Mark 13: An Apocalyptic Precursor to the Passion Narrative

Mark 13, containing Jesus’ ‘apocalyptic (or eschatological) discourse’ has provided interpreters with many difficulties. These interpretive difficulties revolve around the key, central verses which talk of the coming of the Son of man in the context of a great time of distress, followed by his sending out his angels to gather the elect from the corners of the earth (vv. 24-27).

At the heart of these verses lies a quotation from Dan 7:13 (v. 26). In his vision, Daniel had seen ‘one like a Son of man’ coming to the ‘Ancient of Days’ in the context of a judgement scene. His arrival signalled the end of all ungodly human power and, having come to the Ancient of Days,

‘he was given authority, and glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom will never be destroyed’ (Dan 7:14).

Since this description matches that of an earlier vision which spoke of the kingdom that would be set up by the God of heaven (cf. Dan 2:44), it seems that when this Son of man comes to the Ancient of Days he receives nothing short of the Kingdom of God. The rest of the chapter goes on to say that the people of God who are suffering on earth benefit from the Son of man’s reception of the kingdom, for they too will share in the kingdom that is awarded to him (Dan 7:18, 22, 27).

The issue in Mark 13 concerns the referent of this quotation. In Mark’s view, what is this ‘coming of the Son of man’? What does it refer to? What is (are) the event(s) in view in Mark 13:24-27?

Two answers are commonly given:

1. One possibility is that the coming of the Son of man refers to the parousia, i.e. the second coming of Christ which is an event still future both to the events recorded in Mark’s Gospel and to Mark’s readers (including, presumably, those in 1994).

2. Another possibility is that these verses refer to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70. In this case, the coming of the Son of man

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refers, in the first instance, to the vindication of Jesus in his resurrection/exaltation. But this vindicated glory is then powerfully manifested in the destruction of Jerusalem’s temple some 40 years later, and the great time of mission which is said to have followed that event (to cope with v. 27). This expression of Jesus’ vindicated glory in AD 70 is taken to be the main burden of Mark 13.3

Both positions have their exegetical problems, which can be played off against each other. Any or all of these exegetical problems would be fruitful areas for discussion, but my purpose is merely to allude to their existence, and to assert that the two common interpretations have problems sufficient to raise the question whether either alternative is correct. Having said as much, the plan of this paper is to raise two further questions about both positions, and, in the process of answering them, to unfold a third possibility for interpreting the verses in view.

Part A: Parousia, Temple and Resurrection In Mark’s Gospel

The long history of Gospel studies has brought us to the position where the final form of the text of a Gospel is treated with great seriousness. Increasingly the Gospel of Mark is being considered holistically as a literary work with its own narrative dynamics, rhetorical purpose and means of persuading readers to that purpose.4 When such a perspective is taken into account, two further questions can be asked of the common interpretations of Mark 13:24-27.

(1) Do they adequately consider Mark 13 as an integral part of Mark’s story?


(2) Is their assumption of an extratextual referent for verses 24-27 justified?

When considered from this holistic perspective the two usual interpretations share a common weakness. It is rare indeed to find an interpreter who attempts to understand Mark 13 in the literary context of Mark's Gospel. Why did Jesus talk about either the parousia or the destruction of Jerusalem at this point of his career? How does this report of either the parousia or the destruction of the temple contribute to Mark's story which is still in progress by chapter 13?

It is not usual for scholars to even ask this contextual question. This may be the legacy of form critical studies which tended, not only to have little regard for the Gospel as a whole, but also to focus upon the content of Jesus' sayings at the expense of their context. In fact, it appears that T. J. Geddert's work, published in 1989, is the first serious attempt to read Mark 13 'carefully and comprehensively in the context of Mark's Gospel'.

And yet this is how the chapter in its final form patently expects to be read. It is clearly cast as a continuation of the ongoing narrative. Verse 1 introduces the chapter by telling of Jesus' journey away from the temple, which, for the last two chapters, has been the scene of his controversy with his opponents. His apocalyptic discourse is launched (v. 4) by a two-part question from four disciples who are already well-known to us as characters within Mark's story. In other words, although this is almost never acknowledged, the discourse is first and foremost a narrated speech between Jesus and his four friends who all have a role to play in Mark's total story.

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5 Conzelmann has drawn parallels with other genres which traditionally place an eschatological section at the end, reported in E. Schweizer, 'Eschatology in Mark's Gospel', *Neotestamentica et Semitica: Studies in Honour of Matthew Black* (E. E. Ellis & M. Wilcox, eds.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969), p.115. However, offering formal parallels is a long way from offering an explanation in terms of Mark's narrative. It could also be asked whether Mark 13 actually is at the end, like the formal parallels: what of chapters 14-16?

6 T. J. Geddert, *Watchwords. Mark 13 in Markan Eschatology* (JSNTSup; Sheffield: JSOT, 1989). After surveying previous scholarship on the chapter he notes that 'one task ... has remained unfulfilled: the task of reading Mark 13 carefully and comprehensively in the context of Mark's Gospel' (p.18).

features also encourage the reading of Mark 13 as part of the whole narrative. For example, the fact that the opponents' plot to kill Jesus (3:6, 12:13) has not been resolved, since it has come to a standstill (12:34) and now waits for the assistance of Judas for its revival (14:1, 10-11); the expectations raised by temporal and geographical patterning of chapters 11-12; and certain other formal features of the chapter. The chapter certainly functions as something of an aside, or a pause, in the narrative; but precisely the fact that it is a pause in the narrative, encourages us to read it as some kind of reflection on that narrative.

To conclude this point, several factors suggest that chapter 13 is to be read as an integral part of Mark's Gospel in which it stands, and therefore any interpretation of Mark 13 could be expected to offer something which is entirely suitable to its literary context. With this in mind we can return to our first question.

(1) What support do the two common interpretations find within Mark's story?

(i) The Parousia

Although some have dared to claim that the parousia is the focus of the whole Gospel, others have recognised that the evidence for such a claim is

8 S. H. Smith, 'The role of Jesus' opponents in the Markan Drama', NTS 35 (1989), pp.161-182. In dramatic terms, it is therefore after a crisis and part of the rising action that will issue in the climax.

9 There is a three day pattern (11:1, 11:12-19, 11:20ff.), the last of which is open-ended, which causes Mark 13 to be read as part of that same day. The normal geographical pattern (Bethany — Jerusalem — Bethany) is interrupted after Jesus leaves Jerusalem (13:1) by this extended aside on the Mount of Olives, before being concluded in Mk 14:3.

10 It is cast as a monologue, which functions similarly to a 'soliloquy', i.e. as a comment on the surrounding story; the story has been decelerating, as more detail has been provided, across the three days which has the effect of focussing attention on Mk 13 as some kind of climax to the three days; the genre of Biblical apocalyptic may also encourage the vision to reflect upon the narrative (as Daniel 7-12 reflects on 1-6 and Zechariah 9-14 reflects on 1-8).

11 For example: V. Taylor, 'Not only is the Parousia the object of [Mark's] earnest expectation, but the events leading up to it and its spectacular character are strongly emphasized,' The Gospel according to St Mark (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966, rep. 1981), p.116. This statement is obviously dependent on his view of Mark 13, to
slim indeed. And, in fact, the few texts outside of Mark 13 that are used as evidence can be — and, I would suggest, ought to be — understood differently.

A few texts can be dismissed quickly. Some find an allusion to the parousia in Mk 4:21-23 (the lamp on the lamp stand), since they feel that this will be the time when all will be revealed. However, if this saying does speak of a period of revelation in contrast to the time of secrecy, the post-resurrection period seems to be a better candidate (Mk 9:9), but instead, the saying probably ought to be read as a statement of the ultimate purpose of Jesus’ dark sayings (i.e. he hides in order to reveal).

In the passion narrative, the linked verses 14:28 and 16:7 are not overtly about the parousia, and, in fact, should be read in another way, either in association with the launch of the Gentile mission, or renewal of discipleship, or both.

More substantial evidence comes from the parables of the kingdom and the sayings regarding the kingdom. However, these should not be automatically read as if they speak of a still future second coming of Christ. They must be read primarily within the context of Jesus’ ministry to Israel. In which he provides a lone additional reference to Mk 8:38; or W. Marxsen, who ‘opted definitely for the parousia as the focus of the whole Gospel’, based on his understanding of Mk 14:28, 16:7, cf. Schweizer, p.114; for others, plus a critique, see Geddert, 163ff.

Cf. Schweizer, p.115, ‘Eschatological or even apocalyptic passages are remarkably scarce in our Gospel.’ Apart from ch. 13, he cites only 8:38f.

‘The parables of Mark 4 (esp. 4.21-23) indicate that there will be a final revelation of that which is now concealed. The final harvest/disclosure time matches Mark’s portrayal of the parousia a great deal better than his portrayal of the resurrection,’ Geddert, p.53.

Both aspects are brought out by C. H. Dodd, The Parables of the Kingdom (London: Collins, 1935, 1967), pp.107-108: ‘Mark thought the lamp represented the Kingdom of God, which in the lifetime of Jesus was concealed, but only with the ultimate intention that it should be displayed to the world like a lamp on the lamp stand.’ In the evangelist’s day, i.e. the post-resurrection period, it therefore meant that ‘the time has come when the mystery of the Kingdom of God should be blazoned abroad.’

Geddert, ch. 6.

J. K. Howard, ‘Our Lord’s Teaching concerning His Parousia: A Study in the Gospel of Mark’, EvQ 38 (66), pp.52-58, 68-75, 150-175, uses this distinction to discuss, as his extra-Mark 13 material, Mk 4:(21-23?), 26-32, 8:38 (9:1), 14:62.

As C. H. Dodd has so rightly pointed out, Parables.
that setting, the future did not have a two-stage structure. The eschatology that Jesus and Israel shared was that of the Old Testament which appears to have looked forward to the one great event at the end of history, namely, the arrival of the kingdom of God (cf. Dan 2:44, 7:13-14). Rather than speaking of a ‘second’ coming, Jesus is preoccupied with this great end-time event, the final crisis for Israel and the world. His ministry was conducted with the great urgency of knowing that the last days of Israel had arrived, the kingdom of God was just around the corner (Mk 1:15).

When the parables are understood in this context they teach that the end-time harvest was about to begin (The Sower); the ordinary life of Israel was about to be suddenly interrupted by its arrival (4:29) and when it came it would not be nationalistic but would be world-encompassing and universal (4:30-32, drawing on the prophetic ‘world-tree’ symbol, cf. Daniel 4). With such a crisis facing Israel, Jesus sought to gather together from hard-hearted Israel (4:10-12, cf. Isaiah 6) a righteous remnant (Isaiah’s ‘holy seed’), who would share in this kingdom whenever it might arrive.  

The time of the kingdom’s arrival is a crucial question for Mark. Jesus begins his ministry by announcing the kingdom’s nearness (1:15), and he eventually reveals that it will arrive in the life-time of some of his hearers (9:1, cf. 13:30). As in Daniel 7, so also in this passage the arrival of the kingdom of God (9:1) is associated with the coming of the Son of man (8:38). Rather than automatically reading the kingdom sayings in terms of a second coming, we should simply notice that they are linked by the text to the coming of the Son of man. Although this saying at 8:38 is often taken to be a clear reference to the parousia, its interpretation is linked closely to that of 13:26. The same is true of Jesus’ confession at the trial (14:62), and all three verses can be interpreted in line with the various positions held on 13:26, which is, of course, the subject of this inquiry. Even before final conclusions are reached, however, several observations can be made. What can be clearly said is that all three verses look to the time that Daniel 7:13 will be fulfilled, whenever that may be. It can also be said that all three verses are accompanied by a time reference, which is something of an embarrassment to those who believe these verses refer to the parousia. In France’s words, ‘[these] three allusions to Daniel 7 in Mark all carry with them more or less explicit time-limitations,

18 This is not only the function of the entire ‘parables discourse’, but the burden of the following section (4:35–8:26) which, in the case of the disciples, is sustained throughout Mark’s Gospel.
and focus on what will be visible within the current generation.19 It can also be said, that in the case of 14:62, the combination with the enthronement Psalm (Ps 110:1), has caused an increasing number of scholars to recognise the fulfilment of Daniel 7:13 in this instance, not in the parousia, but in Jesus' enthronement after the resurrection.20 This has also lead some to question whether all three should be interpreted in this way.21

To summarise, Jesus did not specifically talk of a second coming, but, in tune with OT expectation, he spoke of a coming kingdom. The arrival of the kingdom was associated with the coming of the Son of man, and, as for timing, he spoke as if it would certainly come within the lifetime of his hearers.

(ii) The Destruction of the Temple

As support for this position from Mark's wider context, the argument is often advanced that Mark contains an anti-Jerusalem and/or anti-temple polemic, especially in chapters 11-12.22

The cursing of the figtree and the so-called cleansing of the temple23 are both taken as evidence of this anti temple stance. However, a plain reading of the text reveals that these events are not so much directed against a physical structure (i.e. the temple), but against people, and that Jesus uses these events to attack the leadership of Israel.24

T. J. Geddent, argues against the background of Hosea 9:10–10:2, that the cursed figtree is not a symbol of Israel, nor of the temple, but 'its primary

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19 France, Government, p.82, my emphasis.
21 France, Government, p.77. France is one who interprets all three together of the enthronement, although extending this to encompass the destruction of the temple.
22 Although some find it earlier than these chapters. J. R. Donahue, 'Temple, Trial, and Royal Christology', The Passion in Mark (W. H. Kelber, ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), pp.68–69, cites as evidence 3:22, 7:1–13, 8:27–10:52 (i.e. 'the way to Jerusalem as a place of suffering and opposition'). My comments (below) are borne out by all these references, for they show opposition by and to people, not places.
23 For the debate over whether it is a cleansing or a portent of destruction, see C. A. Evans, 'Jesus' Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?', CBQ 51/2 (1989), pp.237–270.
24 This plain reading is commonly recognised by commentators, but is overlooked in their eagerness to draw conclusions regarding the Temple.
referent, [is] the religious leaders'.\textsuperscript{25} The same could be argued against the background of Jeremiah 8 or Micah 7.\textsuperscript{26}

This observation does not depend only on the background, but also arises out of the structure of Mark's account. The figtree incident must be interpreted in relation to Jesus' action in the temple.\textsuperscript{27} When Jesus 'cleanses' the temple, Jesus explains the rationale for his action specifically (11:17) because 'you' have made it a den of robbers'. Mark immediately clarifies this 2nd person plural, by reporting in v. 18 who took offence at Jesus' indictment, namely, the chief priests and scribes.

The events of the next day, involve further reflection upon these two incidents. After being questioned by the religious leaders (11:27–33), Jesus tells them the parable of the Tenants (12:1–12). Once again the background in Isaiah (ch. 5, cf. Isa 3:13–15) and the foreground in Mark (12:12) shows that 'it is unmistakably Israel's leadership, not Israel itself, that stands under condemnation', in fact, 'the parable itself is not temple-centred at all. The parable is about the condemnation of Israel's leadership. The parable itself features the owner coming, not to destroy the temple, but to judge and replace the tenants,'\textsuperscript{28} that is, the shepherds of Israel who have ruined God's vineyard (cf. Isa 3:14–15).

In sum, the material in Mark 11–12 reveals that the polemic is not against the temple, but against the religious leaders of Israel.

This clash with the leaders of Israel touches on a major theme of Mark's story. The arrival of Jesus as true Messiah immediately provokes a leadership crisis within Israel. Mark persistently shows the poverty of the leaders of Israel, whether political (Herod, 3:6, 6:14–29, 8:15) or religious (eg. 3:22–30, 7:1–13, 8:15). At one point, after such a portrayal, Mark uses a common Old Testament metaphor for leadership to comment that the people of Israel

\textsuperscript{25} Geddert, 126. He argues that, when he is compared with the prophet, Mark actually lessens the guilt of the people and heightens the guilt of the leaders.

\textsuperscript{26} In Jer 8:13 cf. 10–12; Mic 7:1–2 cf. 3; the blame for the peoples' ruin is laid at the feet of the leadership. This is no doubt true of Joel 1:7, 12 as well, although the reasons for this judgement are not given by Joel and would need to be gleaned from the earlier prophets.

\textsuperscript{27} These two incidents are interrelated by Mark's oft-used 'sandwich' technique, see J. R. Edwards, 'Markan Sandwiches: The Significance of Interpolations in Markan Narratives', \textit{NovT} 21/3 (1989), pp.193–219.

\textsuperscript{28} Geddert, pp.120–121. I might add, that the background of Malachi 3 that has been on view since Mk 1:2, would lead us to this same conclusion, for when the Lord 'suddenly comes to his temple' he begins to judge people.
were 'like sheep without a shepherd' (6:34, cf. Num 27:17, Ezek 34:5). He then goes on to show Jesus as the good shepherd who truly cares for God's flock (6:34–44, cf. Ezekiel 34; see also Mk 14:27).

His clash with the 'false shepherds' began very early and a plot to kill Jesus quickly surfaced (3:6). The opposition gradually built up in intensity, until in chs. 11–12 it comes to a crisis point as Jesus arrives in Jerusalem amidst cries of acclamation suitable for a king (11:1–11), curses the figtree (11:12–14), arrives in the temple to begin the judgement on its leadership (11:15–19, cf. Mal 3:1ff.), then clashes openly with them as they question his authority (11:27–33). He, in turn, questions theirs (12:1–12), and as they unsuccessfully seek to trap him in his words in order to destroy him (12:13ff., cf. 3:6, 11:18), he openly exposes the destructiveness of their leadership to the crowds and his disciples (12:35–44). Beyond this crisis, as we well know, this clash of leadership eventually climaxes in the crucifixion (Mk 14–15).

Associated with the crucifixion account, we find two rather mysterious references to the temple. At the trial some allege that Jesus spoke of destroying the physical temple (14:58), but Mark distances Jesus from their comments by clearly labelling their testimony as 'false' and by saying that they did not even agree amongst themselves. This is hardly strong evidence that Jesus, or Mark, was interested in the destruction of the physical temple. At his crucifixion, we read an allusion to the trial saying (15:29) quickly followed by the even more enigmatic statement regarding the rending of the veil of the temple (15:38). Whatever else it may mean, it is intimately associated with the death of Jesus, and, the combination of the two statements suggests that any temple destruction or reconstruction that Jesus may be involved in is associated with his death. If it also signifies some kind of break with the Jewish temple system, obviously this can be done simply by virtue of Jesus' death and without the necessity of the temple's physical destruction, for the veil is torn at the moment Jesus breathes his last.

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30 Geddert, pp.114–115: 'temple references are invariably wrapped in an aura of mystery'; 'Every reference to the temple outside Mk 13[:2] is puzzling.'
31 Geddert, pp.130–140, correctly shows that it is the reconstruction end of the saying that is of more interest to Mark.
32 Geddert, pp.140–143, lists 35 interpretations.
33 As does Stephen's speech (Acts 7), the epistle to the Hebrews and the Gospel of John. If there is any temple destruction theology in Mark, it is the spiritual destruct-
To summarise: the wider context of Mark 13 does not reveal an anti-temple theme, but an anti-religious authorities theme. The true Shepherd has arrived, the false shepherds occupying his place must make room. But instead, they kill him.

There is one more reference that needs to be discussed, lying in the immediate context of the apocalyptic discourse. The only clear reference to the physical temple’s ruin is Jesus’ answer to the supposedly awe-struck disciple (13:1–2). This is usually called a ‘prophecy’ or ‘prediction’ of the destruction of the temple, implying that Jesus had AD 70 specifically in mind at this point. However, does this saying need to have such an exalted label?

The saying needs to be understood in relation to the disciple’s statement in v. 1, which draws upon OT Zion theology. According to this OT stream of belief, Jerusalem’s splendour guaranteed the security of God’s people. For example, Psalm 48 tells us: ‘As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord Almighty, in the city of our God: God makes her secure for ever. 


Geddert, p.117, admits this: ‘That the temple’s ruin is predicted by Jesus is made unambiguously clear in 13.2, even if all the other texts about the temple leave that point uncertain.’


Within your temple, O God, we meditate on your unfailing love’ (vv. 8–9). Pilgrims were encouraged to tour the city, and view its magnificent buildings to strengthen their faith in God. Again in the words of Psalm 48:

‘Walk about Zion, go around her, consider well her ramparts, view her citadels, that you may tell of them to the next generation. For this God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end’ (vv. 12–14).

When this disciple says ‘Look, Teacher! What marvellous stones! What magnificent buildings!’ , rather than the words of an awe-struck country bumpkin from Galilee, totally inappropriate to the situation of great conflict and turmoil that they have just left behind, Mark 13:1 appears to be a word of encouragement to Jesus. This faithful disciple, fully aware of the trauma of the preceding scenes, draws upon his OT piety and points to the magnificent buildings of Zion in an attempt to remind Jesus that God is on the side of his people.

Jesus’ reply (13:2), therefore, would have come as a tremendous shock when he says that such security is not found in Israel’s Zion theology. Jerusalem and her temple are not where security lies. It is all part of the impermanent creation that will one day pass away into oblivion. There is no need for this to be deemed a prediction/prophecy, as if Jesus had AD 70 specifically in view — even if subsequent history revealed that to be the date of the temple’s ruin. Rather, it is a passing remark by Jesus that says the disciple has his eyes on the wrong place. Security is to be found no longer in the structures of Israel, he should shift his gaze and begin to look for something else. Jesus’ hasty dismissal of this disciple’s OT piety reveals that he is more interested in the constructive end of this shift, than he is with the physical structure that occupies the disciple’s attention. What should occupy the disciple’s attention will be revealed in Jesus’ apocalyptic discourse.

I am now able to answer my first question. The story which surrounds Jesus’ apocalyptic discourse, shows no explicit interest in either the parousia or the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. So far, it seems that neither commonly adopted position on Mark 13:24–27 has explicit support from the context of Mark’s story.

I can now deal with my second question.

(2) The shared assumption

Both positions share the assumption that the expectation of the coming of the Son of man raised by Mark 13:24–27 finds its fulfilment beyond the pages of Mark’s Gospel. By proposing an extratextual referent for the coming of the Son of man, they assume that no intratextual referent can be found. My
second question asks whether this assumption is justified. To answer the
question, I will suggest that there is an intratextual referent to the coming of
the Son of man and that Mark's passion narrative explicitly encourages us to
see this. This then suggests a third option for interpreting Mark 13:24-27.

Firstly, we should deal with the broad sweep of Mark 13.

On a broad canvas, the discourse raises a three-part expectation:
1. vv. 5–23 speak of a situation of cosmic turmoil and the last days of Israel
in which the disciples will find themselves suffering on Jesus' account. In
this context, the disciples will see the 'awful horror' or 'horrible sacrilege' (v.
14), which will issue in the severest time of distress of all time (v. 19). In this
time of greatest distress, the disciples may well be tempted to move away
from their previous confession of Jesus as the Christ (vv. 21–23). This is the
first expectation: the time of great distress.
2. vv. 24–26 reveal the second expectation: 'in those days, after the distress,
... then'. Following the distress, Daniel 7:13 will be fulfilled, the coming of
the Son of man will occur.
3. v. 27 then. The third expectation is that he will send out his messengers,
and the harvest of the elect from all the world will begin.

The sayings and similes that follow say that all these things will take place
within the current generation (v. 30), although, because the precise timing is
unknown, the disciples are encouraged to watch for 'the hour' (v. 32) of ful-
filment, i.e., the hour that encompasses all three expectations, but centres
upon the coming of the Son of man.37

The two common interpretations of Mark 13 assume that there is no
intratextual fulfilment to these three expectations. But is this the case?

At this point a third view can be developed, following the suggestive com-
ments of R. H. Lightfoot and others.

Despite the prevailing note that the exact time of the Hour (v. 32) is un-
known, the final parable (vv. 34-37) contains some specific time references
which are overlaid upon the chapter's expectations. Verse 35 raises the ques-
tion: Will the coming be at evening or midnight or cock crow or dawn? These
demarcations of the four watches of the Roman night now act as 'focalising
moments' that guide the expectations of the chapter. When one of these times
arrives, it will be greeted with the expectancy of potentially being the hour of
fulfilment. When it passes by without any fulfilment of the chapter's expec-

37 France, Government, pp.78–80, makes something of the hour being singular. However, the fact that the chronology of the three expectations centre upon the com-
ing of the Son of Man makes it easily read as a composite hour.
tations, then the next time note takes on an even more intensified expectancy. It was noticed some years ago by R. H. Lightfoot that these same time references can be found in Mark’s passion narrative.\(^{38}\) Although his observation has not been widely taken up,\(^{39}\) it is suggestive of a third possibility for interpreting Mark 13:24-27. Once it is realized that these time references structure and guide the expectations of ch. 13, then it becomes clear that Mark’s passion narrative may actually provide the explicit fulfilment of the expectations raised by that chapter.

Let us briefly survey the passion narrative with the three broad expectations raised by Mark 13 in view. The first was the time of great distress.

The last supper was held in the evening, the first of our time references (14:17), but the departure of the Son of man (v. 21) and the coming of the kingdom (v. 25) are still future to this occasion, so this hour passes with no fulfilment, rather the expectations are sustained. Then, in a mini-apocalyptic discourse (14:26-31),\(^{40}\) Jesus uses Zechariah 13 to warn the disciples that the future will have severe consequences for them too, so severe that even the great Peter will fall.\(^{41}\) His fall will take place that same day, before cockcrow (v. 30) — flagging another of our time-references.

Although the time note is not explicitly given, the Gethsemane scene

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\(^{40}\) For links between the denial-sequence and Mark 13, cf. M. Wilcox, ‘The Denial Sequence in Mark XIV. 26–31, 66–72’, *NTS* 17/4 (1971), pp.426–436. He says, of Mk 14:26, ‘now the Lord is in fact making his way “to the Mount of Olives”: the hour has dawned for the time of desolation and testing described in Zech. xiii. 7 – xiv. 4’.

(14:32–42) takes place in the midst of the night, midnight. In this scene, which has many links with Mark 13, the projected time of distress begins. Here, in the midst of great distress (v. 33–34), Jesus prays that ‘the hour’ might pass from him (v. 36), clearly referring to his coming death. The disciples are to watch and pray lest they fall in this time of testing, yet three times they are found sleeping (cf. 13:33–37). And then, the hour that was previously unknown and for which they were to watch (13:32) suddenly arrives (14:41 — ‘the hour has come. The Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners’). With the arrival of Judas and the arresting party sent from the leaders of Israel, Jesus knows that his death is inevitable, the shepherd is about to be struck down, the hour of great distress has begun. The disciples seem to realize this and they flee (vv. 43–52, cf. 13:14ff.) and the severity of this hour of distress is underlined by an allusion to Amos 2:16 in v. 52, where the distress of the Day of the Lord would be so severe that even the bravest warrior would flee away naked.

As the distress begins to arrive, the second expectation raised by the apocalyptic discourse re-emerges. At the end of his trial Jesus once again promises the coming of the Son of man (14:62), and underlines the imminence of this event by telling his enemies that they themselves will see the fulfilment of Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13. On the other side of the trial, we realise that the hour of distress which is now unfolding is so severe that even Peter the chief disciple falls, as Jesus warned (14:66–72). And, we are told, it is cock crow. This is our third time reference: although the time of distress has begun, there is still no coming of the Son of man. There is only one time reference to go (dawn), and it now carries the full weight of expectation.

It appears, for the first time, in 15:1, as the Sanhedrin reaches their deci-

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42 Geddert, p.104 n. 51, guesses the reason for not mentioning midnight: ‘Mark does not want to over-stress the eschatological significance of the Gethsemane scene itself. After all, it is the whole passion, not only the midnight arrest in the garden, which constitutes ‘the hour that has arrived and that fulfils, on one level at least, eschatological expectations,’ [my emphasis].

43 ‘The links between the Doorkeeper parable (13.33–37) and the Gethsemane account (14.32–42) are so remarkable that the burden of proof is surely on anyone who wants to consider them coincidental,’ Geddert, p.91. See also W. H. Kelber, ‘The Hour of the Son of Man and the Temptation of the Disciples (Mark 14.32–42),’ The Passion in Mark, pp.41–60.

44 Austin Farrer, Mark, p.141, also sees in this verse a fulfilment of Mk 13:16

45 The fact that it appears twice (15:1, 16:1) splits the fulfilment of expectations, to enable first the portrayal of the greatest distress (the cross), and, in due time, the
sion. In the crucifixion scene time is slowed down, ‘the hour’ that Jesus prayed to avoid, now ticks by — ‘the third hour’ (v. 25), ‘the sixth hour’ (v. 33), then ‘the ninth’ (v.34). This slow motion account enables us to feel the full weight of this horrific scene. We watch at a distance as the Gentiles declare our hero innocent, then exchange him for a murderer, scourge him, mock him, strip him and crucify him. But the real horror of the scene comes home in the role played by the leaders of Israel. It is they who hand him over to the Gentiles, they ask for his death, they barter for the murderer, and when Jesus is on the cross they relish the moment: apparently fully cognisant of his mission, they mock that mission; and showing the depths of their unbelief to the last, just before he dies they demand one more sign from him (15:31-32): if he can defeat the cross, then they will believe.

Here is the ‘awful horror’, the great horrifying sacrilege at the heart of Israel, where it ought not be (13:14): Israel’s long-awaited Messiah arrives, and Israel’s leaders crucify him, and relish the moment.47

Where is the greatest distress of all time that follows hard on its heels? Is it not in the arrival of the hour that had filled Jesus with so much anxiety, as we hear the cry of dereliction that screams out of the apocalyptic darkness: ‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?’ (15:34)?

But if this is the great distress, where are the other two expectations? Where is the coming of the Son of man and the gathering of the elect?

In Mark 16:2 our last time note appears yet again. In fact, just to make sure we get the point, two time references (‘very early, just after sunrise’) tell us that it is dawn. Then the young man at the tomb reports that Jesus, the crucified one, has risen (v. 6). Jesus had promised that the Son of man would suffer and then rise (8:31, 9:9-13, 9:31, 10:33-34). He had also promised a time of great distress followed by the coming of the Son of man (ch. 13). It seems that the passion narrative brings these two sets of expectations into line

coming of the Son of Man (the resurrection).

46 Kelber, ‘The Hour’, p.44, ‘Mk resumes the hour motif and extends it, in typical redactional fashion, into a threefold pattern to indicate the heightening of Jesus’ being “delivered up” on the cross. “The hour” is therefore a symbol for Jesus’ passion ... which commences with the arrest immediately following the Gethsemane story and culminates in the cross.’ With Mark 13 in the background ‘it qualifies this suffering in an eschatological sense.’

47 J. Schreiber, *Theologie des Vertrauens* (Hamburg, 1967), pp.142-44, also made this identification between the abomination of desolation and the piety of the high priests and scribes, seeking the life of Jesus in the temple.
Mark 13: An Apocalyptic Precursor to the Passion Narrative

with each other, and that we are meant to see that in the resurrection/exaltation of Jesus the Son of man has come. And with his coming, the kingdom of God has come in power (9:1, 13:29–30, cf. Acts 2:33–36, Rom 1:4).

If so, we should see the fulfilment of Mark 13’s final expectation: the sending of his messengers to gather the elect from the four corners of the earth. And it is therefore no surprise that Mark ends his Gospel by recording the young man’s command for the women to tell the disciples to meet the glorified Son of man in Galilee (16:7–8). This command holds the promise of the launch of the Gentile mission.48 The harvest of the vindicated Son of man is about to begin!

Conclusion to Part A

Jesus’ apocalyptic discourse in Mark should be read as an integral part of Mark’s story. When the wider concerns of this story are examined there appears to be no explicit interest in a second coming, but plenty of interest in the Kingdom of God as expected by the OT, which is linked with the coming of the Son of man. There also appears to be no explicit interest in attacking the Jerusalem temple, although the issue of the leadership clash between Jesus and Israel’s corrupt shepherds is a big concern. The one text (13:2) that mentions the ruin of the physical temple, is a passing remark that dismisses that structure from having any theological significance. If it appears anywhere, the break with Judaism is sufficiently achieved at the cross in its own right. In short, the two common interpretations find no support in the wider context of Mark’s story.

Following the suggestive comments of Lightfoot and others, I have also attempted to show that the three broad expectations erected by Mark 13 all find their counterpart within Mark’s passion narrative. It appears that these expectations (the distress, the coming of the Son of man, and the sending of the angels to gather the elect) are fulfilled in the events of Jesus death, his

resurrection and the launch of his mission. In other words, Jesus’ discourse in Mark 13 is an apocalyptic precursor to his coming passion and resurrection/exaltation.

Some who read Mark 13:24-27 of the parousia, having noticed these connections, state that the passion narrative seems to be a first fulfilment of the expectations of Mark 13. My question is that, if the passion narrative is so explicitly set against the earlier expectations of the apocalyptic discourse, why shouldn’t it be read as the fulfilment?

As a necessary part of the Fall of Jerusalem interpretation, Mark 13:24-27, others read in the first instance of Jesus’ vindication in his resurrection/exaltation. My question can be repeated: If Mark’s passion narrative appears to present the resurrection/vindication of Jesus as the coming of the Son of man, why shouldn’t it be read as the fulfilment?

To conclude, 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 again from the dead. That is when he received the Kingdom from the Ancient of Days, and began to share it with his people.

Of course, I have been discussing the framework within which Mark 13 should be interpreted. Since I have dealt with the apocalyptic discourse itself only on the broad canvas, a further question could now be asked: If the apocalyptic discourse is an apocalyptic precursor to the passion of Jesus, can all of its details be read in this light?

Part B: Mark 13 as an Apocalyptic Precursor to the Passion

B1. The Questions

After Jesus’ unexpected dismissal of Zion theology (vv. 1-2), four of his inner circle of disciples ask him two more questions (vv. 3-4). If their eternal city was simply another part of a creation bound for destruction, then Jesus must be talking about the end of everything. They want to know ‘When?’, when was this end that Jesus spoke about? There is nothing wrong with this question. However, they immediately translate it into another one. Presumably so that the end could be spotted clearly, they proceed to ask for a sign.

In the flow of Mark’s story, this second question is yet another exam-

ple of the disciples' slowness to comprehend. Jesus had already refused to
give a sign (8:11-12), saying that this generation would not receive one. Ask-
ing for a sign places the disciples on the side of his opponents, against whom
he had already warned them (8:14-15).

B2. The Answer

i. Watch yourselves (vv. 5-23)

The first half of Jesus’ reply to them is a warning against such a sign-
seeking attitude (vv. 5-23). He considers this attitude dangerous because it
will place the disciples at risk of being led astray from following Jesus. Note
that his warning focuses upon them: ‘watch out no-one deceives you’ (v. 5),
‘you watch yourselves’ (v. 9),50 ‘look out’ (v. 23).

Verses 5-6 urge the disciples to take heed lest they be led astray by certain
people who come in his name, saying εγώ ειμι (‘It is I’). Another refer-
ence to these people concludes the first half of the discourse by way of inclusio
(vv. 21-23), showing that this is the real danger facing the disciples against
which Jesus is warning them. In an attempt to identify these people, there has
been much sifting of extrabiblical historical material, but there is no need to
look so widely. Just as the true Shepherd comes to his sheep to find many
false shepherds plundering the flock (Ezekiel 34), so too Jesus has come as
Israel’s Messiah, but finds many false shepherds in his place. The leadership
of Israel, both political and religious, is thoroughly corrupt. They form a
significance threat for the disciples, because they will point away from Jesus
as the Christ. The disciples have already confessed Jesus to be the Christ (Mk
8:29), and so it matters very little who the proposed alternatives (13:21) may
be. The point is that this will constitute a threat to the confession of Jesus as
the Christ which the disciples have already made. Deuteronomy 13 even
warns that these false Christs, (i.e. those falsely occupying the leadership of
Israel) and false prophets may even go so far as to perform miracles in their
endeavours to lead the disciples astray. This makes it especially dangerous to
disciples who are seeking signs, as we shall see below. Jesus warns the disci-
pies about a false leadership in Israel which will attempt to compromise their
identification of Jesus as Christ.

Jesus is eager to warn the disciples, because they are living in dangerous
times. He begins by telling them what they should not worry about (vv. 7-8).

50 The significance of the reflexive pronoun is almost universally overlooked by
commentators and translators.
Some may point to these as signs, but this too is misguided. Such things are no signal of the end. They are always here and always have been here. They are merely part of a fallen world. They are not the birth, they are merely the birth pangs. Do not be lead astray by these things, 'the end is not yet' (v. 7).

Rather than looking out for signs, rather than worrying about world events, the disciples should be looking out for themselves (v. 9). For they are the ones in danger. They do not have the privilege of being detached observers. As disciples of Jesus they will be actively engaged in his mission and that will bring them into trouble (vv. 9-11). Here it is important to notice that verse 10 is a statement of priority not chronology. The world must first of all hear about Jesus Christ. Because the gospel mission is of first priority the disciples will keep going through the difficult times. Their involvement in Christ's mission will bring them into great trouble — even striking at their very families (vv. 12-13a). Micah 7 had predicted a division in Israel in the last days and Jesus now reveals that the division will be over him. As the core group of people drafted into his service, the disciples will suffer for him, which is why they must not watch out for signs, they must watch out for themselves. For under such pressure they will be tempted to save their own lives and jettison the work of the gospel (cf. 8:34-37). They must watch out for themselves, for their task must continue right through until the end (v. 13b).

Jesus then moves on to warn his disciples about a terrible time that they will have to go through in their immediate future (vv. 14-20). The phrase 'abomination of desolation', drawn from Daniel, signifies a destructive sacrilege — something that flies in the face of God and all that is holy and true and right. When Jesus calls upon his disciples as readers of Daniel to understand, it is a most intriguing statement for there is not enough information here to enable understanding. But there is one hint of a clue, for when Daniel wrote he was told that he could not understand his vision since it concerned the time of the end. When Jesus calls upon his disciples to understand, it signifies that the time of the end was at hand, since understanding was at least a possibility. But the four disciples would have to wait for the unfolding of events yet to come before the nature of this desolating sacrilege would become clear.

The arrival of this destructive sacrilege is associated with a terrible time of suffering. As well as the generalised suffering that is part and parcel of the

fallen world (vv. 7-8) and the generalised suffering that goes along with the preaching of the gospel (vv. 9-11), Jesus tells his four disciples that they will have to endure a time of great suffering (vv. 19-20). This appears to be more than just prophetic hyperbole. Daniel 12:1 spoke of an unprecedented time of distress that would usher in the end-time resurrection. Jesus quotes this verse and adds to it: not only is the suffering unprecedented, but it is ‘never to be equalled again’ (v. 19). This suffering will be the greatest time of distress that this world would ever endure. Because of the unique terror of this time (v. 17), they ought to pray that it will come at a favourable time (v. 18). They should flee when they can, unencumbered by household goods (vv. 15-16).

During this time, the pressure will really be on. Under such a time of intense suffering, the only thing that will prevent the disciples failing completely will be the divine decision to shorten the time (v. 20). Under such pressure it would be easy to be led astray into something more comfortable, so Jesus ends with the warning with which he began (vv. 21-23).

It now becomes clear why the disciples’ sign-seeking attitude will be a danger to them. On the road to Caesarea Philippi they have already cast their vote: the Christ is Jesus (Mk 8:27). There will be people who do not accept this confession. As they point away from Jesus as the Christ, the temptation will come to the disciples to deny their previous confession, to forget that Jesus is the Christ. They may even do miracles (as Deuteronomy 13 had warned) to endorse their claims. If the disciples are fascinated by signs, then they would be in severe danger, danger to forsake their loyalty to Jesus as the Christ. Do not look for signs, says Jesus, look out for yourselves, for a great pressure is coming. You will see this awful horror and hard on its heels will come the greatest distress this world has ever known (v. 19), and in that pressure you will be tempted to desert me. Watch out!

The disciples had asked a two-part question: When? What sign? Jesus has dealt with their signs question — by warning them against such an attitude: it is dangerous. Now he turns to the question of ‘when?’ (vv. 24-37).

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52 It is important to read this in the context of Jesus’ discussion to his disciples prior to his death and resurrection. He is evidently drawing upon the warning of Deuteronomy 13 which spoke of the possibility of signs and wonders performed by false prophets. It is right for Jesus to raise this as a possibility here as well. Whether or not the possibility actually becomes a reality, remains to be seen in the course of events to follow. On my reading of Mark, in which the religious leadership of Israel represent the false Messiahs, the miracles were not part of their repertoire, as far as we know.
ii. What you will see

Notice that from now on he tells them of a definite sequence of events: ‘in those days, after that distress ...’ (v. 24); ‘and then they will see the son of Man coming ...’ (v. 26); ‘and then he will send out his angels to gather in the elect’ (v. 27). Rather than looking for signs, this is what they will see: the glorious, victorious coming of the Son of man. Now of course, Jesus is referring to himself here, as Mark’s Gospel has made plain by this point.

Jesus quotes Daniel 7:13 in which one like a Son of man comes to the throne of God in the midst of a heavenly judgement scene and is awarded all power and authority and dominion and an everlasting Kingdom. Having received the Kingdom from God, the second half of the chapter reveals that he then shares it with the people of God. This is what they will see fulfilled.

The disciples are not to watch for signs: it is dangerous, for it will open them up to being lead astray during the time of great distress. Instead, Jesus tells them of a sequence of events which they will see. A destructive sacrilege will issue in the time of greatest distress; after that the coming of the Son of man, who will then send out his messengers to gather the elect from all over the earth. That is what they must now look for.

But can the timing be made more specific? When is this coming going to be? The generation of the first hearers will not pass away before the Son of man comes in power to receive his kingdom (v. 30). This is similar to the statement in Mark 9:1 that the Kingdom will arrive in power before the death of some of his hearers. That narrows it down to the lifetime of these disciples. However, it cannot be narrowed down any further. As Jesus talks to his four disciples, not even the Son knows when his coming will be (v. 32). It may become clearer later, as the course of events unfold (cf. Mk 14:25, 41), but at this moment, he is as ignorant as everyone else.

However, since the precise timing is unknown, but yet it is within a generation, the disciples are told to be ready for it any minute (vv. 33–37). It could be at any time of the day, so all the disciples, not just the four who asked the question, need to keep constant watch. For one day soon, (v. 35) either at evening, or midnight, or cockcrow, or at dawn, some day, sometime, they will see the Son of man coming and then issuing the command to gather the elect from the four corners of the earth.

That is their ‘when?’ question answered: Jesus changes their focus from earthly things such as a temple made with human hands that will some day be destroyed; and from signs which are a dangerous distraction. He then focuses them on the thing that really matters: the coming of the Son of man and
his eternal Kingdom, followed by the gathering of the elect into that kingdom of God, as the glorified Son of man shares his kingdom with his people. That is what is important. That is what they should be looking for and waiting for and watching for.

And as we have already seen, the remaining passion narrative reveals that the expectations generated by the eschatological discourse find their fulfilment in the passion and exaltation of Jesus.

Part C: Two ‘Problems’

To conclude this discussion, two problems need to be raised and briefly answered. After what I have said above, some readers will be asking whether it is right to expect a second coming. The answer to that problem is ‘yes’. Even though Jesus did not talk of his second coming explicitly in the Gospel of Mark, but spoke within the framework of OT expectation of the Kingdom of God, a second coming is implicit in the Gospel material. Daniel 7 promised two things: 1. The heavenly reception of the kingdom by the Son of man (vv. 1-14); 2. The sharing of that Kingdom with the saints. In terms of the Gospel of Mark, the first expectation has been fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has arrived with power when Jesus rose from the dead and was exalted to heaven. However, the second expectation is yet to be fulfilled in the experience of God’s people. Although the people of God have entered the Kingdom, through becoming as a little child and following Jesus wherever that may lead (Mk 10:15, 29–31), the Kingdom is still a promise to us. In other words, the people of God live ‘by faith’. The implication is that there must be a second coming when all ungodly power is destroyed, God’s everlasting kingdom arrives, and Jesus shares it with his people.53

The second problem concerns the other Synoptic parallels to Mark 13. How do they fit in with the interpretation of Mark 13 proposed here? The first thing to say is that even on the other two views this question is not without its problems. On the one hand, Matthew 24 appears to be more explicitly about the parousia, but on the other, Luke 17 and 21 appear to be very clearly

53 Anything short of this is not really the Kingdom of God as promised by the Bible. See further, R. Hiers, The Kingdom of God in the Synoptic Tradition (Gainesville: University of South Florida, 1970); Jesus and the Future. Unresolved Questions for Eschatology (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1986); and the classic by J. Weiss, Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892, 31900, in English as Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom of God (Lives of Jesus; R. Hiers & D. L. Holland, eds./transls.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).
about the destruction of Jerusalem. Given this data, interpreters can interpret Mark 13 either way, depending upon which parallel they feel is most significant. However, instead of interpreting one by the other, it is important to allow each Gospel to speak for itself. This means that the first question to be answered is whether the explanation offered here is the best explanation of Mark. If it is, its relationship with the other two can be explained variously. If Matthew speaks of the parousia, and Luke speaks of the destruction of the temple, then one alternative may be that one of the evangelists developed Jesus' teaching in one direction and one in another, both drawing out what they felt to be implicit. However, another alternative is that the interpretation proposed here should lead us to re-examine the parallel passages afresh, for it is just possible that they too speak more of Jesus' death and resurrection than they do of his parousia or the events of AD 70 so important to Jewish history, but of questionable significance to the New Testament.54

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54 I hope to develop these ideas further in future studies.