

When Is the End Not the End?

The Fate of Earth in Biblical Eschatology (Mark 13)

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The blame for exploitation and abuse of the environment by Christians is often laid on the 'Genesis mandate' (Gen. 1.28), particularly when it has been interpreted as giving humans 'dominion' over all creation. At least as culpable however (and arguably even more influential as the reason behind for President Bush's refusal to sign the Kyoto Agreement, for example),¹ are certain biblical convictions about how creation *must* degenerate and collapse, which are usually derived from texts at the other end of the canon to Genesis. It is my aim here to retrieve some of these 'texts of cosmic terror' from the grip of both fanatical and scholarly apocalypticism, to re-evaluate them in light of Earth Bible principles, and to wrestle with those texts that seem to persist as words against Earth. The focus will be on the Synoptic Gospel eschatological texts and Mark 13 in particular, but since they are dependent on the prophetic literature and in turn influential for those texts in the Christian Scriptures written afterwards, the question of the fate of Earth in biblical eschatology is the ultimate topic addressed.² It is my contention that we should not burden these texts with the full scope of our relatively recent apocalyptic imaginations, nor excuse our own responsibility for human and environmental calamities by appealing to divine necessity (*dei geneshai*, 'this *must* take place'; Mk 13.7).

In this context, the Earth Bible principle of interconnectedness — 'Earth

is a community of interconnected living things that are mutually dependent on each other for life and survival' (principle two) — informs the readings that follow here, though I shall extend the interconnectedness to include the 'heavenly bodies' as viewed from Earth. It follows that the Earth Bible affirmations of the intrinsic worth of the universe *and* Earth (principle one) and the principle of purpose of the universe, Earth and all its components (principle four) are also foundational for the interpretations offered here (Earth Bible Team 2000b: 42–53). The re-examining of the texts selected below from this more integrated perspective (which is how they once used to be read), should suggest alternative interpretations to the obsession with the eschatology of inevitable disaster that dominates so much of popular theology.

The Fate of Earth in Popular Eschatology

The eschatological convictions that can limit Christian engagement with Earth issues may be outlined by suggesting (somewhat tongue in cheek) a fundamentalist Christian version of the Earth Bible's six ecojustice principles. Let's call them the six Biblical Eschatological principles:

1. *The principle of imminent cataclysm* — Earth is headed for disaster (sooner rather than later).
2. *The principle of disconnectedness* — we humans don't have to share or feel responsible for Earth's fate (salvation is for humans, not Earth).
3. *The principle of inevitability* — there's nothing we (or Earth) can do about it.
4. *The principle of transcendence* — what really matters is the next world (or 'heavenism' as Habel describes it).
5. *The principle of sovereignty* — God is in ultimate (even direct) control of all this.
6. *The principle of self-interest* — God will rapture 'believers' out of this mess in the nick of time.

1. The dominance of conservative, even fundamentalist, Christianity in the south of the USA — Florida and Texas (the heartland of President Bush's support base) — sets certain parameters for the language within which political issues must be expressed, or at least be seen not to contravene. Long-term ecojustice issues are simply not part of that religious or political vocabulary, and can even be perceived by fundamentalists as a threat to the sovereignty of God and human freedom.

2. This paper was first presented at the ANZATS/ANZIS Conference on Eco-theology in Christchurch, July 2000, (my thanks to those who provided feedback), and has been redrafted in this form during the week of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre, September 2001.

It comes as no surprise that within this kind of operational framework, every ecological disaster and every sign of degenerating human behaviour is seen as proof that 'the end times' are indeed upon us. This in turn tends to reinforce faith as a kind of grim paralysis, stoically enduring the decline of our planet in the hope of something better in the next life. Any motivation to take action in support of a suffering humanity — let alone a suffering Earth — is limited to the immediate concerns of caring for one's own and seeking revenge on anyone who can be implicated in causing the catastrophes. Long-term policies to address the

underlying causes of environmental and social degradation are simply irrelevant to those who are convinced that things have to get worse before they can get better, and that they will only get better through the direct intervention of God to bring this sorry planet to an end. In Norman Habel's words, those who hold such a perspective 'reduce Earth to a ball of corrupted matter about to be thrown onto the waste dump of eternity' (Habel 2000a: 125).

Yet what of those biblical texts used as the basis for such a jaundiced view of the future of creation? Have the developing understandings of our solar system and the relatively recent possibility that humans can destroy planet Earth affected the way we read these texts of cosmic terror? Do the descriptions of the sun being darkened, the moon not giving light and the stars falling from heaven (Mk 13.24-25, using Isaiah and Joel) *necessarily* indicate a pessimistic view of the future of the cosmos? We should realize that it is not just the fundamentalist right who read these texts in this way. Even scholars such as Mary Ann Tolbert interpret the Gospel of Mark, for example, in these terms, claiming the author sees 'this present evil, oppressive, and suffering-filled existence' as 'a passing interlude before the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds and eternal life for the faithful'. She argues further that 'the world in which Jesus and his followers live is a bleak, ugly and painful place filled with wars, persecutions, trials, betrayals, death, and a yet to be experienced last blood bath of cosmic dimensions' (Tolbert 1989: 264-65). At least Tolbert is honest about the predicament that such an interpretation presents to her:

The difficulty Mark furnishes for modern appropriation is not its negative assessment of the human situation but its solution to the problem. Mark argues that only direct divine intervention can preserve the elect from the mess this generation is making of the cosmos. While some even now may wish to continue affirming Mark's view, such acquiescence has unfortunately permitted this generation to keep increasing the mess for almost two thousand years (Tolbert 1989: 310).

Adela Yarbro Collins also speaks of the acute problems that arise for Markan interpreters 'who are conscious about the fact that they do not share the world-view presupposed by Mark' (1988: 148-49). This is a valid problem to raise, and we should not seek to resolve it simply by assuming that a common world view exists between these ancient texts and ourselves, an assumption often characteristic of a fundamentalist reading. Nor should we replace arbitrarily the six biblical eschatological principles with six Earth-friendly ecojustice principles, just to see if we achieve a more relevant exegetical outcome. Of course we cannot help but approach the text with certain assumptions, and it is helpful to be as

open as possible about them, but they are already products of our engagement with our context, our community of meaning and many past readings of the text. As such, I do not simply impose a new set of hermeneutical principles on the texts below (and insofar as I do, I outline them beforehand), so much as meet those principles already embedded in the texts (in both positive and negative manifestations) and in the questions that our present context urges upon us. The cognitive dissonance generated by the application of biblical eschatological principles to our current social and environmental crises, demands this re-examination of our exegetical assumptions.

Tolbert and Collins suggest that we should confront the world view presupposed by the Gospel of Mark and expose its inadequacies for meeting today's problems. That may well be necessary, at least in part, for the texts and their traditional interpretations are not innocent. A credible argument can be mounted, however, that the origin of the bleak apocalyptic outlook they have described is not to be found in the earliest Gospel and its setting – be it in Galilee, Syria or Rome in the late sixties or early seventies of the Common Era. Rather, we should search closer to home for the source of the heightened dualisms of apocalypticism: in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America, and wherever else we find that particular combination of modern Western science and fundamentalist biblicism.³ The language of 'the end' used in the popular media today seems to be dominated by this combination of the more colourful biblical concepts and the language of contemporary science. Together they produce a taxonomy of ultimate terror, what Eugene Boring has termed 'molecular eschatology'. As a result, apocalypse and armageddon have become two of the most public biblical terms used in our 'secular' vocabulary. They have been reinterpreted in the light of the splitting of the atom to take on meanings far beyond the ancient imagination and observations of the cosmos. We are told how many

3. I'm not suggesting for a moment that Tolbert and Collins are fundamentalist or biblicist, but rather that they operate within a culture dominated by an apocalyptic paradigm that originates in the conjunction of Western science and fundamentalist biblicism, and which desperately needs reconstructing. They have no choice but to subject their own culture and its dominant hermeneutic to scholarly critique, but where this acquiesces in the imposition of modernist polarities on ancient texts we have an obligation to point to other ways of reading these texts. Of course, Collins herself was instrumental in overcoming the spiritual-political polarity in the reading of Revelation, just as Tolbert has recently made enormous contributions to 'readings from this place' which challenge many Western polarities: spiritual-material, heavenly-earthly, and so on. These dualisms are described more fully by the Earth Bible Team (2000b: 40-41) in volume 1 of the Earth Bible Series.

hundred times more potent the weapons of today are than those used on Japan, raising the spectre of imminent nuclear meltdown. Even if we survive such cosmic suicide, our understanding of the universe suggests that eventually Earth will one day spin off into outer darkness (no doubt with weeping and gnashing of teeth) or else be swallowed up by the sun and the unquenchable fire.

This peculiar combination of modern Western science and uncritical biblical thought can lead to an eschatological myth so powerful that it impels faith communities towards sectarian fantasies — or at the very least disables any possibility that they might respond more creatively to the present environmental crises. It may sound harsh, but the major cause for alarm is not really the occasional groups of 'apocalunatics' who self-destruct across the pages of our newspapers from time to time, but the large numbers of Bible-believing Christians who seem to be trapped into inactivity by such a world view (or rather, world-denying view) — faithfully tending our rose gardens while the tropical rainforests are destroyed to appease our own profligate consumption.

The power of such a myth rests on a set of tired old oppositions that still have not been fully deconstructed or reconstructed, polarizing our understanding of spirit and matter, ethics and eschatology, ideal and real, politics and religion, this world and the other, the present and the future, the sacred and the secular. Many of these distinctions are made by appealing to 'apocalyptic', as if this were some consistent body of thought and literature that either makes sense of all these ideas (if you're that way inclined), or else that can be marginalized as excusable in times of severe persecution or labelled as sectarian fantasies. They are dangerous polarities because inevitably they devalue the 'material' in favour of the 'spiritual', Earth in favour of heaven, and the present and distant future in favour of the imminent future (Earth Bible Team 2000b: 40–41). Even when they have been denied or marginalized, these polarities often continue to define and warp the discussion.

Yet even if we can retrieve some texts from the distortion of this apocalyptic paradigm (as I attempt below), we should not think that this will solve all the tensions between Earth and eschatology. There remains a huge problem for ecotheology in those texts that resist retrieval and advocate our 'earnestly desiring [hastening] the parousia of the day of God through which the heavens will be torched and dissolved, and the elements melt with fire' (2 Pet. 3.12). The problem is not the imagining of an end to the created order as such — that has been inevitable not only since Nagasaki and Hiroshima, but really since Copernicus, Galileo and Kepler, and the dethroning of Earth as the centre of the universe, the apple of God's eye. Rather, the problem lies in 'earnestly desiring' such

an end, and in seeing it as part of the Creator's immediate plan for the creation, as a 'good thing' that cannot happen soon enough. Such a conviction can only result in passive disinterest in the fate of the environment at best, and may even underlie active exploitation and despoiling of the created order.

What do we do, then, with those biblical texts and images that seem to support such an understanding, and especially when such images seem to resonate with the deepest fears of our contemporary world — 'lurking at the edge of the abyss'? Which texts can be retrieved and which still resist?

Challenging the Distorting Polarities of the 'Apocalyptic Paradigm'

We need to remember that the genre 'apocalypse' is a modern category that has been imposed retrospectively on ancient texts, most of which regard themselves as prophecies — as urgent words of God to their own generation. The label 'apocalypse' was used to draw attention to a perceived heightening of transcendent language and symbolism in some 'prophetic' texts, though the distinction has never been an easy or obvious one (Collins and Collins 1979: 21–121). As such, the use of the word 'apocalypse' can fulfil a useful descriptive function, but it should not be used to impose a set of polarities, arising out of high modernism, on to ancient texts. While these supposed dualities may indicate tensions in prophetic and apocalyptic literature, they have often been polarized into binary opposites by subsequent developments in our understanding of space, time and the cosmos. These oppositions are then read back into prophetic texts with devastating consequences. I shall use the relationship between heaven and Earth (space), and between present and future (time), to illustrate this process, before briefly examining any implications for interpreting some select eschatological texts.

The claim by Yuri Gagarin — that he didn't see God on his trip to the heavens in the first crewed space flight in 1961 — both illustrated the polarization between heaven and Earth that had already taken place in popular thought, and contributed further to the distance between them. The increasing modern scientific awareness of the vast regions in space coupled with a biblicist insistence that heaven is somehow 'up there', have led to a spatial duality quite foreign to the thought world of prophetic and apocalyptic literature. Rather, biblical and other early texts portray heaven and Earth as interactive parallel universes, where heavenly messengers and humans in dreams and visions may cross the boundaries and 'time zones' on an everyday basis. The ambiguity in both Hebrew and Greek of the messenger/angel ('heavenly' or

'earthly'?) illustrates this well, and interestingly, the 'angel unawares' motif has again become a popular theme in this 'new age', especially in film and television. But biblical interpretations often lag behind when hermeneutical paradigms begin to shift. We stubbornly refuse to admit to an angel at the beginning of Mark (Mk 1.2), insist one is present at the end (Mk 16.5), and assume the 'angels in heaven' (Mk 13.32) must also be the 'other-worldly beings' involved in some kind of transcendent parousia at Mk 13.27. But God's messengers cannot be pigeon-holed so neatly. In the cosmic understanding of the first-century Mediterranean world, they are intermediaries between a heaven and Earth that coexist on the inside of a sphere, suspended above the abyss, mirroring each other as God(s) and humans interact.

In *4 Ezra*...the heavenly world exists alongside the earthly one (*4 Ezra* 7.49-51). Similarly, divine time – or timelessness – exists alongside human time, and may be accessed by the privileged few who are granted divinely sent visions and dreams, in which the normal constraints of time (and space) are erased (Dailey 1999: 240).

Dailey goes on to argue that any supposed temporal dualism between present and future is also challenged by the assumed world view of prophetic and apocalyptic literature:

The idea is not simply that one period of time will end, and that a new period of timelessness will begin, but rather that both exist simultaneously. Regarding the endtime, *2 Baruch* states '...they shall see the world which is now invisible to them and they will see a time which is now hidden to them. And time will no longer make them older' (*2 Bar.* 51.9) (Dailey 1999: 239).

Such an understanding of the interconnectedness of Earth and heaven challenges popular religious assumptions about the ontological space between them – that heaven is the opposite to, and distant from, Earth and replaces Earth after its demise. Rather, heaven (and the heavens) interact with, mirror and initiate activities on Earth.⁴ These ideas also challenge our assumptions about heaven as the (only) abode of God. If heaven is immanent and interconnected with Earth as part of the divine ecosystem, then there is no longer any usefulness in the concept of a

4. There is no room here to cite examples from Josephus and the Graeco-Roman historians of the way they use cosmic language as part of their description of significant historical events. Comets, falling stars, darkened sun and moon, and rivers reversing are all understood as *port* of (and not just signs or symbols of) tumultuous historical events, such as the destruction of Jerusalem and the assassination of a Caesar. See examples and the literature cited in Dyer (1998: 230-31; 1999: 106 n. 6) and Adams (2000).

divine residence beyond the farthest reaches of the universe. If heavenly bodies are seen as mutually interdependent with human existence and sharing in consequential relationships, then there is no longer any need to read ourselves as victims of these texts of a cosmic terror ordained by God. We may indeed interpret our role and God's role in some events in that way retrospectively, as the biblical narrative does on many occasions, but the future consequences of our present actions are always open, prophecy is always conditional, and repentance (in the true sense of 'change of direction') is always a possibility.

Retrieving Mark 13.24-30 from the Distorting Polarities of the 'Apocalyptic Paradigm'

Reading the texts in Mark 13 about the darkened sun and moon and the falling stars from a more 'historical' (Earth-based) and less 'apocalyptic' (transcendent) perspective does not deny the cosmological dimensions of the text. It does not seek to impose a 'metaphorical' reading on texts that are very clearly meant 'literally', though these two terms themselves betray an underlying modernist duality that can no longer be sustained. They also betray certain urban Western assumptions about what can and cannot happen in our natural environment. From the perspective of Earth, and away from bright city lights, stars can be seen 'falling' every clear evening. From the perspective of ancient oral cultures, these heavenly movements are significant for interpreting events on Earth (Mt. 2.2). The smoke of great battles darkens the sun and turns the moon blood red, and any other approximately concurrent natural wonders are pressed into service as ways of describing, interpreting, remembering and dating significant human events. What is remarkable about the history of interpretation of these texts in ancient literature is that we have in recent times forgotten how to read them in this way.⁵ Since the

5. Joseph Verheyden (1997) has restated the common modern interpretation of Mk 13.24-25 as recycled theophany/day of the Lord language used to describe a transcendent parousia of the Son of Man at the end of time. His detailed analysis of the theophanic motifs from the prophetic literature is very helpful – and correct in identifying the Markan focus on the gathering of the elect rather than on judgment themes – but any challenge to the assumption that these motifs must be interpreted as a transcendent parousia in Mark is dismissed without engaging the issues: 'I think one also misses the point when arguing that [Mk] 13.24-25 merely announces an important turning point in history' (Verheyden 1997: 526 n. 3). Recent commentators who have taken a more 'historical' interpretation of these verses include: Thomas R. Hatina (1996), N.T. Wright (1996: 339-68), Keith D. Dyer (1998: 230-31) (all of whom refer to the earlier work of R.T. France). Support for similar interpretations of these

Copernican revolution, because we can now imagine these texts in a new 'literal' way, we have burdened them with the full force of modern apocalyptic terror, and insisted that Mk 13.24-27 must therefore be a parousia text, a text of 'the end'. A brief perusal of pre-Copernican exegesis will readily establish what used to be the range of interpretations of this and parallel passages.

Jean Calvin, in his harmony of these synoptic texts, interprets them as referring to the 'continual rising and falling that we observe in the world': 'As for the stars, He does not mean that they shall fall in actual fact, but according to men's way of thinking'; 'In other words, as long as the Church's pilgrimage in this world lasts, the skies will be dark and cloudy' (Calvin 1972: 98, 94). Augustine and Ambrose connect them with leaders and persecutions in their own time:

then the stars shall fall from heaven and the powers of heaven shall be moved, when many who seemed to shine brilliantly with grace will yield to persecutions and will fall, and even the strongest of the faithful will be shaken (Augustine, in Oden and Hall 1998: 187).

Similarly: 'Also the stars, that is, leaders surrounded by fellow Christians, shall fall, as the bitterness of persecution mounts up' (Ambrose, in Oden and Hall 1998: 187). It is natural that these interpreters should see the stars as mirroring leadership within their own contexts, but the particular setting of Mark 13 suggests a further adjustment.

The cosmic events of Mk 13.24-25 can be understood in similar terms to those above as reflecting the falling leaders and powers immediately preceding Mark's day. In this setting, they would be understood as the realignment of temporal powers in the East after the fall of Jerusalem and the establishment of the House of Flavians in Rome. These are the powers (the 'they' of Mk 13.26) who will witness the vindication and exaltation of the 'human one' before God in heaven, just as the High Priest will (Mk 14.62). There is no messianic return, earthly parousia or second coming implied here, but rather, as in Daniel 7, the exaltation of 'one like a human' before the 'Ancient of Days' in heaven. This vindication will also be manifested on Earth in the form of the gathering, by the messengers/angels, of the elect from Judaea and from the four corners of Earth and heaven in the formation of the new community of faith ('his' elect; Mk 13.27). The eschatology and missiology of the Judean remnant is thus redefined in one inclusive moment as they are welcomed into the Markan communities in the north.

texts also comes from the socio-literary readings of Ched Myers (1988: 343) and Herman C. Waeijen (1989: 200), both of whom cite Walter Wink (1984: 162).

Mark 13.29 is usually translated as 'He is near, at the gates' to accord with the view that Mk 13.26-27 speaks of some kind of parousia. But the comparison with the fig tree and summer (in Mk 13 and in Mk 11) requires that the impersonal 'it is near' (Mk 13.29) refers instead to the time of harvest that summer brings. Certainly this is how Luke, one of Mark's earliest interpreters, reads it, when the early summer harvest festival of Pentecost becomes the occasion for the gathering of the multi-ethnic community, and the coming of the kingdom with power (Mk 9.1; Lk. 21.31). This usage of the personification of a season waiting at the gates is well attested in Aristotle ('Winter-at-the-gates') and not as clumsy as we might think.⁶

The affirmation that all these things will happen within a generation of Jesus speaking these words (Mk 13.30) is the assurance to Mark's community that they are *already occurring as they hear the Gospel*. This emphatic time reference in Mk 13.30 has caused much debate, although it is undoubtedly the most unambiguous reference of all. Despite many ingenious attempts to find alternative meanings, it is clear from its usage elsewhere in the Gospel of Mark and in Hebrew literature that its primary meaning is a literal 40-year generation. It is equally apparent that its location in this discourse implies that 'all these things' must include everything up to Mk 13.30 as events in the recent memory and current experience of the Markan community, and the refugees it now welcomes.

Texts that Resist Retrieval from the Ruin of Earth

'Heaven and Earth Will Pass Away' (Mark 13.31, cf. Matthew 24.35)

I have argued elsewhere that this affirmation by Jesus should be understood as more than just a figure of speech used to illustrate the permanence of his words (1999: 117). Certainly there are versions of this saying that *have* been remembered in the tradition in a figurative way: 'But it is easier for heaven and Earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped' (Lk. 16.17, cf. Mt. 5.18: 'until heaven and Earth pass away'). Interestingly, the majority of scholars arguing for a transcendent eschatology in Mk 13.24-27 seem to prefer a figurative reading of Mk 13.31, even though this leaves them with the awkward collapsing together of v. 30 (all these things happening within a

6. J. Jeremias (1965), 174 note 8. The personification of seasons and virtues/vices ('love' and 'lust') waiting 'at the door(s)/gate(s)' is common in classical and koine Greek, and provides a more appropriate framework for Mark 13.19 than James 5.9 or Acts 5.9.

generation), v. 32 (no one, not even the Son, knowing the day or hour) and v. 33 (you/we not knowing the time). If, however, v. 31 is permitted to signal a transition between 'all these things' (Mk 13.30) that occur 'in those days' (Mk 13.24), and the singular event of 'that day and that hour' (Mk 13.32), then it follows that the passing away of heaven and Earth is not just a figure of speech. Rather, it can be seen as the beginning of Jesus' response to the second half of the disciples' question in Mk 13.4.

The first half of the question ('When will this be?'), refers to the throwing down of the Temple building, which is addressed by Mark's compilation of the words of Jesus and early Christian prophets regarding the fate of Jerusalem in v. 6-23. But these events have no direct connection with any ultimate 'end', nor do they even function as a sign (Mk 13.4, cf. 8.12), since the Temple, for Mark, has stood condemned since Jesus first entered it (Mk 11.12-25). The cosmic realignments and the regathering of the elect (the time of summer harvest occurring as Mark writes) are then described in Mk 13.24-30, followed finally by a brief allusion ('Heaven and Earth will pass away'; Mk 13.31) to that second half of the question (Mk 13.4b), the 'fulfilment of all things' and its supposed sign. Jesus denies any knowledge of such an event and its timing (Mk 13.32), and ignores the request for a sign (again, Mk 8.12). Yet arguably, the text does affirm the prerogative of the Creator to de-create the cosmos. Even if this is so, the parable that follows immediately – the parable of the returning householder/Lord (Mk 13.34-36), and the need to move to a heightened level of watchfulness (Mk 13.33, 35, 37), are interpreted existentially in the Passion narrative that follows, as the four watches of the night are acted out (Geddert 1989: 94-105; Dyer 1999: 117-18). In Mark's narrative, it is not so much 'the end' that is inevitable and imminent (contra Tolbert), as those ends we encounter on the road of discipleship and testing. It is not the parousia that dominates Markan eschatology (in fact it is *never* mentioned) as much as the *appearances* of the returning Lord: three times leading up to midnight (Mk 14.32-42: he finds them sleeping at cock crow [Mark 14.72: Peter remembers]), at early dawn (Mark 15.1: Jesus alone), and then the appearance promised again in the new beginning in Galilee (Mk 14.28; 16.7). The logic of Mark's narrative insists that any cosmic eschatology motivates, not paralysis, but existential alertness and faithful action.

2 Peter, Stoicism and Cosmic Conflagration: End, Cycle or Spiral?

If Mk 13.31 contains the affirmation of the end of Earth as we know it, other traditions in the Christian Scriptures develop the idea much further. The passing away of heaven and Earth is linked explicitly with a

new heaven and Earth in Rev. 21.1.⁷ Even here, though, the language is not necessarily to be taken as referring to the annihilation of Earth and its replacement by a totally new creation (Reid 2000; Howard-Brook and Gwyther 1999). This is because it is not clear whether any concept of an absolute end to the cosmos has been clearly expressed in the literature of the ancient world. The closest analogy to the implosion of the solar system or the modern nuclear holocaust was the Stoic idea of cosmic conflagration (*ekpyrosis*), which seems to have been understood as a cyclical (*puligensia*) or perhaps a spiralling event, with each cosmic cycle beginning and ending with fire. Edward Adams is inclined towards a destructionist position himself in interpreting both the biblical and the Stoic texts, but he admits that affirmations in Stoic writings of the destructibility of the cosmos 'are somewhat offset by statements affirming or implying its immortality' (Adams 2000: 54). Thus if cosmos is used of any one particular world-cycle 'it can be described as destructible', but since it is used by the Stoics to encompass 'the endless sequence of world-cycles and conflagrations' it can be 'affirmed as everlasting' (Adams 2000: 55).

The biblical language that comes closest to expressing these Stoic influences is undoubtedly that of 2 Peter (quoted earlier). The melting of the elements (*stoicheia*) with fire (2 Pet 3.12) and the burning up of Earth and the heavens (2 Pet 3.10, 12) seems to use language and concepts shaped specifically to appeal to those within the Greek cultural world (Neyrey 1993: 241). Whereas this might make for a graphic contextualization of eschatological exhortations for the hearers of 2 Peter, it presents insurmountable problems for a retrieval of the text from the perspective of Earth. This is so even if these texts are understood in terms of the renewal rather than the annihilation of Earth, since they also exhort the hearer to actively desiring, if not hastening (2 Pet 3.12), that day. Texts that at the most maintain the prerogative of the Creator to de-/re-create the creation (Mk 13.31; Rev. 21.1) here have become texts that encourage our eager expectation of, and even participation in, that process. This suggests a questionable heightening of meaning that occurred when the Gospel tradition was more thoroughly Hellenized and expressed in Stoic

7. Space permits only a brief reference to the Isaianic background to these texts (e.g. Isa. 65.17; 66.22), and two readings that are supportive of the positions taken here. Westermann uses eschatological language, but argues that the texts imply that 'the world, designated as "heaven and earth", is to be miraculously renewed' (Westermann 1969: 408). Watts historicizes the texts thoroughly, and claims that they do not present 'an eschatological picture of the distant future' but presume 'a position in which the former age is already gone and a new age with Cyrus and his successors has begun' (Watts 1987: 354, 353).

terminology. Such a shift is analogous to that occurring when these same Gospel traditions were modernized and interpreted in post-Copernican terminology, as we have argued above. The process of re-contextualizing the text as a living Word requires a sensitivity to wider shifts in meanings and cosmologies, and attention to the history of interpretation of texts which spans pre-modern, modern and postmodern eras.

Conclusion (*An End, Not 'The End'*)

What, then, of the fate of Earth in Mark 13? There has been no space here to develop the dimensions positive to Earth in the wider Markan story: that Jesus 'was with the wild beasts' (Mk 1.13); that Jesus reclaims the 'sea' of Galilee as a bridge for disciples to cross between cultures, rather than a fearful chasm (Gill 1991: 35–41); that Galilee as *place* is integral to the mission of, and encounter with, the resurrected Jesus (Mk 16.7). Some texts in Mark 13 have been retrieved from the brink of the apocalyptic abyss (Mk 13.24–27) and interpreted in the light of an interconnected cosmos (heaven *and* Earth), where human activity and cosmic consequences *cannot* be separated, and Earth has intrinsic worth and purpose together with humanity.

One text still remains that affirms the exclusive knowledge of 'the Father' regarding the ultimate fate of heaven and Earth (Mk 13.31–32). The text seems to assume, rather than assert, the transcendence of the Creator. Even so, whether this text necessarily speaks of cosmic annihilation is doubtful. Its function within the narrative of Mark is to trigger a call to be on the alert for 'ends' as we encounter them in all aspects of human existence. That is, a call to act responsibly as humans in the face of trials, rather than to hide human and environmental disasters under a cloak of divine inevitability.

The same things cannot be said of the tradition preserved in 2 Pet. 3.7–13. Even though the context may again be hortatory, and the destructive process understood as part of a cyclical renewal, the 'hastening' or 'earnest desiring' of the torching and dissolving of the heavens and the fiery melting of the elements presents irretrievable problems for an ethical response to ecological problems. Again, the hope is for a (re)new(ed) heavens *and* Earth (2 Pet. 3.13), but the active encouragement to hasten the demise of the old Earth is an invitation that too many Christians have accepted too easily already.

Swords into Ploughshares: The End of War? (Q/Luke 9.62)*

Alan H. Cadwallader

Swords into Ploughshares: The Crisis of an Image

The prophetic clarion call of 'swords into ploughshares' (Isa. 2.4; Mic. 4.3) has echoed through the ages as eschatological hope for an end to the ravages of war and a return to idyllic pastoral life. Old American folk songs dream of the day when war will be no more, signalled by the refashioning of swords into ploughshares. Contemporary examples are trumpeted as fulfilling the hope – the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone, for example, hails the recycling of armaments into productive farming implements.¹ The life of humanity is secured in harmony and as a signature of that tranquility, steel is forged to cut Earth open.

This 'myth of innocence' (Mack 1988) – if not of origins, then at least of aspiration – does not dwell in untrammelled light.² The violence of the plough lurks in the shadows. Without any technological modification, the plough becomes a weapon for the mass destruction of Philistines; swinging Shangar is memorialized as judge of Israel (Judg. 3.31).³ The pastoral utopia suddenly stalls when ploughshares are turned back into swords and agricultural images are conscripted into militaristic service (Joel 3.9–13). The reputed implement of productivity becomes the instrument of destruction as cities and territories are ploughed into oblivion (Jer. 26.18).⁴ The plough, it seems, can be a battalion of violence and dispossession.

* I wish to record my thanks to a former student, Stuart Hill, whose doctoral work on Q provided the initial prompt to this essay. See Hill 1998.

1. See 'Swords into ploughshares' ([www.europaworld.org/Issue 35](http://www.europaworld.org/Issue%2035); accessed 18/5/2001). Multitudinous Christian organizations, whether they have a peace agenda or not, latch on to the scriptural text as their flagship.

2. 'Traditional romanticism' and 'a thinly disguised biblicism' are but two of the assessments of the editors of a Festschrift to Burton Mack (Castelli and Tausig 1996: 9).

3. A dispute exists about Shangar's ethnicity: Canaanite or Israelite (Gottwald 1979: 418, n. 342).

4. Cf. *Sibylline Oracles* 5.505. The same metaphor occurs in non-Jewish writings: see Horace, *Odes* 1.16.19–22; Seneca, *On Tranquillity* 1.26.4. The 'metaphor' was a tactic employed by invaders and colonizers.