

Exegetical Study of Mark 13:1-13

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Introduction

Mark 13:1-13 is a part of a longer section of prophetic discourse. The parallel accounts are found in Matthew 24:3-14 and Luke 21:7-19. The vision of events being presented by Jesus in this text needs to be understood from the prophetic vantage point. Biblical prophecy as Ylvisaker rightly points out, “is not given to gratify our desire for information, still less our curiosity.” They are teachings that reach across time and have practical import for the present. In giving us a view of what is to come, our Lord provides both comfort and warning. In this particular prophetic discourse Jesus is directing our attention to four future frames: the end of all earthly glory, the Kingdom fulfilled, the judgment on unbelief and the deliverance of the faithful.

To understand the time aspect of prophecy, the interpreter needs remember the non-dimensional nature of prophetic utterance. Great chronological distance is compressed into a flat image in much the same way as a photograph captures distance on a flat piece of paper. The omission of events in this section of Christ’s prophetic discourse does not, therefore, demonstrate, as some would insist, that Jesus had no knowledge of the rest of the picture. It is this prophetic nature of the discourse which allows us to capture a glimpse of both the destruction of the temple—which occurred in 70 AD—and the conclusion of the world—which is yet to come—in one picture.

The Setting

It was quite a day. From early in the morning Jesus had wrestled the leaders of the church for their souls. He had used the parable of the King’s son and the wedding feast. He had faced down their entrapment on the questions of tribute and whose wife would a widow of seven brothers be in the resurrection. In the strongest language to emanate from the mouth of our Savior, He had dressed down the Scribes and Pharisees with eight pronouncements of woe. It was a day of teaching and exhorting, of dispute and tears. Forced by His encroaching deadline He had reflected on the history of His people and lamented their refusals. In striking contrast to the sparkling temple and flowing robes surrounding him, His only pleasure that day was found in the widow’s mite. This was Tuesday of Holy Week. He was about to leave the temple for the last time.

The events of the past three days were a part of a crescendo to crisis that would culminate in a resurrection triumph over the enemy death. As we begin to place this portion of Mark’s record into its setting, we find Jesus leaving the temple on His way to the Mount of Olives.

The Outline

- I. The Temple’s Destruction Predicted vv. 1-2
- II. Signs Will Precede the Destruction of the Temple and the World vv. 3-13
 - A. Deceptions will rule vv. 3-5
 - B. False claimants to the Messiahship will appear v. 6
 - C. The whole world will be unsettled by wars and disasters vv. 7-8
 - D. Judicial action against believers will provide an opportunity for witness v. 9
 - E. The gospel will be preached to all peoples v. 10
 - F. Believers will suffer because of their faith in Christ vv. 11-13
- III. Believers Will be Victors v. 13b

The Temple's Destruction Predicted vv. 1-2

Translation:

¹As He was coming out of the temple one of his disciples said to him, “Teacher look at the size of the stones and how great the buildings.”

²And Jesus said to him, “Do you see these large buildings? Not one stone here will be permitted on another; none will not be dislodged.”

Jesus “was coming out of the temple” (ἐκ τοῦ ἱεροῦ). He was coming out of His chosen dwelling. From the promise of Abraham, to Jacob, to the desert, to Solomon, God had chosen to dwell in their midst; God had even chosen the very place where he could be found. Now He was leaving. There would soon be a new dwelling place—a new people—of God. These would be His by faith but not by blood. The building blocks of the new temple would be made of people, not rock.

Today, however, the disciples were awed by the splendor of the Herodian temple glimmering in the afternoon sun. If you had been there, it may well have drawn your attention, too. This temple was one of the wonders of the ancient world. Herod the Great had begun construction in 20 BC, and it was still in process. Completion would not come until six years before its destruction. Josephus describes the building stones as white and large, 40’x 14’x 20’, in dimension. With all its walls and colonnades, terraces and marble pillars, its brass and gold, it was quite a sight. To see sixty-foot doors plated with gold and silver, as at the gate of Nicanor, would catch anyone’s eye.

As I thought about this scene with all involved looking back at the building they had just left, I was reminded of Lot’s wife, of how we hate to let go of the visible. How difficult it can be to leave behind—to discount—the splendors of man’s creation, how easily its gleaming surfaces can distract us from the quiet Christ seemingly standing in its shadow. Even Christ’s disciples find themselves drawn to and carried away by the lure which wealth can provide. Jesus then challenges His disciples to rethink the very thing to which we are drawn.

v. 2 “Do you see these large buildings?” Look at them and keep right on looking at them (pres. ind. act.). “Not one stone will be permitted on another; none will not be dislodged.” In so many words Jesus is saying if you want to look at this, then look, but realize the nature of its greatness. It may seem to be magnificent, but it will be desolate.

Mark emphasizes the negative by twice using οὐ μὴ, once in the main clause, once in the subordinate. This double usage provides emphatic force. Stone will simply not be permitted to be on stone. The use of the aorist subjunctive passive in both verbs adds even more thrust to the certainty of this coming event.

These crushing and alarming words are part of the warning of this prophetic discourse. It declares all things are not as they appear. Jesus is challenging all listeners to review their values and to grasp their lives from a new perspective. Peter’s subsequent statement carries this same force when he records, “The heavens will disappear with a groan; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be?” (2 Peter 3:10-11) Both here in Mark and in Peter we are hearing direct prophecy. The fall of the temple in Jerusalem would occur, and its occurrence would signal the beginning of the end, the end of the world, the end of man’s separation from God.

This first prophetic step to the end was reached when Titus, the son of the Emperor Vespasian (AD 69-79), leveled the city in a successful effort to put down the Jewish revolt begun in 66. A description of this war, written by Josephus in his *History of the Jewish War*, is useful reading on this event, especially books IV-VII.

Signs Will Precede the Destruction of the Temple and the World vv. 3-13

Translation:

³As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter (and) James (and) John and Andrew asked him privately,

⁴“Tell us, when will these things be and what is the sign when all these things are about to be completed?”

⁵And Jesus began by saying to them (to say to them), “Watch out lest someone lead you astray (deceive you).”

The view, I’m told, from this particular location, would have been stunning at this time of day. Crowds had surrounded Jesus all day. Finally the disciples had Him to themselves (*κατ’ ἰδίαν*, alone, in private), and there was a lot on their minds, not the least of which was His parting comment on the temple. Matthew describes those who approached Jesus at this point as “the disciples”, Luke says “they”, but as is characteristic of Mark, he gives the detail by naming the disciples who asked.

The question they asked (v. 4) is striking for its lack of doubt. There is no hesitation on the part of the disciples. They do not ask in a way that implies any question as to the fact. Their only concern is preparation. The “when” (*πότε*) of the question carries the concern for the amount of time to elapse before this would occur. The “what” concerns itself with identification. The verb choice (*μέλλω*) shows their concern not to be caught unawares.

Matthew gives us still more insight into the nature of the question when he records it this way, “What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (24:3). The disciples clearly had a sense that the events to begin by the destruction of the temple would conclude with the completion of all goals. All history from this time on was to be for Jesus’ disciples the sign which alerts them to the coming of the end.

Verse 5 is a verse that for a number of years of my life always seemed out of place. The question was, what are the signs? If you skip this verse, the answer appears perfectly normal. But the very first thing Jesus says in response in all three gospels that record it is “Watch out lest someone lead you astray,” i.e., deceive you. A careful reading of the eschatological materials presented by our God, however, leads to the realization that “deception” is the theme of the end times. It is its mark of identification. The closing years of this world will be hard times for sorting out truth and lies. People will be confused, will struggle. Clarity will tend to turn cloudy. Good will tend to look like wrong, and wrong will appear as good and acceptable. This “red alert” uttered by Jesus should lead each of us as pastors to realize the critical importance for our people to become Biblically literate as Christ’s return grows imminent. Without the light of the Word, they will simply stand defenseless before this predicted onslaught which, in the opinion of this writer, has arrived.

The verb used to describe this deception is *πλανάω*. Our word planet has its root in this verb. The ancient world thought of planets as wandering aimlessly in space, hence the idea of leading astray, deception. Despite this strong warning on the part of Jesus that there will be those who will want to lead us around on a meaningless path, speakers around the world are able to draw large crowds by simply appearing to speak knowledgeably on the signs of the times. They tie specific events to specific prophecy when in reality these events are only stepping stones to Christ’s return.

From “deception” Jesus moves on to specifics. The first specific deals with impersonation.

Translation:

⁶“Many will come in My name saying that I am He, and they will lead many astray.”

Jesus says they will come “in my name”. The *ὄνομα* is that by which a person is known. In this case it refers to all that is revealed about Jesus, what He said, what He did. To come “in My name” (*ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι μου*) has the force of “on the basis of My name.” They will use what He did and said to launch themselves and

their teachings. In this particular case they will use what He did and said to identify themselves with His person, to claim His person. They will claim for themselves all the rights and privileges of Christ. The right to speak new words and teach new insights will be assumed. Throughout the force and implication is that they will use Him and all He is as a base to give credibility to their own lies. The list has grown long. Most recently, one thinks of the “other gospel” preached by Robert H. Schuller “on the basis of” His name, Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy, and Sun Myung Moon. The claim of “I am” (Ἐγώ εἰμι) is by most commentators (Lenski, Hendricks, Cambridge, Pulpit) restricted to the thought of actually claiming to be the person of Christ. Given that Matthew adds the ὁ Χριστός, this is the most obvious and direct interpretation. You notice, however, I have not restricted it to this application alone. Taking the context of deception and the choice of the preposition ἐπί, Jesus appears to expand this prophecy concerning claimants to Messiahship to include those who, though they do not claim to be the Christ, act and speak as people bearing equal authority with Him. Both types of claimants will be many and will appear successful. Jesus himself predicted their success. “They will lead many astray” (v. 6). In these end times success should be carefully examined.

Translation:

⁷But at the time you hear of wars and rumors of wars, don't be frightened. It must be so, but the end is not yet.

⁸For a people (ἔθνος) will rise against a people, and nation (βασίλεια) against nation, earthquakes will be in various places and famines will exist. These are the beginning of birth pains.

The reason for the unusual translation of ἔθνος and βασίλεια is to attempt to grasp the difference between the terms. Historically we translate “nation” and “kingdom”, but in our present world the term “nation” is used almost universally to speak of a political unit—a geographical grouping under a government. The term ἔθνος, however, speaks of a body of people held together by the same customs not by the same government. This supplies us with the added thought that not only will countries rise against each other, but also races. He is addressing the phenomena of strife between black and white, between the Polish and the Latins,—the turmoil brought about by people striving against those whose habits and customs are different from their own.

The emphasis in verse 7 is on the hearing. Hearing of wars or of wars about to break out is almost more frightening than knowing you are in a war. Some of you will remember the tense days before Pearl Harbor, others the panic buying that occurred during the Cuban Missile crisis. Recent events in the Middle East have tended to create much the same effect. All fears and worries based on what you hear are here ordered to cease by our Commander and Chief.

The phenomena predicted would come. Earthquakes came to Crete in AD 46 and 47, to Rome in 51 and Apamaia in Phrygia. There were famines—four during the reign of Claudius alone (AD 41-54). One of these was in Judea (AD 44) (cf. Acts 11:28). Jesus was here preparing them for when they would occur. He does not want His disciples to despair.

Jesus tells us it is necessary for these to be (δεῖ γενέσθαι). Why? Why must there be wars and famines, destruction and pain? These things would be a part of life because of sin. They should be considered as normal by Christians, not desirable, not wanted, but normal. “These are the beginning of birth pains.” These are not the end, just a prelude to more pain. Like a woman in childbirth, the pain will grow more intense as the return of Christ draws closer. The concept of birth pains applied in this way has roots in the Old Testament (see Hosea 13:13, Isaiah 26:17 and Jeremiah 22:23).

Translation:

⁹But be on guard for yourselves. They will hand you over to councils and you will be flogged in synagogues and you will be stood up before governors and kings on account of me for a witness to them.

The same word (βλέπετε) used to warn of deception is here used to express another caution. The present imperative is durative and with the ὑμεῖς makes the point emphatic. You are going to be tested, and great stress will be placed upon your faith. On account of me you are going to be arrested and tried. The future tenses in this verse underline the certainty of these events. Both church and state would become involved in this persecution. So watch out for yourself. There will be both personal and spiritual danger. When these predictions come true, the temptation would come to wallow in self-pity, to feel deserted by God. These words are written so Christians might be prepared.

All this would occur ἐνεκεν ἐμοῦ, “on account of me.” The hatred which darkness has of the light will be taken out on the children of light. But there was a purpose, a loving reason. God will place His children in this position so they might be “a witness to them”. This witness would, as you know, bring the entire empire to the foot of the cross by 300 AD. To realize that every frame of life is given for the sake of evangelism is to gain a major insight into life on earth.

Translation:

¹⁰And among every people it is first necessary to proclaim to the gospel.

Verse 10 presents an interesting sign—interesting because of the necessity expressed and because of the word order in which it is expressed. The distribution of the Gospel is, first of all, expressed as a divine must. Some commentators, such as Lenski, look at this as an activity upon which Christ’s return is conditioned. Such an emphasis, however, could lead to the false idea that man is able to either postpone Christ’s return by failing to evangelize or to speed it by extra effort. The thrust of this passage is more properly placed upon the fact (aor. tense) of proclamation and the will of him who causes it to be. As Franzmann notes, “The same overruling divine will that controls wars and rumors of wars will cause the Gospel to speed and triumph amid disasters.” It will happen! This is the prophecy and promise.

The word order, specifically the placement of the πρῶτον appears to give a second thrust to the “first”. Not only is this proclamation to be a sign which will occur before Christ’s coming, hence making πρῶτον express prior action, it also by its mid-sentence placement makes this activity of proclamation a top priority for the Christian community. Thus the δεῖ (it is necessary) expresses both its overruling divine will which will see this task brought to completion and the divine directive to man to make gospel distribution the number one priority of his followers. (If it were meant only to express a completed action prior to Christ’s return, it would seem far more natural to place the adverb in the primary position.)

As we consider both thrusts, the difference between now and then should be noted. Unlike in Christ’s time, there are no longer any new continents to be discovered. The whole of the earth’s surface has been laid bare to the gospel. Those who hide behind this particular sign, taking comfort that there is yet time, are not taking into account St. Paul’s inspired assumption of completion in his writings about Christ’s return nor do they take into account the vast array of distribution tools in use today.

The thought of coming to trial as predicted in verse 9 would bring about other concerns. First could be the temptation to turn from Christ. Another would be the worry that Christ’s name and cause might be harmed by what I’ve done or might say. It is this latter concern which Christ addresses in the next section when he orders His disciples to cease being anxious about what they should say.

Translation:

¹¹And whenever they arrest (bring) you standing up (for trial), do not be anxious about what you should say, but whatever is given you in that hour this you speak for it is not you speaking but the Holy Spirit.

¹²And brother will hand over brother into death and father child, and children will rise up in rebellion against parents and will put them to death.

¹³And you will be hated by all because of my name but the one standing his ground to the end, this one will be saved.

By using the present imperative, *προμεριμνᾶτε*, Jesus stresses that his disciples need never worry about the witness they will give. The reason is simple. He, by the Spirit, will provide. The *ὁ ἐὰν δοθῇ* leaves no doubt as to the total agency of God as supplier. It is “whatever *is* given” (aor. subi. *passive*) that is to be spoken.. The ministries of Peter, John and then Paul are solid attestations to this promise.

Jesus saves the depth to which his presence will divide until last. No sadder descriptions of sins’ impact upon human relations can be given than what is described in verse 12. Even the nuclear family, Jesus declares, will be blown apart in self-destructive outbreaks. Brother will destroy brother, father, child and children, parents. Pagan courts will be used by family member against family member. Authority, respect and honor will dissipate. Even the closest of human relationships will be considered expendable, their lives without value

This is the zenith of self-indulgence. When one sees the 1980’s urge to rush to court for personal gain, this sign, too, takes on specificity.

Verse 13 serves as a summation. “You will be hated by all because of My name.” The sin-blinded people of the world will not be delighted with the bright light of the gospel. Even as Jesus experienced anger and hatred, so those who follow. “No servant is greater than his master” (John 13:16). We are to realize the rejection we will experience at the hands of unbelief will not be because of who we are but because of whose we are. It will be because of Him who dwells in us. They are rejecting Christ. The use of the periphrastic future (*ἔσεσθε* with the present *μισοῦμενοι*) tells us this rejection can be expected to be continuous and wide-spread until he returns (Robt. 357.889). The *ὑπὸ πάντων*, “by all” does not imply every single person but is an idiomatic way of indicating the general reaction.

The disciples asked a simple question. The answer is unlike the question. Fortunately, the message does not stop here with the thought of general, widespread and constant hatred and trouble. The prophetic vision sees the end. “The one standing his ground to the end,” Jesus says, “this one will be saved.” Here in the midst of predicted hardship stands a glorious promise to all who cling to Christ. You may be buffeted, bruised and battered; in world-wide turmoil you may be clamped in irons and set before judges; you may even have your own children turn on you and put you to death, but through thick and thin you need not worry for he will rescue. When you take up your position with Christ, victory is assured.

The image conjured up by the aorist participle *ὑπομείνας* lends graphics to this assurance. It is a military term which means to take all that the enemy can throw against you yet still possess the reserve strength to countercharge to victory. Staying power. Staying power is what Christ had. Staying power is what those in whom Christ dwells possess. The march from life to life may see many battles, many struggles, but at every point all the way through to the end, He will rescue, He will save. Believers will be victors.

“Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.” Revelation 2:10.