

## Mark 13

Because I wanted to avoid a too lengthy journey backwards into Jewish cultural history, given the brevity of the time available to us, I decided that we would tackle the thorny business of apocalyptic writing in the context of the Gospel rather than the Old Testament. But clearly this will, in fact, involve us in a good deal of discursive reading and not just in the Old Testament. The aim of the exercise is that we should have some kind of mental index in which to put this part of Jesus' teaching.

Apocalyptic writing could hardly have evolved without the sense that the truth about the universe is different from the way it appears. We are profoundly different from the ancients in this regard; we are quite ready to find that the universe is not what it appears, but we will do it by attentive and painstaking investigation of detailed empirical exactitude. Sobriety is essential to this scientific process.

In a large and significant subculture, however, we find the impulse towards the apocalyptic alive and well, in the readiness of people to believe that in ecstatic behaviour they can lay their minds open to knowledge that is denied to those who are imprisoned in the cold light of the ordinary. Escape into alcohol and drugs is widely seen as a potential point of entry into an altered state of consciousness that will reveal secrets and access a reality more real than what others accept as real. Like Alice, people still lie on the floor, and peep through a secret door into a beautiful garden full of flowers and fountains, and wonder how they can get into it.

We can hardly read Jewish apocalyptic writing without sensing that it springs from hugely painful experiences. The receiver of the revelation habitually weeps, questions, and is troubled or afraid. The truths which are learned are frequently still more disturbing than the prevailing "ordinary" reality. Therefore we should see the context of apocalyptic as one of adversity.

The links with previous theological streams are rather towards the transcendent than the imminent. To go back a good long way, we might say that in the creation of the Pentateuch, the Jahwist is not an apocalyptic source; but the tendency towards transcendence of the Elohist is more open to the thought of an alternative reality. Apocalyptic writing confirms this thought by the presence and function within it of angels as revelatory presences. Again and again the seers are assisted and governed by angelic guides.

### The announcement of disaster and restoration

One *locus* for the development of apocalypse is the warning of disaster to come. The world will break open before a pent-up stream of fire which will sweep away established certainties. This mode of thought is perfectly familiar to us, and we see the appropriateness of it even in our own evaluation of contemporary history. There is a vogue just now for this way of thinking about the First World War, whose coming perfectly fulfils the words of Jesus: *It is just when people are saying "How calm and peaceful it is!" that the worst suddenly happens, as suddenly as labour-pains coming on a pregnant woman; and there will be no way for anyone to evade it.*

Yet the sophistication and development of apocalyptic writing perhaps received more from the development, notably in Deutero-Isaiah, of the prophecy of consolation. If the peaceful world can suddenly dissolve into unsuspected disaster, the world that is horrific can just as suddenly be transfigured by unexpected hope. In equal terms, this reversal is on a scale which demands the intervention of divine power. The first verses of Ezra ascribe the ending of the exile to the decree of Cyrus, King of Persia. Dt-Is's first verses describe an overriding edict for the ending of the exile in the heavenly council. Here is the scenario for apocalypse, in a very powerful,

central, vital part of the OT tradition; there is nothing extreme or exotic about Dt-Is. Yet here is the vital element, an alternative explanation of reality which involves revelation.

### When Prophecy Goes Unfulfilled

There is a further *locus* that we should take into account: the reality announced by the prophet is actually unfulfilled in reality. What becomes of such a prophecy?

In the OT chronicles we find a forthright denunciation of false prophets, which implies that the prime test of a prophet's veracity is the accurate fulfilment of what he has said. But this is not always what happens to unfulfilled prophecy. It can be forwarded to the future, and, in the process, become projected onto a larger screen as it parts company with its more proximate literal fulfilment. In fact, the more unlikely the prophecy, the more necessary the element of transcendence.

We can see this process at work in the predictions of the post-exilic restoration; perhaps it is most conspicuous of all in the context of the messianic stream of hope which characterizes the post-exilic era. The restoration of the Davidic line is practically demanded by previous prophecy (notably 2 Sam 7); but in ordinary earthly terms a new prophecy of such a restoration would demand a huge revolutionary faith in a transcendent deed of God. Yet these predictions are made in the later prophets (Hag 2:20, Zech 3, 6). Like the great thrust of Trito-Isaiah, these prophecies proceed from a people that senses itself as powerless to advance towards the future destiny they hope for.

It is important to realise that, although apocalyptic thinking and writing may be intimately connected with personal responses on the part of individuals - prophets or authors - yet they represent a communitarian shift within the overall cultural history of Israel. When we find isolated passages, of apocalyptic character, being incorporated into books of prophecy, the phenomenon is showing itself in the minds of those who edited and shaped the canon of scripture. Oracles can appear, shorn of their original context, free-floating and without reference, included in the overall heritage of the prophet because of the imprecise, and as yet unfocussed belief that the future of Israel was somehow foreshadowed in them.

Among the more important ideas that are cradled in the apocalyptic tradition are those of judgment, and the afterlife. Clearly the purpose of conjecture about an overarching power governing the world is intimately connected with the possibility of a definitive intervention to redress the wrongs and punish the crimes which prevail in the confines of the human cosmos. The obvious corollary is that the just whose lives and destiny are in the hand of God, should likewise transcend their earthly fate and live to see the vindication of their cause. These notions, already hinted at in the servant-songs of Dt-Is, receive a full exposition in later apocalypse, and enter the mainstream of Jewish religious ideas particularly in the Pharisee movement.

We have seen how the apocalyptic realm is particularly to be related to that of prophecy. We have always known that Jesus, like John the Baptist, saw himself as standing in the prophetic tradition of Israel. Matthew shows him as seeing himself particularly close to the Pharisaic concern for sanctity and fulfilment of the Law (the Sermon on the Mount would have been music to the ears of a good Pharisee). There is little doubt that Jesus' firm belief in personal survival and the resurrection of the dead is of a piece with all of these streams of faith. The question thus arises: what was the stance of Jesus toward apocalyptic thinking?

Keeping in mind the strictures we have established against assuming that the Gospel of Mark might present us with the purest or with the most primitive tradition about Jesus, we are now in a position to examine the thirteenth chapter of Mark, which is usually accorded the title of "the

eschatological discourse". The two words "eschatological" and "apocalyptic" are closely related, since the apocalyptic writers associate the denouement of the mysteries or secrets of the universe with the moment of death: the thought that death would come to those who catch sight of God, for instance, clearly indicates that there is a kind of revelation that is deadly to human frailty. We can see this belief in quite intimate terms, for instance in the Last Supper discourse of John. Jesus appears to be speaking to his disciples from the far side of the brink of death, when he says: *There are many things I still have to communicate to you; they would be too much for you now. When the Advocate comes (who can only come when Jesus has gone to the Father, ie died) he will lead you to the fulness of truth.* Here is a truth which can only be spoken from the far side of death. Eschatology, therefore, is of its nature apocalyptic, and the tendency of apocalypse is to include the notes of the last trumpet in its themes. But the terms are not by any means interchangeable.

It has been argued since the middle of the last century that Mk 13 is unique in the Gospel in being a sustained and shapely piece of discourse. This has made people suggest that it is a separate document which has been edited into the Gospel. Thus isolated, it raises the question of the origins of such a document. Given that it has received an editing at the time of its incorporation into this Christian Gospel, it has even been suggested that it might have been a Jewish document rather than a Christian one - a kind of fly-sheet distributed at the time of the Jewish War of AD 66 - 70, in advance of the fall of Jerusalem.

Morna Hooker points out that we do not see here all of the features of apocalyptic writing. There are, for instance, no heavenly visions; the voice that speaks is not that of an angel revealing heavenly mysteries, but that of Jesus. There is no bizarre imagery, like that of the intertestamental writing or of the crazy bestiary of the Book of Revelation. Most importantly, there is no map of what is going to happen after the parousia: no resurrection, no judgment, no punishment or reward; there is no key to the time of the end, indeed, any attempt to pinpoint it appears to be ruled out. One of the reasons why the passage is held to be something of an interloper is precisely the incoherence of the contents with the frame. The body of the message seems to be saying: there will be signs, like this, that, and the other, which may suggest to you that the world is coming to its end; don't be deceived, take no notice. The editing line at the end says, when these things begin to happen, *watch out!*

The Gospel in the last two chapters, describing the ministry of Jesus in the Jerusalem temple, has outlined the failure of the Jews to recognize and accept Jesus as their saviour. The next two chapters will outline the consequences - the Passion - which will flow from this refusal. These two themes are extremely close to each other in Mark. The tendency of apocalypse is to warn that a time has arrived when the forces of God's justice are going to irrupt into the unjust world; and these are voices which Mark is concerned to modify, or even to contradict. Clearly he sees that the time of the Church's suffering is not due to end very soon, there is much more that needs to be suffered. Thus the contradiction of false optimism, the warning that "the end is not so soon". The words of Jesus will find their first application in the Passion account that follows, and we will recall that Mark has always told his readers that the following of Jesus will mean the carrying of the Cross. So there is a bifurcation in the message: suffering lies ahead for everyone. But for the Christian, this suffering will lead to life. For those who are on the opposing side, the suffering will bring condemnation. Morna Hooker points out that there are three signs which are unreliable, and three that are true. The unreliable signs tell us nothing - we should take no action; but the true signs of this time coming upon us will be rather like the four-minute warning; no warning at all, since the signs are themselves the reality of what is happening. When you have read the sign, it is already too late to respond to it.