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# OUR LORD'S TEACHING CONCERNING HIS PAROUSIA: A STUDY IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK

by J. K. HOWARD

**D**R. HOWARD follows up the previous instalments of this study, which considered introductory questions and the dominical parables and other sayings in Mark, with an examination of Mark 13 and a concluding summary.

### III. THE OLIVET DISCOURSE

**I**T is clearly outside the scope of our present study to enter into a discussion of the great number of critical problems associated with the Olivet Discourse. That the body of teaching with which we are dealing is authentic is not for one moment in question, a matter which has been most ably defended recently by G. R. Beasley-Murray.<sup>1</sup> As far as the structure of the discourse is concerned the present writer tends to the view put forward by E. Haupt as long ago as 1895,<sup>2</sup> namely, that the Olivet Discourse as we have it at present is of composite origin, consisting of a collection of various sayings relating to the future, spoken originally at different times, and now incorporated by Mark into the framework of a single discourse, the answers of the Lord to His disciple's questions. There is nothing unusual in such an arrangement; the large section, Mark 4: 1-34, must similarly be viewed as a composite discourse formed from various units of tradition, and Matthew uses the same method as he brings together the large number of different sayings which go to make up the "Sermon on the Mount." The composite origin of Mark 13 is also seen from the fact that some of the sayings which Mark has incorporated into it are to be found in quite different contexts in both Matthew and Luke. Quite apart from purely critical matters, however, we find that the exegetical problems weigh no less heavily, and indeed, it is not going too far to suggest that some of the so-called critical problems have arisen simply through the great difficulties experienced in interpretation, especially as so many critical matters are based on subjective judgments and pre-

<sup>1</sup> G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Future* (1954).

<sup>2</sup> E. Haupt, *Die eschatologischen Aussagen Jesu* (1895).

suppositions. One feels that an emphatic "yes" must be given to the pertinent question of D. E. Nineham: "Have scholars who deny *all* authenticity to the passage been influenced at all by the desire to dissociate Jesus from ideas and language strange to modern minds?"<sup>3</sup> That the language of Mark 13 is difficult goes without saying, and in this respect it has to be borne in mind that here we are dealing with genuine apocalypse, with language which is highly figurative and pictorial, with language which is an attempt, as Barclay has put it, "to paint the unpaintable, and speak the unspeakable."<sup>4</sup> In the vivid colours of Old Testament and contemporary Jewish apocalyptic imagery our Lord was bringing to the fore the terror of the Day of the Lord and the troubles which would precede it, the Birthpangs of Messiah. Yet, as Beasley-Murray has pointed out, there are certain marked differences between this discourse and normal apocalyptic.<sup>5</sup> Of these perhaps the most noticeable and important is the marked element of exhortation in Mark 13, as Jesus speaks with His disciples, so that, unlike normal apocalyptic, this discourse presents us with matters which are of intense practical importance.

The disciples of the Lord, in view of the remarks made concerning the approaching destruction of the Temple (13: 1, 2), were eager to have prior knowledge of the time of this event, an event which in their minds must be connected with the final consummation. Accordingly we are told that they asked two questions, the one relating to the destruction of the Temple specifically, and the other a more general question about the end of time. The disciples clearly believed the two sets of events to be essentially contemporaneous, a not unnatural mistake, for the Day of the Lord was seen looming behind every calamity or crisis in which the nation became involved. Further, the disciples wished for "an infallible means of recognizing the approach of the End; they want in fact to be relieved of having to 'watch',"<sup>6</sup> an attitude of mind by no means uncommon. There are those today who, by an insistence upon literalism in the interpretation of the prophetic and apocalyptic writings, have sought to turn them into little better than an "Old Moore's Almanac." In point of fact the destruction of the Temple and the time of the End were to be separated by a long interval of time, and

<sup>3</sup> D. E. Nineham, *St. Mark*, in the *Pelican Gospel Commentaries* (1963), p. 356 n.

<sup>4</sup> W. Barclay, *St. Mark*, in the *Daily Study Bible* (1959), p. 320.

<sup>5</sup> G. R. Beasley-Murray, *op. cit.*, pp. 212 f.

<sup>6</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *St. Mark*, in the *Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary* (1963 edn.), p. 394.

although linked, since the fall of Jerusalem was a shadow of the events which would mark the end of the age and herald the Parousia, they are treated as distinct events in the material which makes up this discourse. This is perhaps not quite so clear in the Markan account, due to the terse and compressed style of writing, but is made plain in both Matthew and Luke. Thus, instead of giving His disciples a single infallible sign, Jesus presents them with a wealth of material, a whole series of pointers to the End, which would aid and strengthen their resolve to be alert and watchful throughout the long night of the "interim." Such signs are an encouragement to faith, and furthermore, they make relevant to each generation matter which would otherwise appear to have little practical value. As Cranfield has put it, "as our faith recognizes the signs as they occur, we are again and again put in remembrance of our Hope, and our gaze, that is so easily distracted from the Lord who is coming to us, is again and again directed back to him."<sup>7</sup> But this gives us no warrant for turning these signs into a series of blueprints for the future; it cannot be over-emphasized that prophecy is not "pre-written history" as some would have us believe.<sup>8</sup>

In view of the double question which the disciples asked, it is to be expected that there are two major divisions in the discourse, but owing to the composite nature and origin of these sayings the material relating to the last days is not grouped as a whole. In our consideration of the discourse we shall take firstly the section concerning the actual fall of Jerusalem (vv. 14-20), and then the material relating to the approaching End, which may be divided as follows: warnings of persecution during the "interim" (vv. 9-13), the dangers of the last days (vv. 3-6, 21, 22), and finally the sayings concerning the Parousia itself (vv. 7, 8, 24-27). The discourse is closed by the short parable of the Watchman (vv. 28-37), inculcating the necessity of watchfulness upon the Church. When the discourse is studied in the light of these groupings, remembering that we are not dealing with a continuous address, many of the problems of interpretation become much less.

The predictions concerning the fall of Jerusalem need not detain us, since we are primarily concerned with the predictions of the Parousia, yet there is a sense in which it is not altogether easy to make a distinction between the signs which relate to the events of

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 390.

<sup>8</sup> The phrase is A. C. Gaebelein's (*The Prophet Daniel*, n.d., p.1); it also represents the view of J. N. Darby (*Collected Writings*, n.d., II, p. 271, etc.) and those who have followed him.

the Jewish War of A.D. 66-70, and those specifically relating to the Parousia, since in the whole section there is but one perspective, the one in which the Parousia stands out, and in this setting the destruction of the Holy City becomes a genuine eschatological event. We must therefore, in Cranfield's words, "allow for a double reference, a mingling of historical and eschatological."<sup>9</sup> This may be seen from the fact that the "abomination which makes desolate," or perhaps better, "the profanation which appals," is here related to the immediate context of the desecration and destruction of the Temple; it is the first sign that destruction is imminent, and probably refers to the ensigns of the Roman legions to which an image of the emperor was attached.<sup>10</sup> Thus, as far as this discourse is concerned, it is a prediction which has been fulfilled. Nonetheless, this allusion forms the basis for Paul's description of the Antichrist at 2 Thessalonians 2: 3 ff., and we should note the very close resemblance between the two descriptions. Thus we see that a picture which originally related to the events of the Maccabean times, can be referred to the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, and can equally be seen as the representation of the final unveiling of evil immediately preceding the Parousia. In this discourse, however, and this needs to be stressed, the reference is to an historical event, the desecration and destruction of the Temple by the Roman armies, but we may also see that the historical situation of A.D. 70 contains elements of the ultimate *eschaton*, and the fact that Jesus uses a masculine participle here lays the ground for the wider application of Paul. Thus, in the same way that the Old Testament prophets had seen in the various judgments which had come upon Israel through her enemies a portrayal of the final day of judgment, the great Day of the Lord (Amos 5: 18-20), so also the fall of Jerusalem was a shadow of the catastrophic events which would mark the end of the age.

Apart from these specific allusions to a definite historical event, the remainder of the discourse is concerned with those happenings which, over a considerable period of time, lead up to the "End" and introduce the Parousia. The information is couched in a series of exhortations and warnings, which, as we have already noted, may be grouped under three headings, the "interim" persecutions, the dangers of the last days, and the Parousia itself.

The troubles of the "interim" (vv. 9-13) together with the dangers of the last days, may be seen as both positive and negative

<sup>9</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *op. cit.*, p. 402.

<sup>10</sup> See G. R. Beasley-Murray, *A Commentary on Mark Thirteen* (1957), pp. 59 f.

happenings, and the two sets of sayings may be considered together, since the last days form part of the "interim". Positively, life will be hard for the Christian community throughout the period of waiting, a fact which has been constantly verified from the days of the Roman Empire to the horrors of Nazi Germany in our own day. There were many such references in Jewish apocalyptic literature, but here we should note that there is no reference to a specific and single isolated period of tribulation; rather our Lord is indicating the long, hard and difficult way which stretched on before the infant Messianic Community. It is within such a context of persecution and trouble that the Church is to proclaim the gospel (v. 10), a gospel which is to reach to all nations before the "End" can come. Turning to the negative aspect, the most prominent of the negative signs associated with the "interim" would be the appearance of false Christs. At the time of our Lord such were common, as we have previously indicated; and it was not long before the infant Church too was being plagued by such personages, and those who, coming in the name of Christ, led astray those insufficiently grounded in the Faith. Recent years have seen a veritable rash of such. The plausibility of these people would be such that they could lead astray even "the elect," and this deceit in its various forms is also given by Paul as one of the characteristics of the Great Lie of the last day (2 Thess. 2: 9 ff.); here Paul has combined the picture of the "Appalling Horror," to use Moffatt's translation, with that of the various false Christs, to produce the picture of one final Antichrist, the "Lawless One." Again we see Paul's dependence upon the eschatological teaching of Christ.

Finally Jesus speaks about the events which would specifically usher in His Parousia, the Messianic Woes of the apocalyptic writings, the birthpangs of the New Age. These events, together with the actual Parousia, are detailed in verses 7, 8 and 24-27. In understanding the sayings it is important that we do not attempt to give them a meaning and significance which is out of keeping with their highly figurative nature. The sufferings which are detailed here are to be common to all men, they are not in the nature of a specific tribulation of the Church or Israel, of which, as we have noted earlier, there is no evidence in the sense of the "Great Tribulation." As the End approaches so the structure of society begins to crumble, the ordered sequence of natural events, to be seen here possibly as a reflection or figure of human government, is disrupted, and as a result there is anarchy and chaos. This idea is again developed in the Pauline writings, and the apostle speaks of a mysterious something which at the present restrains the forces of evil, preventing

the break up of society (2 Thess. 2: 6, 7). It is highly possible that this "restrainer" is in fact ordered government—for Paul, the Roman Empire—and it is in fact just the removal of this which Jesus shows will herald the End. Thus the final eschatological "then" is introduced. "then comes the end," the goal of history is reached, the Son of Man comes in His glory, and His elect are gathered out of the nations. The imagery of the clouds, with their thought of majesty, is also taken up by Paul, as we have had cause to mention earlier, and in view of Paul's descriptions of the majesty of the Parousia the present writer finds it difficult to appreciate the point of view of those who relegate the Parousia to a sort of hole-in-the-corner affair.

In spite of the signs which will herald the Parousia, His appearing is described, in the final short parable, in terms of suddenness and unexpectedness. This parable, as Jeremias has shown,<sup>11</sup> is essentially a variant of the story of the waiting servants (Luke 12: 35-38), and points the same lesson, namely that like the unannounced return of the Master of the House, the coming of Jesus will take many unawares, and therefore comes the warning to the waiting Church: "watch ye therefore for ye know not . . ." Here is the great paradox of the New Testament writings, and one which constantly recurs. Paul can speak of "times and seasons" and almost in the same breath of the "thief at night" (1 Thess. 5: 1, 2), a phrase which in its context is most probably a reflection of the parable at the close of Matthew's account of the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24: 43, 44). The Parousia is thus to be seen, both at one and the same time, as an event to be preceded by well-defined and clear signs, and an event which can be considered an imminent and sudden possibility. This combination of opposites has been the rock upon which many erstwhile prophetic interpreters have foundered, failing to take into account that apocalypse is never logical and consistent, nor does it allow of that discipline so beloved of western minds, systematization. The New Testament, both in the words of the Lord and in those of His apostles, simply presents us with a double stress, and our minds must accept that an event may be imminent while not being immediate. The words of Zahn are also apposite in this context:

it is one of the simplest elements of the Christian preaching that for those absorbed in worldly life the coming of the Day of the Lord will be unexpected and sudden; while, on the other hand, the Christian who lives in constant expectation of the Parousia, the time of which it was impossible to determine by natural reckoning, will always be ready, living always the kind of life that is in keeping with this future Day

<sup>11</sup> J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (E.T., 1954), pp. 43 f.

of the Lord.<sup>12</sup>

There is thus no true incompatibility between the two concepts, between the emphasis upon suddenness and the instantaneous character of the Parousia, and upon the preliminary signs and conditions. The Day is unknown, even as it was to the Son of Man Himself, in His self-imposed limitations, but to him who is alert there will be unmistakable pointers to its approach so that he will not be taken unawares.

We may now briefly summarize the teaching which Jesus has given concerning His Parousia. It was to be an event which would bring about the full and final manifestation of the Kingdom of God, so that "veiledness" would give place to "revealedness"; it would be an event in glory and majesty, designed also to gather His elect together, bringing to them the ultimate deliverance of which they have already received the pledge, an aspect of the Parousia which is developed in detail by Paul. Finally Jesus shows that trends in the course of world history will indicate the approach of the End and will lead up to the appearance of the Messianic Woes which will herald and usher in the End. Nonetheless, our Lord is emphatic that the actual time of the Parousia is unknown (Mark 13: 32). It is also clear that the Parousia marks the end of the great redemptive plan of God, and brings in the eternal state, for there is no evidence in either the words of Jesus or the writings of Paul for a "millennial reign," a limited period in which the Kingdom of God is manifested; such indeed would negate the purpose and value of the Parousia. Says Paul, following immediately upon the Parousia, "then comes the End" (1 Cor. 15: 24). We should note, in passing, that the reference to "this generation," in the context of the discourse, must be seen as referring to the signs of the End, which would be graphically displayed in the events leading up to and including the fall of Jerusalem. This would seem to be borne out also by the fact that there is no subject to the phrase *ὅτι ἔγγυς ἐστίν* (v. 29), which we must apparently translate as "it (i.e., the Fall of Jerusalem) is near" rather than "he (i.e., Jesus) is near."

It was noted earlier that although our Lord borrows extensively from the imagery of the apocalyptic writers there are marked differences in the content of His teaching. Christian eschatology, as initially revealed by the Christ Himself, and developed on this foundation by His apostles, is centred in Jesus Christ, not in the Church, not in the revived Israel of the dispensationalist schemes,

<sup>12</sup> T. Zahn, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (E.T., 1909), I, p. 222.

but solely in the Lord, who in His first appearing initiated the future age, and whose last appearing will consummate it. It has also been pointed out that because of this Christocentric character the eschatology of the New Testament "acquires also far greater unity and simplicity than can be predicated of the Jewish schemes. Everything is practically reduced to the great ideas of the resurrection and the judgment as consequent on the Parousia of Christ."<sup>13</sup> The Parousia is the summing up of all the hopes and aspirations of the Church of Christ, it is essential from the very nature of the historical philosophy of Christianity, for the work of Christ remains incomplete until the final consummation. Further, the Christian's "blessed hope" is founded upon the certainty of the words of Jesus Himself; our awaiting is thus not an illusion; it is founded on the 'perfect', on the 'accomplished' and this is a hope which cannot be mistaken."<sup>14</sup> He who shall come will come and will not tarry.

*Kasama, Zambia.*

<sup>13</sup> G. Vos, "The Eschatology of the New Testament" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* (1947 edn.), p. 980.

<sup>14</sup> K. Barth, *The Faith of the Church* (E.T., 1960), p. 99.