

“But of that day and that hour knoweth no man” (Mark 13:32)

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Author C.S. Lewis is highly regarded for his insights and his ability to clearly articulate biblical truths. However, in his work *The World's Last Night*, Lewis makes some inappropriate comments concerning Jesus' teaching about his return.

Specifically, Lewis examines what Jesus says to his apostles in Mark 13:30, 32 (KJV):

³⁰ “Verily I say unto you, that this generation shall not pass, till all these things be done.”

³² “But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father.”

The following is what Lewis wrote in *The World's Last Night*:

“Say what you like,” we shall be told, “the apocalyptic beliefs of the first Christians have been proved to be false. It is clear from the New Testament that they all expected the Second Coming in their own lifetime. And, worse still, they had a reason, and one which you will find very embarrassing. Their Master had told them so. **He shared, and indeed created, their delusion.** He said in so many words, ‘this generation shall not pass till all these things be done.’ And he was wrong. He clearly knew no more about the end of the world than anyone else.”

It is certainly the most embarrassing verse in the Bible. Yet how teasing, also, that within fourteen words of it should come the statement “But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father.” **The one exhibition of error and the one confession of ignorance grow side by side.** That they stood thus in the mouth of Jesus himself, and were not merely placed thus by the reporter, we surely need not doubt. Unless the reporter were perfectly honest he would never have recorded the confession of ignorance at all; he could have had no motive for doing so except a desire to tell the whole truth. And unless later copyists were equally honest they would never have preserved the (apparently) mistaken prediction about “this generation” after the passage of time had shown the (apparent) mistake. ... The evangelists have the first great characteristic of honest witnesses: they mention facts which are, at first sight, damaging to their main contention.

The facts, then, are these: **that Jesus professed himself (in some sense) ignorant, and within a moment showed that he really was so.**¹

[Emphasis added. End of quote.]

¹ From: *The World's Last Night and Other Essays*, pp. 97-99. Author: C.S. Lewis.

Publisher: Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1960.

Via the Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/details/worldslastnighta012859mbp/page/n9/mode/2up>.

Note: In the first paragraph above, Lewis is stating what he sees to be the problem.

Not only were the first Christians mistaken in their expectations, but the reason for their error was that Jesus himself had promised to return in that generation. “He shared, and indeed created, their delusion.”

The second paragraph and the conclusion are his response and analysis.

Evaluation

Lewis claims that Jesus not only professed to be ignorant as to the time of his return, but that he showed himself to be so by getting it wrong! But Lewis is himself wrong.

The seemingly contradictory statements of Mark 13 verses 30 and 32 are easily reconciled:

A pregnant woman knows the general time of her delivery, but not the specific day or hour.

Labor pains will come on suddenly, yet not entirely unexpectedly.

There is the need to have “bags packed and ready” — to be ready to go at a moment’s notice to the hospital.

In Mark 13 Jesus is prophesying about events that will precede and accompany his return — events that will culminate in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. He is anticipating the Jewish-Roman War of 66-70 AD. His return to judge that city will be sudden and unexpected, so the disciples must remain alert, keep watch, and not sleep (Mk 13:33-37). When they see those signs they are to immediately flee from the city and from Judea and head to the mountains (Mk 13:14-18; cf. Lk 21:20-24).

And that is just what happened. As the Roman army advanced, many Jews (including the Zealot rebels) sought refuge in Jerusalem.

Indeed, even as the Roman army was surrounding Jerusalem (14 April, 70 AD), many thousands of Jews who had come to celebrate the Passover were permitted to enter, but not to leave the city.

They were trapped!

Josephus reports that 1.1 million people perished during the five-month siege.

In contrast, believing Jews had earlier (in 66 AD) fled to Pella, a Greek city of the Decapolis, east of the Jordan.²

So far as is known, not a single Christian perished in that judgment.

But the main point is this: The Second Coming, according to Jesus’ own teaching, would be witnessed by that generation and would be tied to the fall of Jerusalem.

See also Matthew 10:23; 16:27-28; Hebrews 10:25, 37; James 5:7-9; Revelation 1:1, 3; 2:25; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20.

² The Christians likely fled Jerusalem following the unexpected retreat of the Roman army under Cestius Gallus in November 66 AD. On the verge of taking the city, he suddenly and for no good reason gave up the fight and retreated, returning with his army to Antipatris. The Jewish rebels pursued and ambushed his forces on the way, so that he lost thousands of troops and many weapons. The rebels were emboldened by this success, claiming a miraculous deliverance. This event, more than any other, precipitated the War with Rome. Josephus notes that many Jews abandoned Jerusalem around this time, mindful that Roman revenge was now inevitable.