

TRIAL AND TRIBULATION IN MARK XIII¹

by Morna D. HOOKER

LADY MARGARET'S PROFESSOR OF DIVINITY
IN THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

I

There are few things that can be said about Mark xiii without fear of contradiction; but if I begin with the statement that it presents us with an enigma—or even a series of enigmas—I shall perhaps be on safe ground. Few other chapters in the Bible can have been the subject of so many special studies, and it is not without reason that so much attention has been devoted to it. The chapter is full of exegetical problems, but its greatest oddity is that it exists at all. For it is totally unlike anything else in Mark. This is the only occasion on which we find a long, connected discourse in the mouth of Jesus. The passage which comes closest to being similar in format, Mark iv, is not only considerably shorter—approximately 50 lines of Greek text, over against 70—but is broken up into shorter sections. Moreover, whereas Mark iv is a collection of parables—albeit on similar themes—Mark xiii is the exposition of a particular topic. And, of course, that topic in itself marks out Mark xiii from the rest of the gospel, for only here do we have teaching about the end of all things.

The ways in which the problems of Mark xiii have been formulated and approached have varied considerably over the years. As we might expect, they reflect in large measure the concerns and methods of the times. The theory of the Little Apocalypse, a document which Mark is supposed to have taken over and expanded, was first put forward by Colani in 1864.² The reasoning that led him to propound this particular theory seems to have been very largely the result of his attempt to answer the problem of the authenticity of some of the sayings in the discourse. Did Jesus prophesy the end of the world and his own return on the clouds of heaven within the lifetime of his own generation? If he

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library on Wednesday, 10th March 1982.

² T. Colani, *Jésus Christ et les Croyances messianiques de son Temps*, 2nd edn. (Strasbourg, 1864).

did, then he was mistaken. But if we begin with the assumption that Jesus could not have been mistaken, then we must conclude that the prophecies could not have been his. Colani's theory is based both on his conviction that Jesus could not have been mistaken, and also on his dislike of eschatology, for he regarded the eschatological beliefs of Jewish Christians as unworthy of Jesus.³ It is a fascinating exercise to trace the extent to which subsequent exegesis of the chapter has reflected the rejection by certain exegetes of the possibility that Jesus might have been mistaken, and their refusal to reckon with the idea that he might have accepted the eschatological and apocalyptic ideas of his day. At any rate, Colani's theory offered a solution to this dilemma — and did so in terms which made sense to New Testament scholarship of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For this was the period of source criticism, and Colani suggested a source, behind Mark, to explain the problems of this chapter.

Now whether or not Colani's theory is correct I do not know. Certainly there are tensions and apparent contradictions within the chapter which lend support to the view that a variety of material has been pieced together. The somewhat artificial setting and the structure of the discourse are explained if Mark has taken over a document and edited it, and it is hardly surprising that the Little Apocalypse theory has enjoyed great popularity, even if there is considerable disagreement as to which verses to assign to it. But the fact that we can extract certain verses from the chapter and find a pattern in them does not mean that Mark has necessarily taken over an existing structure; it may be that we are imagining the pattern, or that Mark himself has created it. Certainly it seems safer to start with the problem of the way in which Mark has handled the tradition.

When the term "apocalypse" was first used of Mark xiii itself I have not discovered. Certainly it was used by Bultmann and gained popularity in the form-critical period when everything was given a label — even though the discourse did not fall into any form-critical category, being a collection rather than a unit. But in recent years the terms 'Markan apocalypse' or 'apocalyptic discourse' have been challenged. Is this, in fact, true apocalyptic at all? Granted that it bears some of the characteristics of apocalyp-

³ See the discussion by G.R. Beasley-Murray in *Jesus and the Future* (London, 1956), pp. 14-21.

tic writing, and that certain verses are closely parallel to passages in Jewish apocalyptic books, there are nevertheless important dissimilarities. If one draws up a check-list of characteristics which one might expect to find in apocalyptic literature, many are absent. There is no heavenly vision, no bizarre imagery; there is a cosmic catastrophe, but the time of its arrival is unknown; nothing is said about judgement, or about the fate of the righteous and unrighteous. There is at least as much material that can be described as paraenesis as there is material that unfolds the future.

Now I am inclined to side with those who argue that, strictly speaking, Mark xiii is not an apocalypse at all. If one confines the term 'apocalyptic' to a particular form of literature, instead of using it loosely as a synonym for 'eschatology', as so often happens, then Mark xiii is certainly an unusual kind of apocalyptic. However, we cannot say that the term is inappropriate in this case simply because some of the features of apocalyptic are missing; for few pieces of apocalyptic literature bear them all, and it is well known that similar arguments have been held as to whether there is any true apocalyptic in the Old Testament. The dispute as to how we should classify the chapter raises in my mind a more fundamental uneasiness about the desirability of attaching this particular label: is it helpful, or is it misleading, in that it predisposes us to interpret the material in a particular light? At the very least, it seems to me that attaching the label 'apocalypse' may not be particularly helpful. Sorting out material into various pigeon-holes is a favourite pastime with scholars, but it is questionable whether one is doing much more than clarify things in one's own mind. Even among our scientific colleagues, the taxonomist sometimes has to reclassify his specimens; his choices are to some extent subjective. If we wish to discover the purposes and meaning of Mark xiii for Mark, then attaching a particular label may be far from helpful. For I doubt very much whether Mark said to himself: "I am going to write an apocalypse". It is salutary to remember that the one clear example of apocalyptic writing in the New Testament, the book of Revelation, is described by its author as prophecy! That there is a link between prophecy and apocalyptic most scholars would agree; but where does prophecy end and apocalyptic begin? There is no clear divide—rather there is a spectrum of writings, and Mark xiii falls somewhere in the middle. If the discourse fits uneasily into the category of apocalyptic, that of prophecy is no more appropriate.

This suggests that if we want to understand what Mark was doing, we should certainly be prepared to look at contemporary apocalyptic literature for help in understanding the way in which his mind was working; but we should beware of ready-made stick-on labels.

I have already betrayed that the question which primarily concerns me is that of Mark's own handling and understanding of the material. In concentrating on that problem I am, of course, reflecting the mood of New Testament scholarship at the moment as much as Colani and Bultmann reflected the interest of *their* periods. It is the redaction-critical questions that interest us now, and I make no excuse for concentrating on them—not least because I find them particularly fascinating. No longer do we assume that Mark simply put down all the material he knew; what, then, was he aiming to do?

II

First, then, let us look at the context of the chapter. A recent study of Mark xiii, published in the Rylands *Bulletin*, began with the remark: "The existence of Mark xiii between chapters xii and xiv requires explanation".⁴ If Mark is indeed a passion narrative with a long introduction, then chapter xiii is the end of the introduction, for xiv. 1 begins the passion narrative proper. What can we say about its placement at this juncture? I would like to offer just three comments. First, if we want a literary precedent for a speech about future events being placed on a great man's lips at the very end of his life, then there are plenty of examples in the biblical material. In Gen. xlix, for example, Jacob predicts what will happen to his descendants; in Deut. xxxii, Moses addresses the people shortly before his death, and in I Chron. xxviii, David hands over his kingdom to Solomon. In the inter-testamental

⁴ K. Grayston, "The Study of Mark XIII", *Bulletin*, lvi (1973-74), pp. 371-87. Cf. also the discussion by R. Pesch, who argued from the structure of Mark's gospel that ch. xiii was a later addition, though written by the same author, *Naherwartungen*, Tradition und Redaktion in Mk 13 (Düsseldorf, 1968), pp. 48-73. Such an analysis, if it is accepted, makes the problem all the more acute: why did Mark destroy his own symmetrical arrangement? For an analysis of the role of Mark xiii in the overall structure of the gospel, see J. Lambrecht, *Die Redaktion der Markus-Apokalypse*, Literarische Analyse und Strukturuntersuchung (Rome, 1967), pp. 15-63.

period whole books were written in the form of farewell discourses—namely The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and The Assumption of Moses—and in the New Testament we find Paul making a speech when he takes leave of his mission-field in Acts xx. Most interesting of all, the Farewell Discourse attributed to Jesus in the Fourth Gospel comes at precisely the same point in the narrative as in Mark—between the final scene of Jesus teaching in the Temple and the beginning of the passion narrative.⁵

Secondly, the discourse comes at the climax of Mark's account of Jesus' teaching in the Temple. The whole of chapters xi and xii, following Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, are set in the Temple. The one exception to this is the story of the withered fig-tree, which is set on the route to and from the Temple, and which is itself an indictment of the Temple worship. Like the so-called Cleansing of the Temple, around which Mark has set it, this story seems to have been interpreted by Mark as a symbolic action pointing forward to the destruction of the Temple. Now it is arguable that for Jesus himself, the incident of the Cleansing of the Temple was just that—a demand for sincere worship and for reform. Mark, however, has interpreted it as a prophecy of judgement; its insertion into the story of the fig-tree shows that he understood Jesus' actions as a prophecy of destruction.⁶ It is hardly surprising if the end of this section leads into the discourse in chapter xiii.

Thirdly, the discourse is followed by the passion narrative. It was, I think, R. H. Lightfoot,⁷ who first pointed out the remarkable echoes of this chapter in the passion narrative—or perhaps we should put it the other way round: for it is Jesus who suffers first, and the disciples are warned that they must expect similar experiences, so that what is said about them 'echoes' what will be

⁵ In John, of course, the discourse is placed after Jesus' last meal with his disciples, not before. However, there is no account of the supper itself, and the only introduction to the discourse is the incident of the footwashing, which is followed in Jn. xiii by material parallel to the Synoptic tradition of Jesus' conversation with his disciples at the Last Supper. Although the theme of the Johannine discourse is very different from that in the Synoptics (though still concerned with the future), it is worth noting that here, too, the disciples are warned about the persecution they must expect as followers of Jesus.

⁶ This theme has recently been explored in detail by W. R. Telford in *The Barren Temple and the Withered Tree*, J.S.N.T. Supplement 1 (Sheffield, 1980).

⁷ *The Gospel Message of St. Mark* (Oxford, 1950), pp. 48-69.

said about Jesus in the passion narrative. Now this link between the sufferings of Jesus and of his disciples is a very common theme in Mark. Each of the passion predictions is followed by a passage which brings out the implications for the disciples of pledging loyalty to Jesus. Mark xiii plays the same kind of role *vis-à-vis* the passion narrative; although the theme and structure of the chapter are concerned with the last things, it contains also warnings about what the disciples must expect to endure because of their discipleship before the end arrives.

If the position of Mark xiii requires explanation, then, it is surely to be found in the fact that the most appropriate setting for such a discourse is either here or 'after supper' (where John has placed it), and that in view of the subject-matter of the Marcan version, it is more appropriate here. Moreover, the chapter forms a link between the theme of chapters xi and xii (the condemnation of Israel, because of her failure to receive her Messiah)⁸ and that of chapters xiv and xv (the spelling-out of the story of the Messiah's rejection). The two themes are, of course, woven together throughout; e.g. in xii.8 we have a reference to the death of Jesus, while in xiv.58, xv.29 and 38, there are references to the fate of the Temple.

It is often said that the introduction to the discourse is artificial, and serves simply as a peg on which to hang Jesus' words. That the disciples should have been overawed by the sight of the Temple is, of course, understandable enough; Josephus tells us that visitors were amazed at its size and magnificence.⁹ The basis for describing the setting as artificial is partly that the chapter contains two introductions, partly that the destruction of the Temple itself is not mentioned in the whole of the discourse. Yet it is not entirely fair to complain, as Victor of Antioch did long ago, that the disciples asked one question and Jesus answered another. For the abomination that makes desolate in verse 14 is certainly to be set up in the Temple, and the disaster which follows will bring desolation in Judaea. However, the fact that Mark has chosen to introduce the discourse with the prediction of the Temple's destruction in verses 1-2 is certainly a clue to his understanding of

⁸ Matthew underlines this theme by adding ch. xxiii immediately before his parallel to Mark xiii. The chapter consists of a series of 'Woes' pronounced against the scribes and Pharisees, followed by the lament over Jerusalem in verses 37-9.

⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities*, XV.11.5; *Wars*, V.5.4-6.

the material. If Jerusalem and her Temple are to be destroyed, this is due to Israel's wickedness; her punishment will herald the end of all things, and the judgement of all mankind. The setting of the chapter, on the Mount of Olives, was the natural site from which to admire the Temple's magnificence, but in view of Zech. xiv.4, it was an equally appropriate setting for an eschatological discourse. The disciples' double question — "When will these things be, and what is the sign that all these things are going to take place?" links together the fate of Jerusalem and the final judgement.¹⁰

III

The discourse itself consists of five sections, followed by two parables and associated sayings. Let us look at these seven paragraphs in turn.

The first section, in 5-8, opens with the warning which is characteristic of the discourse: βλέπετε. The disciples have asked for a sign of the imminence of the catastrophe. Jesus warns them not to be misled by *false* signs. Various disasters are going to occur—disasters that play a familiar role in prophetic announcements of doom and apocalyptic warnings. But these disasters are *not* the sign of the End, nor even of Jerusalem's fall; the end is *not yet* (7), for these things are only the beginning of sufferings (8). The phrase ἀρχὴ ὠδίνων, with its suggestions of birthpangs, may be a technical term of apocalyptic. Some have described this section as *anti*-apocalyptic, but that seems hardly fair. Phrases such as δεῖ γενέσθαι in v.7 echo the language of apocalyptic predictions. It would be more accurate to describe it as anti-apocalyptic-fervour; as intended to dampen down wild enthusiasm which saw any disaster as the prelude to the Last Days. To describe such disaster as the "birthpangs of the End" is to admit that they are indeed the prelude, but to emphasize how many other things must take place before the end of all things arrives. There is an interesting parallel between this section and 2 Thess. ii, where we find a similar injunction not to be alarmed or agitated—μὴ θροεῖσθε—by reports that the Day of the Lord has arrived. This suggests that the origin of the warning in Mark xiii will have been a similar kind of situation.

¹⁰ The final words of verse 4 echo the LXX version of Dan. xii.7: συντελεσθήσεται πάντα ταῦτα.

But the *crux interpretum* in this particular section is found in the warning in verse 6. Who are the "many" who come "in my name" saying "I am"? The obvious explanation is that they are pseudo-Messiahs, messianic pretenders; this makes sense in a Jewish setting—but why should such men claim to speak in Jesus' name—i.e. with his authority—while making messianic claims for themselves? And how could they mislead the Christian community, for whom Jesus was already the only Messiah? W. Manson's solution was to suggest that what they announced was "I am is here"—just as the false prophets in 2 Thess. ii announced that the day of the Lord had arrived.¹¹ But that hardly seems to be how Mark understood the situation, for it is difficult to see how ἐγώ εἰμι can mean *he* is here; whoever these men were, they seem to have been making false claims about *themselves*. An alternative solution is to take the phrase ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι μου to mean "claiming to be me" or "usurping my name".¹² But were there really "many" in the Christian community who believed themselves to be the returning Jesus, and who misled the faithful? Perhaps this suggestion is possible, in a time of prophetic fervour and enthusiasm, but it must be admitted that there is no evidence elsewhere for such claims. This impasse leads me to return to the obvious interpretation, and suggest that these men were indeed messianic pretenders, but to understand them as *Jewish* claimants to messiahship. We must then take the phrase ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι μου in its second possible meaning, "usurping my name"—i.e. the name Christ, not the name Jesus. Matthew seems to have understood the claim this way, since he interprets Mark's ἐγώ εἰμι as "I am the Christ". But how, one may well ask, could such men mislead the faithful? Now the interesting point to notice here is that Mark does not in fact suggest that they do. They are to mislead "many"; and the disciples are not to be misled by the appearance of these Jewish messianic pretenders, any more than by the wars and rumours of wars, by the earthquakes and famines. This is not an internal Church problem—an early Christian aberration—but part of the familiar pattern of troubles which are part of the unwinding of history.

¹¹ "The ΕΓΩ ΕΙΜΙ of the Messianic Presence in the New Testament", *J.T.S.*, xlviii (1947), 137-45.

¹² Cf. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *A Commentary on Mark Thirteen* (London, 1957), in loc.

Now if verses 6-8 are, as is often suggested, part of a pre-Markan apocalypse—or even if they are simply an independent piece of tradition—it may well be that they are Jewish in origin, rather than Jewish-Christian. It may be that Mark used them here because of the verb *πλανήσουσιν*, which formed a link with his introductory warning where the same verb is found. At any rate, it seems to me that we should not be misled by the double occurrence of the verb into thinking that because the initial command not to be misled is directed to disciples, it is disciples also who are in danger of being misled into following false Messiahs; the danger that awaits them is of assuming that the appearance of these upstarts is the sign of the End.

IV

The second section, verses 9-13, is totally different, though it begins with a repetition of the warning to the disciples in verse 5 to take heed. This time, however, they need to take heed for themselves—*βλέπετε δὲ ὑμεῖς ἑαυτοὺς*. Unlike the sufferings in 5-8, those in 9-13 are experienced specifically by Christians. The warning is, of course, to *expect* these things—not to try to escape them. It would not be true to suggest that these sufferings are totally foreign to the theme of apocalyptic, since apocalyptic writings were often addressed to those who were being persecuted because of their faith. Nevertheless, the sufferings are different in kind from the cosmic disasters associated with the end of the world. The theme is the familiar Marcan one—that disciples must expect to suffer the same kind of vilification and ill-treatment as their master. Matthew and Luke include similar sections in their versions, but it is noteworthy that Matthew omits verses 9, 11 and 12, having used them already in the instruction to the Twelve in Matt. x.17-21. And since Mk. xiii.9-13 are concerned with the cost of discipleship, it looks as if the Matthaean setting, in chapter x, is an indication of the kind of context in which this material was first used. Its function was *not* originally to convey information about the timing of the End, but to warn Jesus' disciples about what following him would mean. They must expect to be handed over to the Jewish courts—much as Jesus himself is about to be handed over to the Sanhedrin; here we have not only the term *συνέδρια* but the verb *παραδίδωμι*, which sounds like a knell through Mark's story. They can expect to be beaten, put on trial

before governors and kings, betrayed by members of their own families, and hated by all for the sake of Jesus' name. Those who endure εἰς τέλος, to the end, will be saved — this final sentence in the paragraph echoes Theodotion's rendering of Dan.xii.12. Taken without reference to the Marcan setting, the meaning seems to be: those who are faithful to the uttermost, i.e. until death, will be saved — a paradoxical saying of the kind we find in Mark viii.35. But what are we to make of the word τέλος in the Marcan context? It seems to suggest that Christians who endure (and who survive!) until the End will be saved — a promise at variance with the warning in the previous verse that they must expect to be handed over to death! Once again, one wonders whether we have in τέλος a link word, which led Mark, or someone before him, to place this section here.

But the real problem in this section is the saying in v.10: the gospel must first be preached to all nations. Let me say straight away I am not persuaded by the arguments of Professor Kilpatrick that the traditional punctuation is wrong.¹³ It is true that there are difficulties in believing that Jesus himself gave such clear directions regarding a mission to the Gentiles; but the saying in any case looks like an intrusion into the context and therefore a Marcan editorial comment. And there are no problems in believing that Mark pointed forwards to such a mission. But how did Mark understand the word "first"? Πρῶτον here could have the sense "before you are arrested": before you are arrested, you must preach the gospel to the Gentiles. In the context of Mark xiii, however, it is more likely to refer to the events which signify the arrival of the End. Matthew has clearly understood the saying in this way, since in his version he adds the words "and then the End will come" (Matt. xxiv.14). Moreover, we find that a similar idea occurs in Matthew x, following Jesus' warning to the disciples about persecution. After the passage that is almost identical with Mk. xiii.9, 11-13, Matthew adds the enigmatic saying in x.23: "if they persecute you in this city, flee to the next; indeed I tell you, you will not have completed the cities of Israel before the Son of man comes." Now there are obvious differences between the two sayings. Matt.x.23 concerns an unfinished mission to Israel, Mark xiii.10 and Matt xxiv.14 a mission to the Gentiles which

¹³ G.D. Kilpatrick, "The Gentile Mission in Mark and Mark 13⁹⁻¹¹", in *Studies in the Gospels*, ed. D.E. Nineham (Oxford, 1957), pp. 145 ff.

must be completed—it is to *all* the Gentiles—before the End comes. Matt. x suggests a sense of urgency, Mark xiii and Matt. xxiv emphasize that the End is not yet here. But all three passages stress the need to preach before the parousia, and link this idea with warnings about the persecution which those who follow Jesus must expect. The fact that Matthew makes this link in two different places (using non-Markan material as well as Marcan) suggests that the ideas of preaching, persecution and the parousia were related ones, and that Mark xiii.10 may not be such an arbitrary insertion as at first appears.

A comparison between Matt. x and Mk. xiii demonstrates very well the way in which tradition can be differently used in different contexts. In Matt. x, the sayings about persecution form part of the warnings to the disciples about the treatment they can expect in the course of their mission; the reference to the parousia in v. 23 stresses the urgency of this mission. In Mark xiii, on the other hand, the same sayings are a warning about what the disciples must expect to endure before the End, while the reference to preaching in 10 serves the same function as the comment in 7 that the End is not yet: the emphasis is on endurance instead of urgency. For Mark, the sufferings of the disciples are not signs that the End is at hand, but signs that the proclamation of the gospel is taking place; the End *cannot* come until the Gentile mission is completed. Now if Johannes Munck was right about the interpretation of the restrainer in 2 Thess. ii, we should once again have a remarkably similar idea in that chapter.¹⁴ Unfortunately, it seems unlikely to me that he *was* right! Nevertheless, we do find in Rom. xi.25 f. the idea that the preaching of the Gospel to the Gentiles was only a first stage in the eschatological count-down. This suggests that Mark may have been writing in a similar situation.

If I am right about the function of the saying, then perhaps this explains its position. Mark could not have begun the section with it, since it does not belong with his warning to take heed. He might have ended with it, as Matthew does in chapter xxiv; this is neater, but in Matthew the comment has no real relevance to the warnings

¹⁴ J. Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (London, 1959), pp. 36 ff. Munck was, of course, picking up an idea that goes back to patristic times, as well as building on the earlier work of O. Cullmann in *R.H.P.R.*, xvi (1936), 210-45.

about persecution, and is simply treated as a reference to one more thing that must take place before the End. In Mark, however awkward the order may be, and however intrusive verse 10 may seem, the saying nevertheless belongs within Mark's overall structure. The disciples must expect to suffer as followers of Christ: but those sufferings are not to be misunderstood as signs that the End is at hand. Rather *they result from the preaching of the gospel*. But that preaching is itself one of the events that must take place before the End: only when the proclamation of the gospel is completed—that is, when it has been preached to *all* the Gentiles—can the disciples expect the End of all things.

V

With the third section, verses 14-20, we have another abrupt change in mood. Instead of general predictions about wars and catastrophes or prophecies of persecution for Jesus' followers, we have a reference to a particular, local disaster. The pace of the discourse alters, and we are given an answer to the disciples' initial question, "When?" Until this point the message has been "Wait! Endure! The End is not yet". But now the time for action has arrived. The sign will be the abomination of desolation, standing where he ought not. The phrase is of course a quotation from Daniel—one of many echoes of Daniel in this chapter, "Let the reader understand!" Those who have attributed the whole discourse to Jesus have been obliged to understand these words as meaning "Let the reader of Daniel understand". Others have supposed that Mark has simply copied them from his written source, not noticing the absurdity of attributing them to Jesus. But there is no need for these explanations; it is better to treat the words as a parenthesis of Mark's own, alerting his readers to the fact that his somewhat enigmatic language needs to be decoded. But why the enigma? Why does Mark use such obscure language? One suggestion is that he avoids speaking plainly because of the dangerous political situation. Another is that he himself has no precise idea of what his words mean. Up to this point, the 'prophecy' has described events already experienced by the Christian community; if this is the point at which Mark himself moves into the unknown, this may explain his mysterious language. This would mean, of course, that Mark wrote *before* A.D. 70. The most likely explanation, however, seems to me to be that

Mark intends us to take note of the full significance of his words. What is going to take place in the Temple will be the fulfilment of Daniel's prophecy, and it will be the sign of the arrival of the last things, for in Dan. xii. 11 the setting up of the abomination of desolation marks the beginning of the count-down to the End. Mark's use of a masculine participle, ἑστηκότα, suggests that he is thinking of a person, but this person is the embodiment of evil — the AntiChrist of later apocalyptic literature. Behind the historical event in the Temple, then, Mark intends us to see its real significance, and to understand *why* this should be the sign that unparalleled disasters are to be let loose in the world. The role of this evil figure in Mark is remarkably similar to that played by the man of lawlessness in 2 Thess. ii. There we read that the Day of the Lord will not come until he has been revealed — the son of perdition who takes his seat in the Temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.

The urgency of the instructions to flee when this event occurs suggest a sudden invasion or uprising. Whatever it is, it brings terrible suffering — the kind of suffering which has accompanied many other disasters in the course of history. Only, says Mark, this is *not* that kind of suffering. For this tribulation, θλίψις, is far greater than anything that has been known in the course of history. The words are a clear reference to Dan. xii. 1, and indicate that Mark is interpreting this as the eschatological tribulation. It is only because God in his mercy has set a limit to its duration that anyone will be able to survive it.

The problematic verse in this section is, of course, 14, and the unsolved problem is whether for Mark this is a future or a past occurrence. For the moment, I do not see the solution to this one. Let us for the moment simply take note of the fact that, future or past, it is here that the programme, as Mark presents it, changes gear. After the "not yet" of the previous two sections, we have at last a "Now!"

VI

We move on to the fourth section, and experience a sense of *déjà vu*, for the appearance of false Christs reminds us of the warning in verse 6. Verses 21-23 look very much like a variant of that saying. There are further interesting parallels in Luke xvii: first in verse 21, where, however, the "not here... not there" refer

to the Kingdom of God, and then in verse 23, where what is being looked for is the coming of the Son of man; Matthew seems to have incorporated a version of this last saying into his account of the discourse (Matt. xxiv.26-8). The idea that the Messiah will be discovered "here" or "there" suggests a human figure rather than a heavenly one descending to earth, and once again the saying may have referred originally to Jewish expectation of a Messiah. This time, however, Mark understands the warning as specifically addressed to the disciples; the danger is such that even the elect may be led astray—if such a thing is possible! The situation depicted now is quite different from that in verse 6. A sign has been given; the days to the End are numbered on the heavenly calendar; the time to expect the Son of man is near. In this context, the saying certainly reminds us of the false rumours mentioned in 2 Thess. ii to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. The faithful must beware false rumours and false prophets who announce the End, beware even false Christs. Who can these false Christs be? We have already said that the elect were unlikely to have been misled into following Jewish messianic pretenders, and that we have no evidence of Christians claiming to be the returning Jesus. Should we perhaps understand the warning, in this context, as linked with the prediction of the arrival of the AntiChrist in 14? It is worth noting that the arrival of the lawless one in 2 Thess. ii is also to be accompanied by 'signs and wonders'. Equally suggestive is the reference to AntiChrist in Jn. ii.18: "You have heard that AntiChrist has come, and now there are many antichrists". For the writer of I John, the false teachers are manifestations of the power of AntiChrist. Mark's warning against ψευδόχριστοι may well refer to something similar. Because the term is for us so specific, we are of course inclined to assume that anyone termed a ψευδόχριστος must have been setting himself up as a unique leader, probably of a political kind, but the fact that Mark links the ψευδόχριστοι with ψευδοπροφήται suggests that his warning is directed against charismatic figures of some kind.¹⁵ If so, then these are teachers who emerge during the troubled period following the downfall of Jerusalem, misleading the Christian community with false teaching about the time of the End; but their predictions are further false alarms. By contrast, Jesus' own prophetic words will be seen to be true (v. 23).

¹⁵ So G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Commentary*, in loc. The words ψευδόχριστοι καὶ are omitted by D 124 1573 d ik, but are probably original.

VII

But finally the last stage of the drama is reached, in verses 24-7: cosmic disasters herald the arrival of the Son of man. The description of what will take place is lifted from a couple of chapters in Isaiah, typical of Old Testament passages which use the imagery of cosmic breakup and darkness to describe the wrath which will overtake the world on the day of the Lord.¹⁶ It is often said that apocalyptic writers took over this poetic imagery and understood it literally, though the evidence that they did so is in fact somewhat scant; references to the sun and moon ceasing to function are surprisingly rare in apocalyptic.¹⁷ Certainly they seem to have expected strange phenomena in the heavens, portents of the approaching End.¹⁸ How does Mark understand these words? It seems unlikely that he is using them simply as poetic imagery, forceful ways of describing the terrors of war, earthquake and famine, since these disasters have been described already, in 6-9, and again in 15-20. We seem to have moved on beyond the course of historical events to the winding-up of history. Are the failure of sun and moon and stars to be understood literally, as signs of the approaching End? If so, then, unlike earlier false alarms, there can be no mistaking these particular portents! It is not simply that the heavens have gone awry, but that they are breaking up. We must, of course, be careful not to read back into Mark's words our own understanding of the universe. To us, his picture suggests total cosmic disintegration. Luke is perhaps closer to understanding Mark when he speaks about 'signs in sun and moon and stars'. But it is doubtful whether Mark had worked out the logic of the picture which he presents. The language he used was the traditional language used by the prophets for the day of the Lord, and it is used because it evokes all the ideas associated with that day of judgement. It is more than metaphorical, less than literal; the

¹⁶ Isa. xiii.10; xxxiv.4.

¹⁷ The failure of sun, moon and stars is apparently seen as part of God's judgement on the world in Ass. Moses x.5, and as part of the disorder of nature that man brings upon himself through his wickedness in I En. lxxx.4 ff.

¹⁸ In 4 Ez. v.4 f. the reversal of day and night is a sign of the coming of the End; the quenching of the sun in Test. Levi iv.1 is a sign of coming judgment that unbelieving men ignore; Sib. Or. iii.798 ff. sees the sun's failure as a sign of the end of all things. Cf. Joel ii.30 f. (iii.3 f.), where the darkening of sun and moon are 'portents' of the Day of the Lord.

closest parallels are in the passages he uses — Isa. xiii and xxxiv — which are equally ambiguous. In this context, sensible questions about what will actually happen are out of place, for the language is the language of myth. When these things happen, *then* “they”¹⁹ will see the Son of man coming with great power and glory, and *then* he will send out his angels and gather the elect from all corners. Once again, the *then* provides an answer to the disciples’ initial question, “When?” — or rather, to their second question, about the time when all things were to be fulfilled. The first sign was set in the Temple, and heralded its destruction; the second sign is set in the heavens, and heralds the advent of the Son of man and the vindication of the elect.

VIII

The first of the two parables that follow is about the fig-tree, the harbinger of summer; its green shoots are the sign that summer is about to follow. Placed at this point in the discourse, the parable seems to confirm the idea that in the previous paragraph, 24-7, Jesus had at last provided the answer to the disciples’ question — that *second* question, about the sign of the fulfilment of everything. When they see these things — presumably the cosmic phenomena in verses 24 f. — then they will know that something or somebody is at the door; the context demands that we understand the subject of ἔστιν as “he”: when these things take place, the Son of man will be on the threshold. The intriguing thing about this parable is that it refers to a fig-tree. The fig-tree is, of course, the obvious tree to have chosen, since it is not an evergreen, unlike most trees in the area. But a fig-tree has already been used, at the beginning of the section on the Temple, in Mark xi, to symbolize the destruction of the Temple. Here, by contrast, the bursting into new life of an apparently dead tree is to be the sign of the Son of man’s arrival, and it is a fitting sign of what is, for the elect, a joyous event. Nor is it an arbitrary sign, for, as Dr. Telford, in his recent study *The Barren Fig-tree*,²⁰ has demonstrated, the fig-tree was commonly used to symbolize the joys of the messianic age.

¹⁹ The subject of the verb is not specified. The fact that this verse is not addressed to the disciples suggests that we have here an independent saying.

²⁰ Cf. n. 6.

The sayings which follow are often said to be contradictory, but I see no problem in supposing that Mark could maintain both that what has been predicted is certain, and will take place within a certain time (30 f.), and that the precise time is unknown (32). The real problem comes in the final verses of the chapter, the second of the two parables. It is introduced with the familiar warning to take heed, which occurs repeatedly in the discourse. But this time the reason for the warning is that the time of the End is unknown. The situation of the disciples is like that of servants waiting for their master to return from a journey in the middle of the night; they do not know at what hour he will return, and therefore they must watch through the whole night. In Mark's version, the parable bears obvious marks of artificiality. Nobody would have returned from a long journey in first-century Palestine in the middle of the night; Luke's version of the parable is about a man who had gone out to a banquet, and this makes much better sense.²¹ Mark seems to have combined a story about a man expected home at night with the parable recorded elsewhere in Matthew and Luke about a man away from home who entrusts his servants with various responsibilities.²² The point of his version is not that the master's arrival is unexpected, but that his servants are given no warning about the precise time that he will come, and must therefore be constantly vigilant. The detail about giving his servants work to do, which seems to have come from the parable of the talents, will have reminded Mark's readers that keeping watch for the master's return does not excuse the servants from faithfully carrying out their duties. Mark's allegorical interpretation of the parable is plain, and the moral spelt out with only a thin disguise in v. 35: the disciples must keep watch, since they do not know when their master will come. This suggests that he is already at hand, and the urgency of this command is at odds with the earlier part of the discourse, which emphasized that the End could not be expected yet. It may be, however, that Mark has added the detail about the work that is entrusted to the household servants in order to emphasize that the command to keep watch for the master's return does not in his view conflict with the belief that a certain period of time must elapse first.

²¹ Lk. xii.36-40.

²² Matt. xxv.14-30 = Lk. xix.12-27.

IX

How, then, are we to understand Mark's overall purpose in this discourse? In contrast to Marxsen, who suggested that it was designed to urge Mark's readers to flee from Jerusalem to Galilee,²³ it seems to me that it urges inaction rather than action. It is true that three of its sections refer to signs that some great event is about to occur; but interwoven with these are three other sections describing events that *might* be taken as signs but which in fact are not to be misunderstood as such. These three sections are introduced by the warning to take heed in verses 5, 9 and 23—and this warning is against misunderstanding what is happening and not, as we might perhaps expect, against being caught off guard by the parousia. But taken together, these first six sections can be understood to present a coherent message which runs: "Do not be alarmed by these events... the End is not yet; but when this event occurs—then watch out!" This message is repeated twice, the first climax coming in verse 14, and the second in 24 ff., and is rounded off by 28-31. The final section, however, although it too contains the command to take heed in verse 33, apparently contradicts *all* the previous six paragraphs by urging the need to watch constantly, since the time of the parousia is unknown to anyone. It offers no signs, either true or false, but demands constant vigilance; the Lord's coming cannot be pinned down to any particular period of the night.

Paradoxically, it may well be this last section, which seems out of place in the discourse, which comes closest to representing Jesus' own teaching. It is understandable if a message which originally ran "Be prepared; watch; the Kingdom of God may come at any time" encouraged the early Christian community to expect an imminent end to the world. Expectation of the coming Kingdom tended to be overlaid by expectation of the coming Son of man.²⁴ In time a new warning was necessary in a situation of over-enthusiasm: "Do not get *too* excited: the End is near—but not as near as all that". This, in fact, is precisely the development which—if the epistles addressed to the Thessalonian church are both genuinely Pauline—took place in the Christian community

²³ W. Marxsen, *Der Evangelist Markus*, Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Evangeliums (Göttingen, 1959), pp. 101-40.

²⁴ An obvious example is seen in Matt. xvi.28, compared with Mk.ix.1. Cf. also Lk. xvii.20-30; Matt. x.5-7, 23; xiii.24-30, 36-43.

at Thessalonica. At the same time, events that had been interpreted as signs that God was working his purpose out, and therefore as warnings to Christians to be on the alert, became distorted into signs by which one could plot the time of the Lord's return, and were welcomed as indications that the period of the Church's suffering was over. Mark's chapter seems to reflect this second situation, and it looks very much as though he has adapted the material to fit it. Events which were being interpreted by some of his contemporaries as signs that salvation was near were indeed part of the eschatological programme, but they could not pinpoint the time. Mark's overall message is a warning that there may be more suffering yet in store—a familiar enough theme in a gospel which has emphasized that following Jesus means taking up the cross. Nevertheless, Mark encourages his readers by his confidence in the final parousia of the Son of man in glory, which brings victory not only for the Son of man but also for the elect. As for what I have suggested is the earliest eschatological message, in verses 33 ff., Mark has adapted the original warning about the End coming "at any time" to suggest that it may be later rather than sooner: in the meantime the Lord's servants must faithfully perform the tasks he has given them and be prepared to face temptation and trial, however long they may have to wait.

X

However great the tension between the material in the earlier sections and this last paragraph, therefore, an attempt has been made to hold them together. But there are tensions, also, between these earlier sections. Let us investigate first the pattern that emerges if we concentrate on the four sections in the discourse that begin with the warning: βλέπετε. These are the three sections which warn about things that must not be misunderstood as signs (numbers 1, 2 and 4), and the final paragraph which warns that there is to be no sign at all. Taken together, the message of these four sections is as follows:

Take heed. There will be all kinds of turmoil and disaster, but these are not the sign; the End is not yet. You will be persecuted—but this is not the sign: persecution shows rather that the gospel is being preached. There will be false teachers, and even Christians will be led astray—but this is not the sign. There is no sign of his coming, and you must therefore be continually alert.

Might these four paragraphs perhaps come from one source? If so, its message seems to have been a warning against *all* attempts to calculate the time of the End. But the warning of the final paragraph, with its emphasis on the need to watch, is at variance with the insistence of the earlier paragraphs that the End is not yet, even though it has been adapted to suggest a period of waiting. Do these other three paragraphs, then (sections 1, 2 and 4), perhaps have a common origin? Or does the repeated βλέπετε indicate Marcan editing, since the same warning is found on three other occasions in the gospel?²⁵ And whatever their previous history, how do these four paragraphs fit with the three sections in which a sign *is* mentioned? Now the interesting thing to note in these three sections is the speed, in every case, with which the sign is followed by the event that it heralds. When you see the abomination of desolation standing in the Temple, then get out! There is no time to do anything except flee. When you see the heavens disintegrate, then there certainly cannot be any mistaking the sign, nor any time to make further preparations. When you see the fig-tree burst into leaf, then summer is at hand. There is nothing arbitrary about any of these images. When the Temple is invaded by AntiChrist, then it will be destroyed; when the heavens break up, the End is here; when the leaves unfold, summer has come. There is no time for anything. The signs are not detached phenomena, but rather the beginning of the disaster itself. The message of the final paragraph is certainly appropriate to this situation, for if things happen so suddenly, then clearly the disciples need to be continually on the alert.

When Mark pieces all this material together (and it looks very much as though the various traditions may have been used in very different situations at an earlier period), the whole thing looks like this:

The disciples ask for a sign of the Temple's destruction, and a sign that all things are going to be fulfilled. Jesus replies as follows: world disasters are not the sign; persecution of Christians is not the sign. There *is* a sign of Jerusalem's fall—but it will be instantaneous and demand immediate action. As for the End, false teachers will announce that it is here—but even that is not the sign. When it comes, there will be no mistaking the sign of its arrival. To all of this the theme of the final parable² is

²⁵ Mk. iv.24; viii.15; xii.38. R. Pesch, *op. cit.*, argues that the phrase is part of Marcan redaction.

surprisingly relevant: since the crisis comes suddenly, there is need to keep alert, but since its coming may not be immediate, there is need to work.

What kind of situation lies behind Mark's discourse? We have already noticed the interesting parallels with 2 Thess. ii, and it looks very much as though a similar situation exists in both communities. In other words, Mark's teaching is aimed at Christians who are unduly excited and agitated by eschatological expectation; he reminds them that Christian discipleship involves mission and persecution before the final time of vindication. However, there is a significant difference between the two passages. The readers of 2 Thessalonians are urged not to believe rumours that the End has arrived, because the man of lawlessness must first be revealed. He will seat himself in the Temple, proclaim himself to be God, and his activity will be marked by false signs and wonders. In Mark, the desecration of the Temple is interpreted as a sign of the Temple's destruction, and though this is of course firmly linked with the End, the two apparently take place at different times. There are two crises, one local, one global. Why? One possibility is that the emphasis on Jerusalem reflects the interests of a Palestinian community. Another is that it reflects Mark's own interests, and his insistence on Israel's failure and coming punishment. But it may well be that Mark is writing between the two crises—i.e. after A.D. 70; in other words, that he separates the two because Jerusalem has fallen, the Temple been destroyed, Israel been judged and the End is still not here. If the prophecy of verse 14 does not accord directly with historical events, this suggests that Mark is not writing in Palestine, and that he is using traditional material, rather than recording what happened.

Finally, we should note another difference between 2 Thessalonians and Mark. What is said in 2 Thess. ii about the man of lawlessness who is revealed before the End is in Mark divided between three groups of figures. First, there are those who usurp Jesus' name and say "I am" (6); in 2 Thessalonians the man of lawlessness proclaims himself God (2 Thess. ii.4). Secondly, there is the abomination of desolation, standing where he ought not (14)—the man of lawlessness sits in the Temple (2 Thess. ii.4); and thirdly, there are false Christs and false prophets who perform signs and wonders (22)—activities associated with the man of

lawlessness (2 Thess. ii.9). It looks very much as though the three groups in Mark represent different parts of the tradition about the opposition which will mark the last days.²⁶ Interestingly enough, Mark insists that two of these groups are *not* to be interpreted as signs of the impending crisis, whereas one of them *is*.

If that provides us with a puzzle with which to end this study of Mark xiii it may perhaps provide us also with a clue to understanding the problem with which this discourse was intended to deal. For the tradition preserved in 2 Thess. ii might well have led to the kind of misinterpretation—the hunting for signs—to which Mark seems to be opposed. If the unleashing of evil was said to be the sign of the End, then we can understand how all sorts of different manifestations of evil were being interpreted as *the* sign, and how many false rumours could arise. Mark's message is a warning against looking for false signs. Neither international disturbances nor persecution are signs that the End is imminent. Even when tribulation is at its most intense and false prophets announce that the End is here—still these are false signs. When AntiChrist comes, then destruction will follow, instantly. As for the coming of the Son of man, that will be sudden, and judgement will follow immediately. Mark's readers must not be misled by talk about the signs of the End. This is why he adapts the final parable. They need to wait patiently and to work faithfully, as well as to watch. For Mark, the AntiChrist figure has become the symbol of Israel's judgement and the Temple's destruction. Beyond that, the disciple can only wait and watch for the coming of the Son of man.

²⁶ Cf. L. Hartman, *Prophecy Interpreted*, The Formation of Some Jewish Apocalyptic Texts and of the Eschatological Discourse Mark 13 Par. (Lund, 1966), pp. 178-205, 235-8.