

## Article

# Jewish Apocalyptic Motifs in Mark 13, Considering Current Global Conflicts

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## Abstract

In Mark 13:7–8, wars and natural disasters are depicted in apocalyptic themes, reflecting Jewish traditions that viewed cosmic upheaval as preludes to divine intervention. This article examines Mark 13 within its socio-historical context and in relation to Second Temple apocalyptic literature such as the Sibylline Oracles and 4 Ezra. Using a historical-critical approach, it argues that Mark's portrayal of tribulations was not intended to foster fatalism but to cultivate vigilance, faith, and resilience. Building on this, the article explores how apocalyptic motifs can be brought into dialogue with contemporary crises, particularly ecological devastation, global conflicts, and pandemics. To enrich this dialogue, insights from African indigenous theologies—especially their communal understandings of endurance and hope—are introduced as contextual perspectives that resonate with Mark's eschatological vision. By bridging ancient apocalyptic discourse, ecological theology, and contextual reflection, the study contends that Mark 13 offers a constructive vision of hope and ethical responsibility amid contemporary turmoil.

**Keywords:** Mark 13; Jewish apocalypticism; eschatology; ethical response; postcolonial trauma; socio-political crisis; contextual theology

## 1. Contribution

This study reinterprets Mark 13's eschatology as a morally engaged and hopeful discourse rather than mere fatalism, situating it within its Jewish apocalyptic context while addressing contemporary global and African crises. It offers a multidisciplinary framework that bridges historical-critical exegesis with modern theological reflection, providing a resource for ethical action and resilience. The research also contributes to African theological scholarship by opening a dialogue between biblical eschatology and indigenous concepts of apocalypticism. Ultimately, it enriches both academic and practical understandings of apocalyptic literature in contexts of social turmoil and ecological urgency.

## 2. Introduction

This study investigates the apocalyptic motifs in Mark 13:7–8, arguing that, rather than promoting fatalistic resignation, these verses call for ethical vigilance and theological hope amid tribulation. Mark's references to "wars and rumors of wars," "earthquakes," and "famines" echo core Jewish apocalyptic themes developed during the Second Temple period. Yet, as apocalyptic scholars such as [J. J. Collins \(2016, pp. 19–25\)](#) and [Grabbe \(2007, pp. 37–39\)](#) note, these motifs emerged from a symbolic universe in which cosmic upheavals functioned as theological responses to historical trauma. Modern readers, however, encounter these texts within a different symbolic horizon—marked by ecological col-



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lapse, pandemics, and geopolitical instability. This creates an interpretive tension: how can ancient apocalyptic visions of divine intervention and hope be responsibly re-read, considering contemporary crises? These motifs are not intended as a predictive timetable of eschatological events but rather function as theological responses to historical trauma, particularly the collapse of socio-political structures under imperial domination (Edsall 2018, pp. 427–49). When re-read against the backdrop of contemporary global crises—such as ecological collapse, pandemics, and international conflict—the passage takes on renewed relevance, offering a theological vision that emphasizes resilience, discernment, and prophetic engagement in history (Fitzgerald 2011, pp. 30–39). The primary aim of this article is to address the interpretive gap between ancient Jewish apocalypticism and modern existential realities. Despite the centrality of apocalyptic discourse in the earliest strata of New Testament literature, earlier streams of modern biblical interpretation—particularly in the mid-20th century—often misunderstood or dismissed its theological function as irrational or escapist (cf. Bultmann 1951; Käsemann 1964; Schweizer 1970). By reassessing the role of apocalyptic motifs in Mark 13, this study proposes that these texts functioned as vehicles for ethical exhortation and communal endurance in the face of imperial violence (Hombana 2025, pp. 1–8). Furthermore, this analysis seeks to retrieve their significance for our contemporary context, where apocalyptic rhetoric resurfaces amidst widespread fears about the future of the planet and human civilization.

Methodologically<sup>1</sup>, this study employs a historical-critical analysis of Mark 13:7–8 within the context of first-century Jewish apocalyptic thought. The “Little Apocalypse” of Mark 13 reflects not a deterministic eschatology, but a paraenetic framework grounded in the experience of social upheaval<sup>2</sup>. Myers (2008, p. 323) has argued that Mark 13 should be understood not as a speculative forecast but as a “political-theological lament of a world unraveling under imperial violence”. Similarly, A. Y. Collins (2007, pp. 616–17) maintains that the listed tribulations—wars, earthquakes, famines—are not signs of the immediate end, but rather “birth pangs” that signal the beginning of a new age and call the community to steadfastness and discernment. Meanwhile, Marcus (2009, pp. 870–71) further supports this view by tracing the intertextual links between Mark 13 and Daniel 7–12, arguing that Mark adapts Daniel’s apocalyptic imagery to encourage hope in the face of crisis rather than to promote speculative eschatology.

In addition to the Gospel text, this study offers a comparative analysis with other apocalyptic works from the Second Temple period to further situate Mark’s language within a broader literary-theological tradition. The Sibylline Oracles, particularly Book 3, present a sequence of natural disasters and cosmic portents—including earthquakes and famine—as expressions of divine judgment upon imperial oppression (Sib. Or. 3.635–650; see J. J. Collins 2016, pp. 137–39). Likewise, 4 Ezra (or 2 Esdras), composed in the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple, reflects a worldview in which catastrophe precedes renewal. In 4 Ezra 5:1–13, a litany of woes—including sword, famine, and pestilence—is cast as an inevitable prelude to divine intervention (Stone 1990, pp. 121–23). Similarly, 2 Baruch 27–30 outlines a period of tribulation leading to messianic deliverance, where the disruption of cosmic and social order becomes the stage for theological reorientation (Henze 2011, pp. 177–79). These sources reveal that Jewish apocalyptic texts were not passive or fatalistic in outlook. Instead, they functioned as theological protest literature, affirming divine sovereignty in the face of overwhelming suffering. They challenged prevailing power structures, inspired ethical vigilance, and nurtured eschatological hope. In this light, Mark 13:7–8 should be read not as an otherworldly distraction but as a theological resource for interpreting and responding to crises, both ancient and contemporary. This study, therefore, contributes to both historical Jesus research and contextual theology

by recovering the constructive, not destructive, theological vision embedded in apocalyptic discourse.

### 3. Socio-Historical Context of Mark 13

Understanding Mark 13 within its socio-historical context necessitates situating the text in its *Sitz im Leben*, specifically the traumatic aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. The fall of Jerusalem at the hands of Roman legions led by Titus was not only a military catastrophe but also a theological crisis for Jewish identity and religious practice. This period of socio-political upheaval created a vacuum in Jewish leadership and spirituality, prompting varied responses among sectarian groups, including the early followers of Jesus.

The Gospel of Mark, traditionally considered to have been written shortly after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, bears the marks of this trauma. Some scholars, however, argue that Mark may have been composed during the Jewish War, while others suggest that Mark 13 could be a post-war interpolation reflecting later eschatological reflection (Grabbe 2007, p. 112; A. Y. Collins 2007, pp. 56–58). Its apocalyptic tone, particularly evident in Chapter 13, reflects the theological disorientation and yearning for divine vindication in a world destabilized by imperial violence and religious displacement (Marcus 2009, p. 871)."

The early Christian communities were themselves marginalized, both politically and within the broader Jewish milieu. They faced Roman suspicion and persecution, while also navigating sectarian tensions with other Jewish groups such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots. According to A. Y. Collins (2007, pp. 18–20), the Markan community likely experienced exclusion and hostility, contributing to a heightened sense of urgency and anticipation of eschatological intervention. This context of crisis produced fertile ground for apocalyptic imagination and rhetorical strategy.

Mark 13 functions as crisis literature, drawing on Jewish apocalyptic motifs that were prevalent in texts such as Daniel, 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, and 2 Baruch. These texts share common literary and theological features: dualism between good and evil, revelations mediated through visionary experiences, temporal determinism, and an emphasis on divine judgment as the ultimate resolution to worldly injustice. As J. J. Collins (2016, pp. 5–6) notes, apocalyptic literature typically involves a revelatory narrative where a divine or angelic figure unveils hidden truths to a human recipient, offering a theological lens for interpreting suffering and maintaining hope for renewal.

The rhetorical function of apocalyptic discourse in such settings was not to foster fatalism but to cultivate ethical vigilance, communal resilience, and faith in divine sovereignty. Horsley (1993, pp. 205–8) emphasizes that apocalyptic texts acted as counter-discourses to imperial narratives of control and stability. Rather than portraying history as chaotic and meaningless, apocalyptic writers offered an interpretive framework that affirmed God's ultimate justice and the eventual reversal of oppressive conditions. In Mark 13, the catalogue of disasters—wars, earthquakes, famines—should be read not as chronological predictions but as symbolic indicators of a transition in God's plan for the world. The reference to "birth pangs" in Mark 13:8 evokes the prophetic tradition where suffering precedes the emergence of new life, suggesting an eschatological transformation rather than mere destruction.

### 4. Exegetical Analysis of Mark 13:7–8

Mark 13:7–8 is nestled within what is often termed the "Little Apocalypse" or "Olivet Discourse," marking Jesus' last major teaching moment prior to the passion narrative. Its placement is significant; it functions as a theological and literary transition from prophetic

warning to imminent suffering. France observes that the broader discourse in Mark 13 is framed within a first-century Jewish context, where Jesus' words about global convulsions were likely understood not as remote future predictions but as immediate interpretive frameworks for the destruction of the Temple and communal trauma (France 2002, pp. 531–33). Within this context, Jesus' enumeration of "wars and rumors of wars," "earthquakes," and "famines" must be read as both concrete occurrences and symbolic markers of cosmic upheaval. Guelich emphasizes how Mark's use of the divine passive verb  $\delta\epsilon\iota$  ("must take place") imparts a theological urgency, suggesting that such calamities are woven into God's sovereign plan rather than being isolated historical accidents (Guelich 1989, pp. 268–70). Consequently, these signs are neither random natural disasters nor mere certainties of doom, but invitations to discern divine purpose amid history's rupture.

Marcus further contributes to this literary-theological tapestry by drawing attention to the metaphor of "birth pangs" ( $\acute{\omega}\delta\acute{\iota}\nu\epsilon\varsigma$ ). Marcus traces this image to earlier scriptural traditions—particularly Isaiah 26:17–18 and Daniel 7–12, where suffering precedes redemption in the unfolding of God's eschatological purposes (Marcus 2009, pp. 879–81). Here, the metaphor signals that affliction is not the terminus but the threshold of God's eschatological work. Additionally, Alford's commentary catalogues the contemporary cataclysms of the first century—earthquakes in Laodicea, famines under Claudius, and Roman civil strife—as earthly events aligned with Jesus' warning (Alford 1870: Mark 13.1–8, note 2). This pairing of historical events with apocalyptic motifs reinforces France's observation that Mark's audience would have heard echoes of their own lived experience in the words spoken by Jesus decades earlier. In comparative terms within the Synoptic tradition, Mark refrains from offering the interpretive expansions found in Matthew and Luke. While Matthew's version adds explanatory comments and Luke offers historical framing, Mark preserves a characteristic brevity and ambiguity that demand reader vigilance. Guelich notes that Mark's retention of ambiguity and tension invites readers to participate in the ongoing interpretation of sacred history (Guelich 1989, pp. 271–73).

## 5. Jewish Apocalyptic Parallels in Mark 13

The Gospel of Mark 13:7–8, with its vivid portrayal of wars, famines, and earthquakes, resonates deeply with themes found in Jewish apocalyptic literature, particularly the Sibylline Oracles and 4 Ezra (2 Esdras). These texts emerge from comparable socio-political crises and serve to critique imperial power structures while affirming divine sovereignty and future deliverance.

## 6. The Sibylline Oracles (Books III & V): Apocalyptic Resistance and Eschatological Imagination

The Sibylline Oracles, particularly Books III and V, provide critical insight into the Hellenistic Jewish apocalyptic imagination, articulating a theologically charged resistance against the prevailing Roman imperial hegemony. These oracular compositions, attributed pseudonymously to the Greco-Roman sibyls, serve as a medium through which marginalized Jewish communities voice divine judgment and eschatological hope during periods of political oppression and existential crisis. In Book III, the prophetic corpus integrates Hellenistic literary tropes with Jewish eschatological motifs, deploying cosmic disasters—earthquakes, famines, pestilences, and heavenly disturbances—as symbols of divine judgment upon imperial entities, especially Rome. This apocalyptic catalogue, as exemplified in Sib. Or. III.652–670, indicts the arrogance and tyranny of political leaders, portraying their demise as an inevitable consequence of their injustice. These verses exhibit a clear theodical function, where human suffering under empire is framed within a broader divine economy of justice and cosmic order (Perkins 2007). The motifs of fire and

sword, frequent in these lines, not only mirror prophetic literature (cf. Isa 66:15–16) but also reinforce a theology of divine vengeance against the enemies of God’s people<sup>3</sup>.

Book V deepens this apocalyptic vision. Written most likely after the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE), it reflects a post-70 Jewish consciousness, saturated with grief yet longing for vindication. It depicts celestial anomalies, such as eclipses and signs in the sky, alongside wars, famines, and plagues, not as random calamities but as eschatological portents announcing divine intervention. In Sib. Or. V. 158–161, the phrase “the Highest shall send a king from the sun” likely alludes to a messianic figure whose coming reverses imperial fortunes<sup>4</sup>. This image resonates with Mark 13, where similar apocalyptic signs—“the sun will be darkened... and the powers in the heavens will be shaken” (Mark 13:24–25)—prepare for the Son of Man’s arrival. Both texts thus operate within a shared symbolic universe, shaped by trauma and the search for meaning under imperial violence<sup>5</sup>.

Collins notes that these oracles, while couched in pseudepigraphic Greco-Roman form, serve a distinctly Jewish purpose: to preserve identity, critique power, and sustain eschatological hope. The oracles function as historical memory, encoding experiences of defeat and persecution—especially during the reigns of Antiochus IV, Nero, and Titus—and transmuting them into expectations of divine reversal<sup>6</sup>. In doing so, they offer a counter-narrative to imperial triumphalism, asserting that Rome’s ascendancy is temporary and that God’s justice is final. Therefore, Books III and V of the Sibylline Oracles are not merely literary relics but deeply theological texts, articulating a Jewish apocalyptic theology through the language of catastrophe and the hope of cosmic transformation. They should be read not only as texts of lament but as acts of resistance, where the poetic imagination becomes a theological weapon against oppression.

#### 7. 4 Ezra (2 Esdras): Theodicy, Empire, and Eschatological Imagination

Composed in the wake of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, 4 Ezra (also known as 2 Esdras in the Christian tradition) is one of the most profound and anguished reflections on divine justice in Jewish apocalyptic literature. Situated within the aftermath of catastrophic national trauma, the text offers a theologically rich and emotionally raw response to the devastation of Zion, the apparent silence of God, and the enduring question of Israel’s suffering under foreign domination (Stone 1990, pp. 45–78).

#### 8. Lamentation and Theological Inquiry (Chs. 3–10)

The heart of 4 Ezra lies in its sustained dialogue between the seer Ezra and the angel Uriel. In this extended visionary sequence (chapters 3–10), Ezra repeatedly challenges God on the grounds of theodicy—Why does a righteous people suffer while the wicked prosper (4 Ezra 3:1–3 and 4:1–6)? Ezra’s laments are not abstract; they are the cries of a community disoriented by loss, where the destruction of the Temple is perceived as both a theological scandal and an existential rupture. As Michael E. Stone observes, this segment oscillates between despair and reassurance, mirroring the dual structure of lamentation followed by divine instruction. Uriel’s responses are complex and often indirect. He does not dismiss Ezra’s pain but reframes it within a cosmic economy of hidden wisdom, where God’s ways surpass human comprehension (Stone 1990, pp. 45–78) (See also, Stone 1990, pp. 65–78). Yet even within this mystification, glimpses of hope emerge: a Messianic Age (4 Ezra 7:28–29), the resurrection of the dead (4 Ezra 7:32–33), and the vindication of the righteous (4 Ezra 5:41–42). Thus, the dialogue enacts a pedagogy of apocalyptic faith, where questioning is not suppressed but transformed through visionary insight.

## 9. The Eagle Vision and Imperial Critique (Chs. 11–12)

The eagle vision in chapters 11–12 represents a pivotal shift from theological inquiry to historical apocalyptic critique. The eagle, with its many heads and wings, has been widely understood—both in ancient and modern interpretation—as a veiled allegory of the Roman Empire. This interpretation is supported by parallels to Danielic imagery (especially Daniel 7) and reinforced by the temporal proximity of the text to Roman rule over Judea.

The vision depicts the eagle as a grotesque and tyrannical force, consumed by arrogance and destined for divine judgment. It exemplifies a strategy of coded resistance, where political critique is embedded within symbolic and mythological frameworks to evade censorship and heighten theological resonance. As George W.E. Nickelsburg emphasizes, the critique is not merely political; it is cosmo-political—Rome is not just a geopolitical oppressor but an embodiment of cosmic rebellion against the divine order. The destruction of the eagle by a lion—interpreted by some as a messianic figure from the line of Judah—signals not only Rome’s fall but the inauguration of a just eschatological kingdom (Nickelsburg (2005, pp. 253–55)). Here, 4 Ezra imagines a reversal of imperial dominance through divine intervention, offering consolation through an assured yet future-oriented justice.

## 10. Eschatology and Moral Urgency (Chs. 13–16)

The latter chapters continue this eschatological momentum. In chapter 13, Ezra is shown a vision of a “man” rising from the sea—interpreted again in messianic terms—who vanquishes hostile nations by the mere power of his breath. This vision extends the themes of divine sovereignty and cosmic renewal, where deliverance is not gradual but cataclysmic and unmistakable. In chapter 16, the tone becomes even more urgent and exhortative. The metaphor of birth pangs (16:38) underscores the inevitability and intensity of the coming tribulations. The language closely echoes Mark 13:8: “These are the beginnings of birth pangs.” Both texts utilize the metaphor to frame suffering not as divine absence but as a sign of divine imminence. As Matthias Henze<sup>7</sup> observes, the use of such imagery signals a prophetic realism, acknowledging present distress while affirming that it is precisely in the turmoil that God is actively bringing forth a new world. Moreover, the call to moral preparedness in these chapters echoes the New Testament’s parousia ethics. The righteous are summoned to separate from corruption, endure suffering, and wait patiently. This portrays a vision of ethical apocalypticism, where eschatological hope demands present fidelity and spiritual clarity<sup>8</sup>.

## 11. Comparative Synthesis

Both Sibylline Oracles and 4 Ezra underline key theological motifs that Mark 13 reflects (draws upon) and reconfigures. These include:

- Judgment: Cataclysmic events function as signs of divine judgment on oppressive systems.
- Deliverance: While judgment is real, it is never the final word. Both texts hold out eschatological hope—of a purified world or restored Israel.
- Hope and Ethical Urgency: Apocalyptic rhetoric is mobilized to provoke repentance and faithful vigilance, not passive resignation.

Mark 13 participates in this Jewish apocalyptic discourse but reorients it theologically around the person and mission of Jesus. The emphasis on “birth pangs” (ὠδίνες) reframes suffering as anticipatory rather than terminal. As Marcus notes, Mark transforms apocalypticism into a call to discipleship amid tribulation, emphasizing God’s control over history (Marcus 2009, pp. 879–81). Thus, the evangelist is not merely borrowing apocalyptic tropes; he is reinterpreting them christologically. In doing so, Mark contributes a distinct

voice to the evolution of Jewish apocalyptic thought—one that affirms continuity with ancestral hope while introducing a radical theological recalibration.

## 12. Contextual Theological Engagement

Theological reflection on apocalyptic motifs gains renewed urgency when contextualized within contemporary global and regional crises. In particular, the experience of Southern Africa—a region grappling with multifaceted socio-political instabilities, environmental degradation, and health pandemics—provides a poignant lens through which to reconsider the function of apocalyptic discourse beyond abstract eschatology. Rather than mere speculation about the end times, apocalyptic imagery emerges as a critical interpretive framework that articulates collective anxiety, moral urgency, and the possibility of divine intervention amid tangible, lived crises. This section aims to explore how modern conflicts and calamities in Southern Africa resonate with biblical apocalyptic motifs, inviting faith communities to respond with ethical vigilance, hope, and transformative praxis.

## 13. Global Conflicts as Modern Apocalypses in Southern Africa

In contemporary Southern Africa, the devastating consequences of environmental disasters have infused daily experience with apocalyptic resonance, drawing urgent theological and moral questions from communities grappling with climate-induced trauma. Far from being abstract or mythic, apocalyptic imagery has re-entered the public imagination as a lens through which to interpret the escalating interplay between ecological collapse, social fragility, and existential threat. For instance, “When the Limpopo River floods destroyed homes in 2019, local communities described the event using terms resonant with apocalyptic imagery: ‘The skies opened in judgment,’ ‘The earth rebelled against us,’ and ‘It is as if the end has come.’ Such language echoes motifs in Jewish apocalyptic texts—cosmic disturbances, catastrophic upheaval, and imminent divine reckoning—while providing a framework for interpreting environmental disaster as morally and spiritually meaningful (Thinane et al. 2023, pp. 1–10). The April 2022 KwaZulu-Natal floods exemplify this shift. Torrential rainfall led to catastrophic mudslides and flash floods, claiming nearly 500 lives and displacing thousands, especially in informal settlements. Thinane and colleagues describe this calamity as not merely environmental but profoundly symbolic of a coming “climate apocalypse”, with disproportionate impacts on the poor and historically marginalized communities (Thinane et al. 2023, pp. 1–2). The use of apocalyptic language in this context is not accidental—it signals an emerging hermeneutic that fuses biblical motifs of chaos and judgment with lived socio-environmental instability.

This interpretative mode was reinforced in September 2023, when the Western Cape experienced flash flooding that resulted in at least 11 fatalities, thousands stranded, and damaged infrastructure worth over R1.4 billion. According to reports by the South African Weather Service and government assessments, the floods were linked to a series of cut-off low-pressure systems, phenomena increasingly intensified by climate change (South African Weather Service 2023; GroundUp 2023). The sheer unpredictability and frequency of these events suggest a disruption of cosmological order, paralleling apocalyptic texts that portray nature as unraveling under divine or cosmic judgment (cf. Isa 24:19–20; Rev 6:12–17). These South African experiences are mirrored in the wider region. Cyclone Idai (March 2019), one of the deadliest storms in Southern Hemisphere history, ravaged Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Malawi, leaving more than 1300 dead and affecting over 3 million people. The World Meteorological Organization labelled it “a humanitarian catastrophe,” exacerbated by poor infrastructure and climate vulnerability (WMO 2019). In 2023, Cyclone Freddy followed with similar destruction, described by the UN as one of the

longest-lived and most energetic tropical systems ever recorded, affecting over 500,000 people in Malawi alone and deepening hunger crises across the region (UN OCHA 2023). These disasters underscore a pattern of climatic intensification that exposes the precarity of national preparedness and the fragility of human resilience.

What emerges from these events is a new apocalyptic consciousness, where communities encounter disaster as a theological rupture—a moment when historical suffering becomes eschatologically charged. Like the biblical apocalypses of Daniel, 4 Ezra, or Revelation, these calamities are experienced not just as random acts of nature but as signs of a deeper moral and cosmic disorder. The symbolic power of water, fire, and darkness in these settings reflects an intuitive grasp that environmental crises are never merely physical; they are spiritual breaches that cry out for prophetic interpretation and moral accountability. This theology of crisis is beginning to inform academic and ecclesial discourse. Scholars such as Munyaradzi Murove and James Kombo argue for a contextual African theological ethics that responds to climate trauma not only through eco-theology but by engaging traditional African cosmologies and moral reasoning systems (Murove 2021; Kombo 2017). Churches, too, are rethinking eschatology considering climate justice, viewing environmental stewardship not as optional charity but as a theological imperative rooted in Genesis 1–2, Romans 8, and the Book of Revelation’s new creation vision.

Moreover, these apocalyptic experiences raise critical ethical challenges for public theology: How should faith communities interpret floods, famines, and cyclones without reverting to fatalism? Can the language of divine judgment be reclaimed constructively to critique anthropogenic ecological sin and systemic neglect? And how might apocalyptic hope be cultivated without denying the depth of present suffering? In early June 2025, a potent cold front swept across the Eastern Cape—bringing torrential rains, floods, strong winds, and even snow that overwhelmed the town of Mthatha and surrounding districts. Within days, over 100 lives were lost (including at least 38 children), thousands displaced, and critical infrastructure—homes, schools, hospitals, roads—left in ruins, with reconstruction costs exceeding R5 billion. The rapid rise of floodwaters, sweeping away a school bus and stranding families on rooftops and trees, evoked biblical imagery of tumultuous waters and divine wrath (cf. Ps 93:3–4; Isa 43:2) (South African Weather Service (2023). See also, Thinane et al. (2023, pp. 1–10)). Survivors described scenes of utter disorientation, fractured safety, and existential dread—hallmarks of apocalyptic rupture, where the cosmic order is violently destabilized.

#### 14. Structural Failure and Social Injustice as Sinful Context

Unlike unpredictable natural cataclysms, the Mthatha floods exposed deep-rooted structural failures—insufficient infrastructure in floodplains, lack of local rescue capacity, failing governance, and poor urban planning. This mirrors prophetic denunciations (e.g., Amos 5:24; Mic 6:8) where societal neglect becomes a kind of corporate sin, intensifying the moral dimension of climate disasters. Floods—beyond meteorological phenomena—become divinely resonant judgments against systems of neglect. They reveal not merely ecological imbalance, but ethical bankruptcy in our socio-political foundations.

#### 15. Cumulative Apocalyptic Pattern Across the Region

This paper focuses primarily on Southern Africa as a contextual example for exploring ecological threats, given the region’s acute environmental challenges and the contributions of African theologians engaging these realities. While Southern Africa serves as the primary lens, it is acknowledged that many of the ecological crises and theological concerns reflected here are also common across Africa and bear relevance for global ecological discourse.

Mthatha's floods are not an isolated incident but part of an escalating pattern of ecological disruption across the region. In April 2022, KwaZulu-Natal experienced devastating floods that claimed nearly 500 lives, which Thinane and colleagues described as a "climate apocalypse" (Thinane et al. 2023, p. 12). Similarly, the Western Cape in September 2023 endured ecological chaos and damages estimated at R1.4 billion. Beyond South Africa, Cyclone Idai (2019) and Cyclone Freddy (2023) brought widespread destruction to Mozambique, Malawi, and Zimbabwe, leaving trails of death and displacement. Together, these disasters form a disturbing chorus of elemental interruptions, reminiscent of the imagery of the seventh seal in Revelation, where earthquakes shake the earth, oceans roar, and stars fall from the heavens (Rev. 6:12–14). These are no longer distant prophecies confined to eschatological imagination, but urgent presentiments of ecological judgment unfolding in the present.

## 16. Apocalyptic Imaginaries as Theological Resource

These recurrent crises are pushing Southern African theologians (e.g., Murove, Kombo) to craft a contextual apocalyptic theology that:

Views environmental chaos as a divine sign of cosmic distress.

Urges moral accountability—not fatalism but action driven by covenantal justice.

Reframes eschatology from future hope to present responsibility—climate stewardship becomes prophetic praxis.

To put it more bluntly, A Southern African apocalyptic theology emerging from these crises must navigate difficult tensions. It should recognize human suffering without succumbing to despair, critique social and structural injustices without resigning to them, and cultivate hope that is concrete rather than abstract. This theological approach calls for mindful reflection, acknowledging that disasters often expose deep-seated social and moral failings. It encourages engaged mourning, where expressions of grief become meaningful theological responses, and it fosters forward-looking hope, motivating ethical and structural action grounded in covenantal responsibility and communal care (Conradie 2006, pp. 19–24, see also, Dames 2022, pp. 1–8).

This theological shift draws heavily from biblical themes: water-washed land becoming new creation soil (Gen 1–2; Rev 21–22), famine as moral tightening, storms as spiritual awakenings.

## 17. Apocalyptic Mourning and Prophetic Resistance

Communal mourning—funeral services, candle lighting, days of prayer—are not passive grieving but ritual protests, coded as prophetic witness (cf. Rev 6:9–11). They declare that such disasters reveal a wounded creation—and in that wounding, a summons to repentance, justice, and ecological solidarity. The Mthatha and regional floods represent modern apocalypses—they break our normality and demand theological reckoning. They are not just climate events but cosmic red flags: signals that creation groans (Rom 8:22) and humanity must respond.

The emerging Southern African apocalyptic theology must hold these tensions: lament without despair, critique without resignation, hope without abstraction. It calls for:

1. Vigilant remembering—that disasters expose systemic sin.
2. Active lament—that acknowledges grief as theological language.
3. Prophetic hope—that urges structural change guided by covenantal ethics.

## 18. Re-Reading Apocalyptic Hope Amid Crisis

Rather than fueling despair, contemporary theologians frame these crises as kairotic opportunities for prophetic action. Thinane and colleagues argue that responsible public

theology in South Africa must heed the call of apocalyptic catastrophe, urging churches to mobilise for human security and ecological justice (Thinane et al. 2023, pp. 7–8). Likewise, Meiring emphasises that apocalyptic discourse—properly understood—“challenges contemporary powers... and presents prophetic and ethical ways for the church to participate in the *Missio Dei*” (Meiring 2020, p. 6, see also, Hombana 2024, pp. 1–8). In Zimbabwe, the 2023 El Niño-induced drought precipitated a national hunger disaster affecting millions, leading to repeated disaster declarations by Malawi and Zambia. These overlapping climate events exemplify the “birth pangs” motif—not as terminal destruction, but as a call to vigilance, solidarity, and collective responsibility. The Church, therefore, cannot retreat into eschatological quietism but must serve as a locus of resistance and restoration.

## 19. African Contextual Reflection on Apocalyptic Imagination

African theologies have long embraced indigenous eschatological patterns that interpret crises as shared ancestral summons to renewal. The cyclical imagery found in African traditional thought—a theology of rebirth through communal calamity—resonates powerfully with apocalyptic texts (Mugambi 1995, pp. 160–80). Postcolonial theology in the region interprets environmental disasters and political oppression as episodes of communal suffering, calling for spiritual rejuvenation and sovereignty. For example, Southern African eco-theologians highlight the Scripture’s flood narratives to frame preventive theology and public policy—a form of eschatological solidarity with the earth’s frontline communities (Thinane et al. 2023, p. 34). Moreover, youth-centered eco-responses in South Africa are increasingly seen not merely as activism but as expressions of ancestral restoration, integrating black consciousness with creation care (Benedict 2022, pp. 287–91). These perspectives demonstrate how African churches contextualize apocalyptic motifs not as otherworldly escapes but as triggers for systemic transformation, ecological stewardship, and communal healing.

## 20. Ethical and Ecclesiological Implications

The ethical implications of Mark 13:7–8 compel a re-evaluation of Christian discipleship as active engagement rather than passive fatalism. The Markan apocalyptic summons to “watchfulness” and endurance amid tribulation functions as an ethical injunction towards resilience, social justice, and communal solidarity in contexts of crisis (France 2002, p. 534). This vigilance is not merely a private spiritual stance but extends to public responsibility, where communities embody prophetic witness through ethical resistance to injustice and systemic oppression (Bauckham 1993, p. 37). From an ecclesiological perspective, the apocalyptic discourse challenges the church to function as a countercultural community that refuses complacency, fostering a praxis that anticipates divine sovereignty while confronting present realities (Evans 2001, p. 364).

Hermeneutically, this stance urges scholars and practitioners to resist reductive or sensationalist readings of apocalyptic literature that distort its complex theological motifs (Gundry 1993, p. 573). Instead, it encourages a responsible exegesis that integrates historical-critical insights with contemporary socio-political realities, facilitating interpretations that empower rather than alienate believers (Hombana 2025, pp. 1–8). Such an approach situates Mark 13 as a dynamic theological resource that mediates hope and ethical action amid crisis, fostering a theological imagination that is simultaneously critical, hopeful, and transformative.

## 21. Conclusions

In conclusion, Mark 13 presents an eschatological vision that transcends mere prognostication, offering a nuanced theological resource deeply relevant to contemporary tur-

moil. The passage's apocalyptic imagery, firmly rooted in Jewish apocalyptic traditions, is not intended as a deterministic forecast but rather as a call to ethical vigilance, endurance, and hope amid crisis. Historical-critical analysis demonstrates that Mark's use of motifs such as "birth pangs" and cosmic disturbances reflects a theological framework that is simultaneously sobering and redemptive, challenging believers to active faithfulness rather than passive fatalism. Furthermore, the parallels with Jewish apocalyptic texts such as the Sibylline Oracles and 4 Ezra reveal a consistent moral urgency underpinning apocalyptic discourse, emphasizing divine judgment coupled with deliverance and restoration. Therefore, Mark 13's eschatology, when read dialogically with both ancient texts and present realities—including the socio-political crises of our times—functions as an ethical and theological catalyst. It invites faith communities not only to interpret signs of the times but to embody transformative hope and prophetic resilience in the face of uncertainty.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The intersection of historical criticism and contextual theology occurs in their mutual concern for context, power, and meaning-making. While historical criticism investigates the original historical, linguistic, and socio-political setting of biblical texts—seeking to recover authorial intent and the *Sitz im Leben*—contextual theology prioritizes the lived realities of present-day readers, particularly those from marginalized communities. Their meeting point lies in a shared commitment to situated interpretation, where meaning arises not abstractly but within concrete historical and existential conditions. This convergence is particularly fruitful in African and postcolonial contexts, where scholars like Gerald West (1999, pp. 20–22) advocate for a dialogical hermeneutics that holds the biblical world and the contemporary reader's world in creative tension. The result is an interpretation that is both historically grounded and ethically engaged. The positives of this intersection include a deepened theological understanding that resists universalist and decontextualized readings, heightened ethical sensitivity, and the empowerment of subjugated voices through liberation-centered readings (Dube 2000, p. 15; Carter 2001, pp. 52–55). Moreover, historical criticism helps guard contextual theology against anachronism, while contextual theology helps ground historical criticism in contemporary relevance and ethical urgency. Thus, their synergy fosters a multidimensional hermeneutic that is both critical and constructive.
- <sup>2</sup> This study contributes to both historical Jesus research and contextual theology by recovering a *constructive*, rather than *destructive*, theological vision embedded in apocalyptic discourse. In traditional historical Jesus' scholarship, apocalypticism has often been associated with cosmic cataclysm and eschatological judgment, casting Jesus as a failed apocalyptic prophet (Schweitzer 1910, p. 366). However, more recent scholarship reinterprets Jesus' apocalyptic message as a symbolic framework for divine intervention, socio-political renewal, and ethical transformation (Wright 2013, pp. 201–203; see also Allison 2009, pp. 37–40). Scholars such as John Dominic Crossan and Richard Horsley argue that Jesus' apocalyptic language critiqued imperial power and called for justice within history rather than forecasting an end to history (Crossan 1994, p. 245; see Horsley 1993, p. 63). In this sense, the apocalyptic genre becomes a rhetorical strategy to envision the inbreaking of God's reign amid suffering and oppression. Within contextual theology, especially in African and postcolonial settings, apocalyptic discourse functions not as a theology of escape but as a language of protest and hope. It resonates with the existential realities of communities grappling with colonial legacies, systemic poverty, and socio-ecological destruction (Boesak 1980, p. 112; West 1999, pp. 28, 30). African biblical scholars like Itumeleng Mosala and David T. Adamo read apocalyptic texts as articulations of divine solidarity with the oppressed and as catalysts for ethical and societal transformation (Mosala 1989, pp. 158–60; Adamo 2015, p. 6). Hence, by re-centering apocalypticism within both Jesus research and African contextual readings, this study reframes it as a generative theological vision of divine justice, communal renewal, and transformative hope.

- <sup>3</sup> See J. J. Collins (1983, pp. 378–80). These sections contain direct denunciations of kings and tyrants, using language suggestive of divine wrath and natural upheaval, echoing Hebrew prophetic traditions.
- <sup>4</sup> See J. J. Collins (1998, pp. 117–19). Collins explores how cosmic signs in Book V allude to a messianic intervention that transcends mere political liberation.
- <sup>5</sup> See also (Grabbe and Haak 2003). He discusses apocalyptic literature’s role in coping with imperial pressures and failed national hopes.
- <sup>6</sup> See J. J. Collins (1998, pp. 83–89). He argues that the *Sibylline Oracles* offer not just political protest but also a profound identity-forming narrative for diasporic Jews.
- <sup>7</sup> See Henze (2011, pp. 112–18). The ethos of Henze’s *Jewish Apocalyptic Literature: A Guide to Interpretation* is characterized by scholarly rigor, historical sensitivity, and theological depth. Henze approaches the subject matter with a commitment to understanding the texts on their own terms, avoiding anachronistic interpretations. His work reflects a balanced integration of literary criticism, historical analysis, and theological reflection, aiming to present a nuanced understanding of Jewish apocalyptic literature’s role in shaping religious thought and identity during the Second Temple period.
- <sup>8</sup> In Mark 13:10, Jesus assures that ‘the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations,’ offering a promise of ultimate divine triumph amid chaos. Similarly, 4 Ezra 7:28–29 envisions the resurrection of the righteous: ‘The dead shall rise, and the just shall be vindicated,’ signaling hope beyond suffering.

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