other ways that the author of Mark reworks passages from Zechariah, he uses the Son of Man designation to demonstrate that this figure, which embodies the coming God, could only be Jesus. Because Mark establishes Jesus's authority from the beginning of the gospel, the prophecies in Mark 13 presuppose Jesus's authority to speak on what is to come and also to vindicate his authority in light of the temple's destruction and those who oppose him. Harriman finds that these allusions establish Jesus as identified more with God than in a mediating role, as other scholars have argued in terms of Christological precedents (Harriman 2016, 297, see also Yarbro Collins and Collins 2008, and Dunn 1980).

Internal vs External Context

One of the challenges of interpreting Mark 13, or any biblical text for that matter, is the complex relation between the internal context (the narrative itself in terms of form and content) and the external context (its historical setting and audience). In the case of Mark 13, the author has combined three different settings: an oral tradition of the teaching of Jesus to his disciples; the situation of the early church before Jesus's death and resurrection; and the situation in which and for which Mark wrote his gospel. Mark, writing after Jesus's death and the destruction of the temple, is limited to the oral tradition he has inherited and to his understanding of the community's current circumstances. These limitations mean that an oral tradition that retained exhortations of Jesus to Jews to flee Jerusalem and avoid coming destruction would not be relevant to Mark's audience, who are largely Gentile. Because the temple in Jerusalem had already been destroyed by the time Mark was composing his gospel, words of Jesus predicting the temple's destruction serve as an *ex eventu* prophecy that reinforces Jesus's authority. Given this tension between the internal and external context, scholars such as Robert Stein interpret the chapter as emphasizing how to understand Jesus's teachings. The author does this by forming a parallelism between vss. 1–4 (the question of the disciples and reference to "these things") and vss. 5–37 (the response and an explication of "these things"). The parallelism thus intensifies the connection between the question of "how" posed by the disciples and Jesus's response of being forewarned and prepared. Mark's audience can then understand the past event of the destruction of the temple as a sign of God's judgment that precedes the coming Son of Man (Stein 2014, 43–68).

The Son of Man imagery presents a set of issues regarding the tension between internal and external contexts. In vss. 5–23, the second-person pronoun "you" is used as Jesus's teaching to his disciples is shared, while in vv. 24–27, the third-person plural pronoun "they" is used. The change in audience signals not only a shift in audience from Jesus addressing his disciples to Mark addressing his audience but also a link between the past event of the destruction of the temple to an eminent arrival of the Son of Man. The introductory phrase of "in those days" of v. 24 points to the cosmic signs and coming of the Lord of earlier traditions, but it also ties together two events that are separated in time. The Son of Man arrives after the destruction of the temple (referenced in vv. 14–23), but the length of that gap in time is unknown (Stein

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2014, 103–4). Thus, the internal context of the narrative corresponds to the external context of the Markan audience.

Some scholars argue that vv. 5–23 are a literal description of the temple's destruction, while vv. 24–27 are a metaphorical description that employs images of a theophany such as in Jeremiah 3:16 and Zechariah 8:23 (see Allison 1999). However, Stein argues that no such hard division between literal and metaphorical is warranted. The expression "in those days" can also refer to a particular period, as in Mark 13:17, and the phrase typically does not refer to a theophany in Mark but is usually a historical term that recalls the past. Here, it links two events historically, but not in the sense of a historical narrative. Rather, the imagery of the "signs" referring to the historical event of the temple's destruction is not literal but the cosmic language that accompanies prophecies, such as in Amos and Ezekiel (Stein 2014, 109). The cosmic imagery is used figuratively to describe the judgment of God. In Mark, it has the additional function of demonstrating the fulfillment of prophecies through the mission of Jesus.

How, then, would Mark's audience have understood this metaphorical language of the signs foretelling the arrival of the Son of Man? Most scholars agree that they would have understood them to refer to the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem as God's judgment upon Israel. However, they would see the Son of Man as the risen Jesus of Nazareth coming from heaven in glory, as in 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17, and they anticipated him imminently (Stein 2014, 112–17).

Conclusion

Mark 13 is difficult to categorize in terms of its rhetorical and literary forms, but its apocalyptic themes are clear. By drawing upon the eschatology of prophetic texts, the author recontextualizes an inherited tradition of Jesus's teachings to his disciples for his own audience. In the aftermath of Rome's destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, Mark and his community seek to understand the significance of these events in light of the death or resurrection of Jesus some thirty years before. Their claim that he is the Messiah holds the promise of vindication and restoration, a coming of God into their time and space that they anxiously await. It is reasonable to imagine that not only might Jesus's disciples wonder how they would know that the end was upon them, but also that those who came after them would wonder too. Mark 13 thus fuses a historical situation and community with a theological proposition of watching and waiting for a fulfillment of prophecy. The chapter distills Markan themes of Jesus's authority, his messianic status, and the meaning of discipleship all in one speech of Jesus, who addresses, through Mark's narrative, both the disciples of the past and those of the present.

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