The Abomination of Desolation

GRAHAM COTTER

THIS study of the "little apocalypse" in St. Mark's Gospel had its point of departure in the study of English literature: it was a sense of poetic appropriateness which led me to see a connection between the frequent mention of the desert in this Gospel and the mysterious reference to the desolating abomination in Chapter 13. I sensed, on reading through the Gospel in Greek, that the symbolic relation between the actual desert in which Jesus both found and gave inspiration, and the spiritual desert, whether represented by Nazareth or by Jerusalem, where he was met by rejection, had not been fully grasped by the evangelist. Yet so essential was this contrast to the contents of Jesus' Gospel that its print had been left deep in the tradition. I went about looking for this symbolic connection much as I had been accustomed to tracking down allusions and symbolic patterns in poetry, yet I was aware that the evangelist was not a creative artist in the usual sense, but the servant of the Holy Spirit, an articulate member of Christ's Church, and an inheritor of the Gospel tradition. As an inheritor of that Gospel he might re-present it, but could he justly change its nature? I for one, could not nonchalantly assume that the Apostolic Church had invented for itself a Gospel not actually preached by Our Lord. Surely, I assumed, there is an essential Gospel pattern, substantially but not exhaustively expressed in the Gospels, and surely this pattern is properly original with the words, acts and intentions of Jesus himself. This pattern can, I think be agreed upon, and where there is important confusion we can distinguish between the truth and its distortion.

It is not my present concern to prove these assumptions, but, rather, to draw attention to those elements of the pattern which are relevant to the particular confusion which seems to exist in the "little apocalypse." Behind the obscurities of that chapter there lie, I contend, the confusion of the disciples about the nature of Jesus as Messiah, and the later confusion of the Apostolic Church about the nature of the Last Things. As we know, Jesus' claim to be the Christ—a claim which in this Gospel is made for him rather than by him—involves a considerable revolution in Messianic thinking. We would gather that in his own mind he is bringing together the known symbols Son of Man and Suffering Servant. This was the most difficult lesson for his followers to learn; hence, Jesus chides Peter when that hasty leader confesses him as Christ: not only will Peter stumble, but all will stumble, during the Passion, when they have to learn so bitterly that Redemption is through Messiah's death. A second and consequent change introduced by the Gospel into the apocalyptic thinking of the time is in the meaning of

the "Parousia of the Son of Man." Jesus would teach his flock that the Last Things are inaugurated by Calvary, and that nothing is more clearly the Parousia than the Resurrection. Indeed, one explanation of the abrupt ending of this Gospel at 16:8, is that the Resurrection is itself the appearing of the Son of Man, and there is no more to be said: the evangelist is living within this New Age, and the existence of the Church presents the resurrected Christ to the world.

This view of the Parousia is not found explicitly in the Gospel, and I suggest that the reason for its being obscured is, first, the bewilderment of the disciples over an "appearing" which transcends time, and yet is related to history, and, secondly, the natural recourse of Christians to Jewish apocalyptic and the attempt to establish a "program of events" within the Parousia. It was not entirely a relapse into Jewish apocalyptic; there was, I am sure, some such "rebirth of images" as Dr. Farrer suggests in his book on the Revelation; yet the imagination had to do something with the idea of futurity. For the Lord himself, the future reign had all but begun: the Kingdom is *at hand*. An apocalyptic statement from Jesus might therefore be expected to reveal to his followers something of the pattern of the Last Things which began with his Passion—but this revelation would very easily be overlaid a generation later by the messianic hopes of the persecuted Church.

Here, then, is my hypothesis. The misapprehension and incredulity of Jesus' followers are factors both before and after the Resurrection, but after the Resurrection they are less important and do not interfere essentially with the Gospel. As factors before the Passion they bore dynamic relationship to the preaching. To some extent the Jewish hope of an earthly messianic kingdom, shared in by the disciples, was one of the signs of a superficial religion: the Lord's Gospel was of a religion of the heart which would be manifested in obedience to the Father through life and unto death. In preaching such a Gospel to such a people Jesus naturally used the wilderness as a symbol to indicate both spiritual and natural death, and he used this symbolism, not only by word of mouth, but also by his acts. It is in the wilderness that he is baptized by John, and it is into the wilderness, that traditional waste land where the nomad is spiritually at home, that he retires to prepare himself for his ministry. He takes men into the desert places to teach men and to feed them. This is symbolic of the Incarnation, of his coming into the "wilderness of this world" to bring life into a land of death. But in the civilized places where the natural desert has been conquered the Lord is rejected, and these towns and cities where he meets sophisticated opposition are the breeding places of the worst sin. In such places he is met by spiritual desolation: yet to them he must go, for it is spiritual desolation he has come to heal. By his obedience to death he defeats not only physical death but also spiritual death, which is sin. Therefore, when he is approached with the usual request of messiah-seekers for an apocalyptic sign, he has two ways of answering. He answers the insincere seekers, the Pharisees, by saying that

no sign will be given to an insincere generation—for if they had a sign they would neither recognize it nor believe it. On the other hand, he gives the most understanding of his own followers all the sign they can expect in the Transfiguration: for what is this extraordinary event if it is not the Son of Man in the glory of the Father? This "appearing of the Son of Man" comes properly before the Passion, for the Parousia precedes the inauguration of the Saviour's kingdom. Yet the appearing is to the few and the glory is like a dream: the hard, bitter work of redemption is not done with pomp and circumstance but with humiliation and pain. As Vincent Taylor says, "What we detach from his shoulders is the glittering apocalyptic robe with which primitive Christianity clothed Him and with which He is still draped in popular Christian expectation." Such a penetration of the overlay of quasi-Christian apocalyptic to the true revelation of the personality and will of God is work essential to the Gospel and parallel to the evangelism of Jesus Himself. What such penetration amounts to in terms of the discourse in Chapter 13 is the assertion that if the Lord did preface the events of the Passion with counsel to his inner circle of disciples, the significance he would attach to the abomination of desolation would be altogether new: the foul and stinking thing which makes desolate is his own betrayal, trial, and delivery to death; it is the really potent sign, the Sign of the Cross, which the disciples must regard, not as a signal for insurrection, but as a sign of the End. There is a hint of such an original meaning in the very fact that *erēmōseōs* is related to *erēmos*, a desert place; the hint itself may be accidental, what is hinted is not.

Before we look more fully into this, let us recall the chapter in R. H. Lightfoot's *The Gospel Message of St. Mark* which is entitled "The Connexion of Chapter Thirteen with the Passion Narrative." Lightfoot there considers that the discourse contains hints of what is to come in the Passion. He draws a parallel between 13:9, "They shall deliver you up; in councils and synagogues shall ye be beaten; and ye shall stand before governors and kings," and parts of 14:53–15:15, where the "Lord is delivered by Judas to the Sanhedrin; he stands before it and before Pilate the governor, and he is scourged" (p. 52). Again, Lightfoot relates 13:22–23, "There shall arise false Christs and false prophets, and shall show signs and wonders, that they may lead astray, if possible, the elect. But take ye heed: behold I have told you all things beforehand," to the Lord's betrayal by Judas and the further warning to the disciples on the way to Gethsemane. He refers the statement, "of that *hour* knoweth no one," to the exact temporal reckoning of Christ's arrest when it does come. He compares the reference to the Parousia in the Discourse with the reference to it made by Jesus before the Sanhedrin. He points out that if the discourse is a preliminary warning of the events of the Passion, then there is not much difficulty in the verse, "Verily, I say unto you, this generation shall not pass away, until all these things be accomplished." He goes on in a dramatic paragraph to show that Mark "is at particular pains to dwell upon the steadily increasing and finally

complete dereliction of the Lord." But one thing Lightfoot does not find by way of parallel is a distinct reference to the death of the speaker of the discourse. Yet the Lord had already warned them of his death. How strange that he should not do so now. To my mind, that warning was there: "When you see the desolating abomination set up where it ought not to be—the Messiah executed outside his own capital city—then flee." There is a further parallel, which the iron grip of Jewish apocalyptic still makes it difficult for us to grasp: the Parousia of the Son of Man will come to end the tribulation, and that Parousia is the Resurrection.

If such a preliminary warning of the events which are to follow is the original nature of the discourse, then what is the provenance of its present form? It may be an artificial introduction to the Passion put there by the evangelist. It is not, however, a particularly successful artificial construction: it does not clearly lead us to the Passion, and it refers us to events which are apparently to take place at some indefinite time in the future. Scholars have assumed that the discourse is, instead, an interpolation, and that it derives from some separate apocalyptic document, part of which is distinctly Roman and part which is distinctly Judaean, and so forth. My own present assumptions forbid my making such sweeping guesses: I ask that we assume that Jesus did say or do some such things as are recorded, but that the original may have become distorted. Moreover, if we look at the discourse as originally a warning to the disciples, we see that nothing is more likely than such a warning to them just before the Passion.

However, as it stands, the discourse is an apocalypse, and it may be argued that it is an apocalypse constructed in the persecuted sub-Apostolic Church with the traditional models in mind but with special reference to the Lord's Passion as the type of the Church's own suffering. Certainly, the Passion is the type of the Church's suffering, but this does not mean that the discourse, as an apocalypse, is properly original with the Church. As it stands it is a guide to a persecuted Church, yet, as it stands, it is obviously not original. It is more confused than even apocalyptic can reasonably be. If we carefully remove lines or phrases which clearly refer to the persecuted Church or the later Judaean situation, and which could not be part of an original dominical discourse, we find a curious appropriateness to the situation of Jesus after he had made his final appearance in the temple, and before that institution of the Eucharist which was to be the signal for his Passion to begin.

In the circumstances, and in the light of the Fourth Gospel, the weight of the evidence is in favour of Jesus' having given some instruction to the disciples at this time. If that is so, we may well ask why the instruction is not as simple as the earlier instructions. Previously, he has told of his forthcoming Passion—how the Son of Man must go to Jerusalem and be delivered up and suffer at the hands of the chief priests and be put to death. The purpose of an apocalyptic discourse within a final warning to the inner circle would be, not only to warn of what was to come—they had been

warned of that—but also to explain the significance of the coming events. Similar explanation had been afforded a similar group of disciples in the revelation on the mount of Transfiguration. Traditional apocalyptic took within its purview things past, present and to come, and the acts and words of Jesus are significant for all men and all times. The significance which Our Lord had to explain was not transitory; he had to show how his Passion was to be the main theme of the Gospel. The original discourse, I suggest, was apocalyptic in form in order to stress the universal significance of the coming events, and in order to relate the traditional imagery of the messianic kingdom, the Parousia and the tribulations to the true facts about the Kingdom, the Appearing of the Son and the sufferings both of the Son of Man and of the Saints of God. Since the significance of the Passion and the Resurrection of Jesus constitutes the theme of the Christian Gospel it is not surprising that this earliest extant Gospel should be constructed around those events. The whole account of the ministry in Jerusalem is full of symbolic references to this significance: the entry into Jerusalem stresses the Messiahship of Jesus; the cleansing of the temple, perhaps, the participation of the Gentiles in the Gospel. More obscure are such events as the blasting of the fig-tree—an event which I look upon as an acted parable of the spiritual desolation of Jerusalem, laid bare and deprived of its pretensions to productivity. Perhaps this is the most significant symbol, for it is with reference to its destruction that the discourse begins.

As Jesus sits across from the temple he is asked what the sign will be of its coming destruction. His reply is that there will be troubles and there will be persecution, that they must flee when they see the *bdelugma tēs erēmōseōs*, and that then the Son of Man will come. But no man knows the hour and they must watch and pray. This is easily interpreted as for the persecuted Church. I do not suggest that the Lord was not giving counsel for the future and for his Church, but I think the discourse was originally intended to put a different emphasis on the Parousia as the fulfilment of the Church's hope. If we interchange the positions of the two major items we have quite a different pattern. It takes no great act of prediction for Jesus to see that the temple would be destroyed, in the light of the temper of the Jews. I suggest that the discourse begins with a more ambiguous reference to the destruction of the temple, one which relates its destruction to his own physical death. Here is the sequence and meaning of the postulated original discourse:

The disciples ask for a sign, perhaps more aware than the text indicates that Jesus is referring to himself when he talks of the temple. The sign, he replies, will be the abomination of desolation: not the desecration of the temple by worship of Zeus Olympios or Caligula's horse—these earlier and later desecrations are shadows of the supreme sacrilege—but the making of the temple of his own body into a stinking thing, a corpse, which brings desolation to the faithful who see it. Then let them flee, for they must accept his humiliation without yet sharing his suffering (and, indeed, forty years later, let them flee again when the temple of the old dispensation is dese-

crated). Then follows the warning of tumult and persecution, probably less elaborate than it stands now, and the declaration that he will come in glory at the right hand of the Father, as they have already briefly seen him in the Transfiguration. He concludes with the warning that they must watch. No one knows the hour when these things will take place, but when once they begin the others will follow. This apocalyptic reference to Last Things I take to mean, among other things, that Our Lord did not have anything like a handy timetable to the events of the Resurrection and the Ascension and the "coming," all of which he refers to as the appearing of the Son of Man. It is not possible for Jesus, in his human capacity, to know "when these things will be" in any exact way before they happen to him. It is a part of the suffering of Gethsemane and Calvary that Jesus, although according to the tradition he had assurance of rising in three days to a hoped-for consummation which would conquer sin and death for ever, looked out across a death as bleak as any human death could be.

After the inauguration of these Last Things the time-sequence, although transcended by the New Age, is still the earthly condition of that New Age's realization in history. The Appearing then takes many forms: the appearances in a transformed body to the disciples, vision of the Ascension, the coming of the Holy Spirit, the appearance to St. Paul, the visions of St. John on Patmos. Essentially, the Last Things are still not subject to a temporal schedule. The difficulty of recording the Resurrection appearances and such indescribable happenings as the Ascension is just one indication of this. That the Second Person of the Trinity should have taken his risen human nature to "the right hand of the Father" is hard enough to grasp. The Lord's command, however, is clear enough. We are intended to keep watching for the Bridegroom, not just in the sky, but everywhere, all the time: he is always coming, always appearing to us when we do not expect him, and our life in the Church is a life in his presence. In our dynamic relation to the Gospel, being saved by it and called by it, yet being sent also to proclaim it, we are caught up into the life of God; and it is natural that we should return, after we read Chapter 16, verse 8, to Galilee, to begin again the cycle whose consummation is sketched in the apocalyptic discourse, but whose whole meaning is as well stated in the first Chapter:

> "The time is fulfilled,
> and the kingdom of God is at hand."