


# Violence and apocalyptic notions in Mark 13

**Author:**Mphumezi Hombana<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies-New Testament, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**

Mphumezi Hombana,  
hombam@unisa.ac.za

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Mark 13 is famously known as the most challenging text in the entire Markan gospel. In Mark 13:7–8, the Markan Jesus foretells a tumultuous period marked by wars, rumours of wars, nations in conflict and natural hazards, aligning with common motifs in apocalyptic literature. The language vividly depicts a world in upheaval, emphasising cosmic and earthly disturbances as harbingers of climactic historical moments. The destruction of the temple, announced in Mark 13:2, is subject to both literal and symbolic interpretations, with some associating it with the historical event of the Second Temple's destruction in 70 CE and others perceiving it as a symbol of the end of an age. Approaching Mark 13 without being triggered by violent connotations is unthinkable. Hence, responsible interpretation is pivotal in addressing such potentially violent connotations, particularly considering contemporary world conflicts. Sensitivity, without compromising the truth of the message of Mark 13, is crucial when considering the text's impact on war-torn communities. This applies both to a reading that simulates the possible intention of the text within the context in which the Gospel, according to Mark, originated and to a historically informed use of such a reading considering contemporary conflicts. This study aims to employ a historiographical hermeneutic as an investigative tool to contribute a plausible understanding of the present text and avoid utilising this text as proof to promote violence and wars today. Especially, when one considers the recent catastrophes: natural hazards, civil unrest and wars across the world. Some are quick to utilise the Olivet discourse to explain such gruesome activities.

**Contribution:** This study contextualizes Mark 13 within the 1st century CE, focusing on the Second Temple's destruction in 70 CE. It promotes a sensitive interpretation, avoiding justifications for contemporary violence, and highlights the text's relevance by drawing parallels between its turmoil and current global conflicts, encouraging ethical reflection.

**Keywords:** Apocalyptic Literature; Mark 13; historiographical hermeneutic; eschatology; violence and conflict; contemporary relevance.

## Introduction

The study focuses on Mark 13, a text recognised as a complex segment within the Gospel of Mark (Neville 2008:359–384). This passage, steeped in apocalyptic themes and vivid, violent imagery, requires scholarly scrutiny because of its dense narrative and symbolic nuances (Collins 2008; Marcus 2009). The depiction of wars, rumours of wars and natural calamities in Mark 13:7–8 align with common motifs found in apocalyptic literature, necessitating an exploration of their significance and potential implications regarding violence (Rhoads, Dewey & Michie 2012). Moreover, the dual interpretation of the temple's destruction in Mark 13:2 – both literal and symbolic – poses interpretive challenges that demand careful analysis (Marcus 2009). Given the contemporary global context marked by conflicts, it is crucial to approach Mark 13 with sensitivity to avoid misappropriation of its violent imagery and apocalyptic themes (Dunn 2003). Adopting a historiographical hermeneutic, this study aims to contribute a plausible understanding of Mark 13:13–21, its socio-historical context and its contemporary relevance while refraining from utilising this text in promoting violence through informed interpretations (Davies & Allison 1988; Rhoads et al. 2012).

## The nature and function of apocalyptic literature

In scholarly discourse, 'apocalyptic' refers to a genre of revelatory literature within Jewish and early Christian traditions, characterised by the disclosure of divine mysteries through symbolic visions, dreams or angelic messengers. This genre often emphasises an eschatological worldview, portraying an impending cosmic upheaval, the final judgement and the ultimate

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triumph of divine forces over evil. The term is derived from the Greek word 'apokalypsis', meaning 'revelation' or 'unveiling'. Collins (1991:13) asserts that the term 'apocalyptic' should primarily describe the content found within apocalypses, warning that using it in other contexts can lead to confusion. Decock observes that since Hanson's 1976 article, the distinction between the apocalyptic genre (apocalypse), apocalyptic eschatology and apocalyptic movements (apocalypticism) has become widely recognised. However, there remains debate over the significance of each of these categories and the precise nature of their interrelationship. Furthermore, Decock (1999:5–6) observes that Collins' definition of the apocalyptic genre, established in 1979, has been broadly accepted (Hanson 1992:279). Collins categorises the genre into two main types: historical apocalypses and heavenly ascents (Collins 1991:13–14). He also agrees with an amendment from Semeia 36, which expands the definition to include the function of apocalypses – namely, to interpret current earthly situations considering the supernatural and future events and to influence the audience's understanding and behaviour through divine authority (Collins 1991:19).

### An overview of previous readings of Mark 13

Van Eck (2013:95–97) significantly outlines the *Wirkungsgeschichte*, or history of interpretation, of Mark 13. Van Eck further observes that Mark 13's history of interpretation is a rich field of study that reflects diverse perspectives on the origins, literary nature and thematic significance of this narrative within the Gospel of Mark. Scholars such as Colani, Pesch and Balabanski have contributed notable insights into the possible sources, intentions and effects of Mark 13 within its historical and literary context. Colani's proposition that Mark incorporated an expanded version of an existing apocalypse into Mark 13 suggests a complex relationship between the Gospel author and apocalyptic traditions. Pesch's viewpoint, which posits that Mark reluctantly included an apocalyptic pamphlet because of its popularity among readers despite its potential disruption to the Gospel's structure, highlights the dynamic interplay between authorial intention and audience reception.

Balabanski's thesis introduces a regional perspective, suggesting that Mark may have utilised a Judean oracle to resonate with Judean Christians in a Syrian context, particularly those who fled Judea before the Jewish War. This emphasises the adaptability and contextualisation of religious themes within early Christian communities. Regarding the genre of Mark 13, various proposals have been put forward, including its classification as an apocalyptic Flugblatt (a brief apocalyptic text), an example of *evocatio* (a literary technique invoking a deity), a narrated speech of Jesus or a farewell speech of Jesus. These diverse interpretations underscore the multifaceted nature of the text and the challenges in categorising it within conventional genre frameworks. Debates also exist regarding the literary function and structural integration of Mark 13 within the Gospel of Mark. Some scholars argue that Mark 13 disrupts

the narrative flow, while others contend that it is integral to understanding the broader themes and motifs of the Gospel. The thematic and structural connections between Mark 13 and adjacent passages, such as Mark 11–12 and Mark 14–15, suggest a cohesive narrative thread centred on the temple and eschatological themes (see Marius Nel 2023).

John J. Collins situates Mark 13 within Jewish apocalyptic literature, emphasising its reflection of early Christian socio-political anxieties post-70 CE, particularly regarding the Temple's destruction. He interprets the text as adapting traditional Jewish motifs to emphasise divine intervention and encourage a persecuted community, framing their suffering within a cosmic battle (Collins 1998:222–224). Adela Yarbro Collins, through literary and historical analysis, views the chapter as a prophetic narrative and theological reflection on divine judgement and salvation, emphasising eschatological themes such as the return of the Son of Man, central to Christian hope (Collins 2007:590–631). Moore (2006:74–78) offers a postcolonial reading, interpreting the chapter as resistance literature against Roman imperial power, highlighting its subversive apocalyptic language. Horrell (2014:145–150) reinterprets the apocalyptic imagery to address modern ecological challenges, advocating for environmental ethics. Nel (2023:3–4; 2014:263–265) argues that while Mark 13 has apocalyptic traits, it diverges from traditional apocalyptic literature, incorporating elements from prophecy and paraenesis and functions as a theological response to suffering, promoting ethical watchfulness rather than apocalyptic fervour (Gray 2008:97; Kee 1977:45–66; Meier 1994:243–251; Nel 2014:233–264; Telford 1995:136–137).

### Contemporary catastrophes

In South Africa, particularly in the context of contemporary catastrophes such as natural hazards and pandemics and social unrest, Mark's Olivet discourse has sometimes been invoked by religious leaders and communities to make sense of these events within a theological framework. This passage, which speaks of wars, natural hazards and persecution as signs of the end times, can be both comforting and troubling for those seeking to understand their suffering in a broader, cosmic context. One way Mark 13 has been used is to interpret contemporary catastrophes as signs of divine judgement or as part of the eschatological timeline leading to the return of Christ. This apocalyptic perspective can provide a framework for understanding the seemingly uncontrollable and chaotic nature of disasters, offering a sense of order and purpose amid chaos. In the face of devastating floods, for instance, some might view these events as fulfilling the 'birth pains' described in Mark 13:8, thereby reinforcing the belief that these disasters are part of a divine plan and a precursor to a new era (Garland 2005).

However, this interpretation can also lead to a sense of fatalism, where individuals or communities might feel that these events are inevitable and beyond human control, thus diminishing the urgency for practical and proactive responses. This perspective might inadvertently discourage

efforts to address the underlying causes of disasters, such as climate change, poor urban planning and socioeconomic inequality, which require human agency and intervention (Wilder 2000). Conversely, Mark 13 has also been misused to propagate fear or to exploit vulnerable communities. In times of crisis, there have been instances where religious leaders might use the imagery and language of Mark 13 to promote apocalyptic narratives that can cause panic or lead to harmful behaviours. For example, the emphasis on wars, earthquakes and famines as signs of the end times might be exaggerated to suggest that certain catastrophes are beyond redemption or that human efforts to mitigate them are futile (Horsley 2001). Moreover, the discourse in Mark 13 about false prophets and deception has been used to discredit scientific explanations for disasters or to undermine efforts aimed at social reform and disaster prevention. In some cases, this misuse can contribute to a reluctance to engage with modern solutions to environmental and social challenges, thereby exacerbating the impact of these catastrophes.

### Plausible reading lenses of Mark 13

Recently, Breytenbach (2023:1–6) published ‘The Task and the Future of NT Studies’. In this momentous work, he outlined a significant task for any plausible reading of the NT text. At this stage, it is crucial to consider critical aspects for a responsible interpretation of the NT, mainly focusing on Mark 13. Firstly, the availability of the Markan text itself is paramount, even though it seems impossible to access sources Mark used to compose his gospel. Appreciating and working with the second Gospel, written in Greek, requires a foundational understanding of the language, akin to any study of the NT. Again, Van Eck’s (2009:1–12) thesis proposes in reading parables that avoiding ethnocentric and anthropocentric biases is essential when engaging with these ancient texts, alongside positioning oneself about the authorial intent and the intended audience. However, the exact intent may not always be explicit in the text. Secondly, placing the text within its historical context, such as Mark’s likely location in Rome during the late 60s CE amid the Jewish War and the temple’s impending destruction in 70 CE, provides valuable contextual insights. There are various proposals in this regard. For instance, van Eck thinks Mark’s social location is Galilee (Van Eck 1995).

Thirdly, investigating the narrative function of Mark 13 reveals its integral role in the overall plot of Mark’s Gospel. Mark 13 initiates with Jesus’ prophecy about the temple’s destruction, prompting questions from the disciples about when this event will occur. Jesus responds with four successive proleptic sayings, followed by a time statement and a short parable, alluding to events that will transpire within the current generation. The time references in Mark 13:35 guide readers to understand both the passion narrative and Jesus’ prophetic utterances, creating a cohesive narrative arc. This structured approach aids in unravelling the thematic connections between Mark 13 and subsequent events, such as the Last Supper, Jesus’ arrest in Gethsemane, Peter’s denial and the trial before the Sanhedrin. These parallels highlight

the intertwined nature of Mark’s narrative, culminating in the fulfilment of Jesus’ predictions and the vindication of his message.

### Exegetical analysis of Mark 13:14–21

In Mark 13, the point of view is both narrative and ideological, with Jesus as the authoritative speaker addressing the disciples about eschatological events. The narrative perspective presents Jesus’ teachings on the end times, while the ideological stance reflects a Jewish apocalyptic worldview, emphasising divine control over history, the impermanence of earthly institutions and the certainty of tribulation. The narrator guides the reader to adopt a perspective of vigilance and faithfulness, anticipating divine intervention and the fulfilment of God’s kingdom (cf. Van Aarde 2009). This pericope (vv. 13–21) sits within this apocalyptic discourse, characterised by prophetic and eschatological language. The setting is intended to convey urgency and crisis, reflecting the concerns of the early Christian audience.

In Mark 13, Jesus is the central figure, assuming the role of prophet and teacher, preparing his disciples for future trials (Hooker 1991). The disciples, although silent in the passage, are the primary audience, receiving warnings and instructions (Witherington 2001). False Messiahs, although not directly present, symbolise external threats of deception, persecution and betrayal that the disciples will face (Stein 2008). The Gospel’s narrative is delivered by a third-person narrator, addressing an implied reader as the first-level audience. Unlike in a typical novel, the evangelist has a clear understanding of his audience, a community he knows well, shaping the Gospel to meet their real needs (Smith 1996:187).

Mark 13:13–21 exhibits a coherent structure typical of Mark’s narrative style, blending urgency with theological reflection. The passage intertwines warnings, instructions and promises, preparing the disciples for impending trials while offering hope through divine protection. This structure emphasises the interplay between human responsibility (endurance, discernment) and divine sovereignty, addressing the eschatological concerns of early Christians (France 2002).

The passage is commonly understood as a chiasmic structure, a literary device where ideas are presented in a mirrored pattern, such as A-B-C-B’-A’, to emphasise key themes or ideas (Nel 2014:307–317; Welch 1999). This structure, prevalent in biblical literature, serves to highlight central themes through parallelism, creating a balanced and memorable narrative. Recognising Mark 13:13–21 as a chiasm enhances interpretive engagement, inviting readers to see connections between elements and understand the theological and pastoral concerns embedded in the passage (Marcus 2009). The chiasmic structure is a deliberate literary technique employed to emphasise key theological themes, reinforcing the message of endurance, vigilance and divine sovereignty amid tribulation.

## The message of Mark 13 and its significance to Mark's community

This chapter, dealing with themes of destruction, tribulation and ultimate redemption, would have been particularly poignant for a community experiencing sociopolitical turmoil and persecution. Understanding Mark's audience's historical and social context is crucial for comprehending how they would have interpreted and understood Mark 13 violent apocalyptic images.

### A brief historical context

Hurtado (1989:211) observes that Mark 13, like Mark 4, is one of the two most extended sections in the Gospel of Mark. To thoroughly understand this chapter, two important considerations must be addressed. Firstly, as indicated in verses 1–4, Jesus' pronouncements are closely tied to the prophecy concerning the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE – a catastrophic event for Jews and likely for Jewish Christians as well. Secondly, the teachings of Jesus documented in this chapter were considered pertinent to the early church during Mark's time. Consequently, we must explore the early church's perspectives before quickly addressing the relevance of these teachings for contemporary audiences. Correctly interpreting Jesus' sayings requires a historical investigation, drawing from ancient Jewish and Christian sources rather than modern perspectives.

The late 60s CE was a tumultuous time for Jews and early Christians alike. The Jewish revolt against Roman rule led to widespread unrest, culminating in the siege and destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple by Roman forces. For Jews, the Temple was the epicentre of religious life, and its destruction was a cataclysmic event (Josephus, Book II, VII Wars of the Jews translation by Whiston and La Sor 1981). For early Christians, many of whom were Jewish, this event would have been a political and theological crisis (Horsley 2011; Witherington 2001). The article posits that the Gospel of Mark was likely composed between the mid and late 60s CE, aligning with the broader scholarly consensus that situates Markan dating within this period (Brown 1997; Cranfield 1959; Meier 2001, etc.).

## Theological and eschatological significance

As this subheading suggests, the goal is to briefly unpack the theological and eschatological significance of Mark 13 for the immediate Markan audience. Of course, this is an attempt at a historically informed thought.

### Prophecy of the temple's destruction (Mark 13:1–2)

The prediction of the Temple's destruction would have had immediate relevance to Mark's community. Given that the Gospel is dated around the time of or shortly after the Temple's actual destruction, this prophecy would be seen as profoundly validating Jesus' foreknowledge and authority. It underscores

the transient nature of earthly institutions in contrast to the permanence of Jesus' teachings (Marcus 2009; Wright 1996).

### Signs of the end times and the great tribulation (Mark 13:3–23)

The signs of the end times, including wars, earthquakes and famines, would mirror the real experiences of Mark's audience amid the Jewish–Roman conflict. The reference to false prophets and persecutions (13:9–13) would resonate with the community's experiences of ostracism and persecution (Witherington 2001; Myers 1988). This section prepares the community for enduring hardship, affirming that tribulations are part of a divine plan rather than random misfortunes. The 'abomination of desolation' (13:14), a phrase with roots in the Book of Daniel, refers to sacrilegious actions in sacred spaces, likely seen by Mark's readers as a reference to the Roman desecration of the Temple. The instructions to flee to the mountains echo practical survival advice and a spiritual call to disengage from doomed institutions (Horsley 2011).

### The coming of the Son of Man (Mark 13:24–27)

The portrayal of cosmic disturbances and the coming of the Son of Man would offer a vision of hope and redemption. This promise of divine intervention and vindication would provide profound comfort for a community besieged by despair and confusion. The imagery of gathering the elect from the four winds reinforces the inclusivity of salvation and the gathering of a dispersed and persecuted community (Collins 2007; Wright 1996).

### The lesson of the fig tree and exhortation to watchfulness (Mark 13:28–37)

The lesson of the fig tree serves as a metaphor for discerning the signs of the times, encouraging the community to remain vigilant and perceptive. The concluding exhortation to watchfulness (13:32–37) emphasises the unpredictability of the eschaton, urging constant readiness and faithfulness. This call to vigilance would be crucial for a community facing ongoing persecution and uncertainty (Marcus 2009).

### Insinuations for Mark's community

Mark 13, therefore, functions on multiple levels for its original audience. It offers immediate practical guidance for surviving persecution and upheaval, theological assurance of Jesus' authority and divine plan and eschatological hope for ultimate redemption and vindication. The chapter reassures the community that their sufferings are neither unanticipated nor meaningless but part of a larger divine narrative leading to the eventual triumph of God's kingdom (Horsley 2011; Myers 1988).

Mark 13 would have been a profoundly significant message for the early Christian community of the late 60s CE. It speaks directly to their immediate experiences of turmoil and persecution, providing both practical guidance and theological assurance. By framing their sufferings within the larger eschatological narrative, Mark 13 would help the



community maintain faith and vigilance amid the chaos, underscoring the transient nature of their trials and the ultimate promise of divine redemption. Mark 13, with its blend of apocalyptic prophecy and exhortation, continues to resonate with contemporary readers, offering historical insights and enduring theological themes.

## Hope and endurance

One of the central themes of Mark 13 is hope amid adversity. This chapter portrays a world in turmoil, with wars, natural hazards and persecution (Mk 13:7–8). However, it also promises divine intervention and ultimate redemption. The message of hope is encapsulated in the vision of the coming of the Son of Man (Mk 13:24–27), a symbol of God's imminent and decisive action to gather and save the faithful. For contemporary readers, this message of hope remains powerful. In a world still plagued by conflict, natural calamities and personal tribulations, Mark 13 offers reassurance that these sufferings are neither unnoticed nor meaningless. The promise of the Son of Man's return reinforces the belief in a future restoration and the vindication of the righteous. This eschatological hope encourages believers to remain steadfast in their faith and moral integrity, even in the face of overwhelming challenges. The exhortation to vigilance and readiness (Mk 13:32–37) is particularly relevant today. It highlights the necessity of living a life of faith and preparedness, not merely as an end-time expectation but as a daily practice. This call to watchfulness encourages contemporary Christians to be mindful of their spiritual lives, ethical conduct and communal responsibilities. It promotes an active and engaged faith grounded in anticipating God's eventual and transformative intervention in human history.

## Conclusion

What sense would this message of the Markan Jesus have for Mark's community? In the aforesaid, it was argued that a responsible reading of Mark 13 is necessary in light of the contemporary chaotic and evident violence presented in this present Markan text. Mark's community, situated in a turbulent Roman context, faced disillusionment after the Jewish War and the destruction of the temple. Mark 13, with its violent imagery, requires responsible interpretation. The message is twofold: Firstly, Jesus replaces the temple with a new community, emphasising the present reality of God's kingdom. Secondly, the eschatological hope rests not in political events but in Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection. This reinterpretation guards against misusing Mark 13 to justify violence and highlights the transformative nature of Jesus' message for the community then and now.

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