

The Apocalyptic Cross: Preaching Mark 13

By Martin Little

Introduction

Mark 13 is the longest speech attributed to Jesus within this shortest of Gospels. It is therefore highly significant for both Mark's message and Christian tradition. How might one preach this passage as good news today? Of what significance are contested historical, theology and literary issues? This essay explores these challenges, settling on a *crucicentric* approach as both satisfying interpretation and appropriate *kerygma* for a contemporary world in need of the hope of Christ. It does so largely within Fred Craddock's 'inductive' model.

A Little Apocalypse?

Often designated Mark's 'Little Apocalypse', Jesus' speech addresses events in a future time using image, allusion, and parable with a tone of utmost solemnity, even doom. Despite noting absences of some characteristics of Jewish apocalyptic, Hooker nevertheless argues there are enough hallmarks to designate this the principal *genre*.¹ Craddock argues against biblical texts being 'forced to fit a new frame', suggesting that the *genre* of a sermon might be inspired in the first place by the *genre* of the biblical text being preached. He gives narrative and parable as examples; one wonders, would he extend this to apocalyptic?² Within 'mainstream' Christianity, perhaps we feel uneasy about preaching in 'apocalyptic voice', where portentous overtones of judgement and destruction smell of fundamentalism. Yet if Buttrick rightly laments that much contemporary preaching tends towards either 'therapy' or 'management', apocalyptic preaching may yet prove antidotal.³ Apocalyptic language and style is intrinsically 'flexible' and 'multivalent'⁴, qualities promising for Craddock's 'inductive' preaching that breaks 'the tyranny of the single

¹ Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St Mark*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: A & C Black, 1991), 299.

² Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, Second (Revised) (St Louis: Chalice, 2001), 121.

³ David Buttrick, *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 47.

⁴ Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 120–21.

perspective'.⁵ Jesus' own 'homiletic' pivots on the exhortation to *keep watch* (v23; 35; 37) – it is less explanatory 'conclusion' than open-ended summons – and thus rather in 'inductive' mode itself.

History, Prophecy, Parousia

In our critical age, questions of historicity simmer constantly beneath gospel texts. These are particularly pointed in ch.13, which is often used to bolster the dating of Mark to around the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in A.D. 70. If we accept this hypothesis, then ch.13 must be a *vaticinium ex eventu* (prophecy after the event) a revision that in turn affects how we view the unity and authenticity of the discourse.⁶ Behind this circular logic, I suspect, lies a demythologising bias against the plausibility of genuine prophecy; so, many twentieth century commentaries followed Bultmann in privileging form criticism. The result is that speculations about Mark's 'sources' in earlier apocalyptic material have somewhat eclipsed the notion that Jesus himself may indeed have said most of these words, perhaps in an order not irreconcilable with that presented by Mark! Several commentators suggest, for example, that the tricky v30 represents the evangelist blandly inserting an unrelated saying under the tenuous heading of 'watchfulness'.⁷ It is challenging for preachers simply to know what to *do* with such reconstructions so reticent to give Mark - at least - the benefit of the doubt. Mercifully, this seems to be an approach that is itself 'passing away', with N.T. Wright among others pointing to alternatives. Highlighting discrepancies between Mark and Josephus, Wright argues it is:

far more plausible to regard the details of the passage as extrapolations from ancient biblical prophecy than to read them as lame and inaccurate attempts to turn history, after the event, into pseudo-prophecy.⁸

Even if Wright claims too much for unity, his approach frees Mark 13 from fragmentation *ad nihilo*. In short, Jesus is vividly 'retelling' various prophetic

⁵ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 28. Though Craddock's own style is rather more 'folksy' than 'apocalyptic'!

⁶ George R. Beasley-Murray, *Preaching the Gospel from the Gospels* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996), 13; Cf. Bultmann, Rudolf, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh, Second Revised Edition (New York & Evanston: Harper & Row, 1968), 122.

⁷ Hooker, *The Gospel According to St Mark*, 321; Beasley-Murray, *Preaching the Gospel*, 121.

⁸ N.T. Wright, *Jesus And The Victory of God: The New Testament and Christian Origins Vol. 2* (London: SPCK, 1996), 349.

narratives so that they now ‘focus on his own work.’⁹ This *faithful-yet-radical* ‘retelling’ of tradition on a clear trajectory toward the present person of Christ is constructive for preaching; indeed, it is a good definition of the homiletic task itself. Wright emphasises temple destruction for what it *represents* prophetically – that is, the downfall of Second Temple Jewish religious hierarchy. The cosmic portents of vv24-25 utilize classic imagery for the fall of Babylon: astonishingly, Jesus turns these on Jerusalem herself, the Zion of Israel’s hope.¹⁰ Jesus himself is the new temple, his followers the new Israel.

More controversially, Wright is dismissive of the tradition that the ‘the son of man’ (v26) indicates the Second Coming of Christ. A literal cloud-borne figure is deemed a ‘monstrosity’ that ‘can be left behind’ - a faulty transposition of the heavenly encounter of Daniel 7 to one of earthly descent; furthermore, any notion of the ‘physical collapse of the space-time world’ is ‘crass literalism’.¹¹ Vv24-27 is instead standard Jewish language for the rescue of God’s people after judgement, which for Wright means temple destruction - ‘what the whole chapter has been about from the start.’¹² This ‘realized eschatology’ represents a huge challenge for preaching in congregations who have been conditioned to read Mark 13 in a highly transcendent ‘end-times’ way, not least when the lectionary has 13:32-37 in Advent Sunday under the seasonal rubric of the ‘last things.’ It may be that Wright has thrown out some of the eschatological baby with the bad exegetical bathwater; Middleton sees rather a ‘double referent’ in Mark 13 - imminent events and final *parousia* may well both be in view.¹³

What homiletic strategy might appropriate these insights? I suggest the rhetorical device of *occultatio*: introducing material while feigning its omission.¹⁴ For example: ‘I *could* have preached today on the way Mark’s account contains intriguing resonances with the Fall of the Temple in A.D.70...’ or ‘I *could* have preached about the way the Church thinks about the return of Jesus at the end of time...’ and so on, outlining some of the salient points - ‘but I’m not going to preach either of those sermons today.’ This ‘names the issues’ while simultaneously generating anticipation. Furthermore, this structure *arises* from the form of Mark 13 itself: the

⁹ Ibid., 348.

¹⁰ Ibid., 354–55.

¹¹ Ibid., 361; 517.

¹² Ibid., 362.

¹³ Middleton, *A New Heaven*, 183.

¹⁴ Sam Leith, *You Talkin’ to Me? Rhetoric from Aristotle to Obama* (London: Profile, 2011), 273–74.

political turmoil and persecutions of vv5-13 are emphatically *not* the signs of the 'end' (whatever that may be). They are birth pangs but not the main event. It is only with v14 with its '*But when... then*' formula that the actual climax comes. In Craddock's terms, such a 'transition' formula, when retained from the biblical text, generates sermonic movement and 'progression.'¹⁵ What then *is* this climax?

Temple to Cross

Wright employs 1 Maccabees to interpret Mark 13 from the premise that the destruction of the temple is "the necessary and predictable focal point of Jesus' whole prophetic ministry."¹⁶ This is a slightly odd conclusion, because however large the temple looms at the start of the chapter, it soon fades from view and is not explicitly mentioned after v2. Furthermore, in terms of Mark's theology *as a whole*, not to mention Christian tradition, it is the *cross* that is the focus.¹⁷ How much more for preaching (1 Cor. 2:1-2)! Noting the spurious testimony at Jesus' trial (14:56-59), Peter Bolt argues that physical temple destruction is insignificant next to the supremacy of Jesus' *death and resurrection*.¹⁸ Bolt argues for Mark 13 as 'Apocalyptic Precursor to the Passion Narrative', based on ch.13's immediate *literary* context. Indeed, many of the chapter's themes and details reappear during this narrative, within an imminent timeframe first linked by H.R. Lightfoot to the four Roman 'watches of the night' indicated in 13:35. These parallels can be summarised thus:

'*Evening*': this points to the last supper with its 'mini-apocalyptic' discourse (14.26-31) drawing on Zech. 13.

'*Midnight*': this refers to Gethsemane with the disciples sleeping (14:37) despite Jesus' repeated exhortations to 'keep watch' (14.34, 38; 13.32). Terrified, the disciples flee (14:50; 13.14ff) and Jesus repeats the 'Son of man' formula (14.62; 13:26).

'*Cockcrow*': still the 'coming' is delayed, and Peter's doom-laden denial comes true (14:72).

¹⁵ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 122.

¹⁶ Wright, *Jesus And The Victory of God*, 262.

¹⁷ W.R. Telford, *The Theology of the Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 114.

¹⁸ Peter G. Bolt, 'Mark 13: An Apocalyptic Precursor to the Passion Narrative', *Reformed Theological Review* 54 (1995): 18.

'Dawn': this timeframe shapes both 15:1 (the day of crucifixion) and 16:2 (the day of resurrection). These *together* mark the climax of the narrative: the decisive 'coming' of the Son of Man. The 'gathering of the elect' (13:27), says Bolt, is fulfilled in the promise of Gentile missions, inaugurated in Galilee (16:7-8; cf.13:10).¹⁹

Bolt concludes:

when read against the explicit story of Mark's Gospel, it appears that the coming of the Son of man promised in Daniel 7:13, and quoted in Mark 13:26, refers not to a still distant parousia, nor to the destruction of the temple. Mark's Gospel tells us that the Son of man comes when Jesus rose from the dead. That is when he received the Kingdom from the Ancient of Days, and began to share it with his people.²⁰

This construal makes crucial sense of the otherwise-puzzling v30 and v10, without recourse to the revisionist strategies I critiqued above. This close textual work might be rendered homiletically through following the narrative structure of this night-to-dawn sequence with its evocative atmosphere and symbolism. Parallels could be narrated from the disciples' point of view, imagining them 'remembering' their Lord's apocalyptic discourse in the midst of fear, confusion and astonishment.

Desolation to Hope

At the centre of Mark 13 stands the 'desolating sacrilege'. Structurally, as we noted earlier, it is the genuine 'sign' of the 'end'. The image is mysterious, even downright creepy, sending the imagination in any number of directions – from cultic taboo objects to explorations of idolatry and blasphemy in dystopian literature such as *The Lord of the Flies* or *Heart of Darkness*. If we are aiming for a sermon in 'apocalyptic voice' it seems to me advantageous for movement and tension to *track with* this suggestiveness, rather than flattening or explaining it away too soon. The risk of purely historical reconstructions is to speak as if meanings of the 'abomination' were *reducible* to textual parallels in Daniel and the intertestamental literature. Rather, '[a] hermeneutic that respects the full catholicity of meaning needs to start by accepting abundance as a positive condition'.²¹ The horror of the thing 'where it should not be'

¹⁹ Ibid., 22–23.

²⁰ Ibid., 25.

²¹ A.K.M Adam, 'Poaching on Zion: Biblical Theology as Signifying Practice', in *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation*, ed. A.K.M Adam et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 25.

is further suggestive of contemporary *ethical* ‘abominations’ – the tragic image of little Alan Kurdi for example. Such images need careful framing to foster genuine pathos rather than luridness. But crucially for our argument, this approach leads inductively toward Bolt’s imaginatively persuasive construal of the ‘abomination’ as *the crucifixion itself*. This *crucicentric* position is the high point of his argument re the passion.²² He asks: ‘could there be a greater act of sacrilege than the destruction of God’s Son in such a horrendous way?’²³ The cross is initially *the* act of human evil, now transfigured into *the* act of divine salvation. This interpretation cuts to the heart of the Christian *kerygma*: it is *on the cross* that Jesus ‘arrives’, *on the cross* that Jesus reveals God. Whatever our beliefs about the ‘second coming’, it is supremely *on the cross that God judges the world*, passing the double sentence: ‘guilty!’ - but also: ‘forgiven!’ Bolt offers a sermon application, linking Mark 13’s ‘wars and rumours of wars’ to the perennial struggle for ‘security’ on the international scene, and pointing to Christ’s redemption from cycles of violence and self-interest:

The only security for this world is found in the coming of the Son of Man, in the kingdom of God that is awarded to him at his exaltation. And before the Son of Man comes, human culture is shown up for what it really is, and is judged once and for all. [...] The human culture that committed the desolating sacrilege in the first place continues to mock what it does not understand. But the cross spells the end of that world.²⁴

The cross, as Bolt’s chapter title puts it, is ‘the end of the world’. This is preaching in the apocalyptic voice. Bridging the imagination of the preacher, the skill of the evangelist and the apocalyptic revelation of Christ its author, the cross is continually ‘connecting heaven and earth, containing all of creation and all of history.’²⁵ Brueggemann searches for a preacher-poet who ‘bespeaks a reality the world cannot contain.’²⁶ What else, then, shall we preach?

Conclusion

A sermon on Mark 13 has a lot of ground to cover; attempting to ‘explain’ everything is futile. I would approach this firstly through use of *occultatio*, before continuing in

²² Peter G. Bolt, *The Cross from a Distance: Atonement in Mark’s Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill: Apollos IVP, 2004), 100.

²³ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 113; 115.

²⁵ Bradley Jersak, *A More Christlike God: A More Beautiful Gospel* (Pasadena, CA: CWR, 2015), 132.

²⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *And Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 108.

something of the 'apocalyptic voice', using scriptural images allusively while keeping a key doctrinal focus, weaving in *crucicentric* interpretation from Bolt in its full dramatic context with contemporary illustrations focusing on the 'desolating sacrilege.' In conclusion I offer the following sermon extract. This might form the conclusion to a sermon for Advent Sunday.

Jesus says: "keep watch!" But, we reply: "Lord, to what shall we look?" And Jesus responds with the dark, mysterious words of apocalypse - words that reach beyond comfort, beyond death, beyond our speculations and deliberations. Words beyond the edge of words. With his whole life, Jesus says: 'look to the cross.'

As he comes to us, wordless in the manger, he says 'look to the cross.'

As he instructs disciples in 'the Way', he says: 'look to the cross.'

As he empties his life for the outcast, he says: 'look to the cross.'

And as we look, all the suffering and sin of the world swirls in black vapours around the bowed head with the crown of thorns. All the desolation, all the abomination that the world can devise – on the cross is embraced, pulverised and redeemed by the open arms of our Saviour.

And so the apocalyptic vision fades... and we see ourselves. How then shall we live? Shall we come to this cross? Shall we trust to it all our darkest thoughts, all our deepest pain, all our bids for worldly power, all our hopes for new life in the hereafter? Well may we look in Mark 13 for the end of the world. On the cross, Jesus proclaims an end which, we find, is really a beginning: the full and final revelation of the God of eternal love, saying to evil once and for all: 'It is finished.'

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