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The Good News about Death: Predictions of Jesus' Death in the First Commentaries on the Gospel of Mark*

Abstract: The references to Jesus' death that appear before the beginning of the actual description thereof prove the significance of this death for Mark the Evangelist. Theophylact of Ohrid, the first Greek commentator of the entire Gospel of Mark, also paid attention to the significance of these references. He turns out to be original when compared with the patristic interpretations of the Gospel texts.

Key words: biblical commentaries, Gospel of Mark, Theophylact of Ohrid

The Gospel is good news. However, the content denoted by this word in the writings of the New Testament contrasts with a literal meaning of the noun εὐαγγέλιον. The term “gospel” appears in the first verse of the Gospel of Mark, although this Evangelist devotes much more space to the narration of Jesus' passion and death than to the references to His resurrection.¹ The references to

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¹ This focus on Jesus' passion and death is easily noticeable in its original text with a shorter ending. The longer ending of the Gospel of Mark includes three last pericopes (Mark 16:9–20). It is missing from the two most important codices: Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus (both from the 4th century), medieval manuscripts, and the significant Syrian, Georgian, Armenian, and Ethiopian translations. The longer ending can be found in later manuscripts, although Justin Martyr, Tatian,

Jesus' death that appear even before the beginning of the actual narrative concerning it prove the significance of this death for Mark. Their crucial role was noticed in the last two centuries when the Gospel of Mark was called a passion narrative with a long introduction.² The first Greek commentator of the whole Gospel of Mark also paid attention to the significance of these references. Theophylact of Ohrid turns out to be original when compared with the patristic interpretations of the Gospel texts.³

The Motif of Jesus' Death in the Gospel of Mark

Owing to the structure which emphasises the role of Jesus' death, characteristic for the Gospel of Mark and adopted in the other three,⁴ the good news (εὐαγγέλιον) can in a way present itself as bad news. The inherent and essential part of all four of them is narratives about the last moments of Jesus' earthly life.⁵

For a long time the meaning of the motif of Jesus' death as unique for the development of a genre of gospel was underestimated in the interpretations of Mark. Many of the commentators of the text did not pay any attention at all to its own unique character. Such little interest of the commentators was grounded in the conviction of its dependence on other Evangelists, particularly on Matthew.⁶

and Irenaeus mention it. Cf. A. Malina: *Ewangelia według św. Marka, część I: 1, 1–8, 26. Wstęp – przekład z oryginału – komentarz*. Częstochowa 2013, pp. 27–28.

² Cf. M. Meyer: "Taking Up the Cross and Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark." *Calvin Theological Journal* 2002, no. 37, pp. 231–232: "This text of good news apparently has bad news, not *euangelion*, but *dysangelion* – painful news, deadly news. Mark is, as it has been put aptly, a passion narrative with a long introduction (in the quoted article footnote 9: M. Kähler: *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische Christus* [Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1956], 60). The good news is the bad news, and the bad news is the good news: the news of the cross, the suffering Messiah and Son of God, and the suffering followers of the Messiah and Son of God."

³ Source texts: Theophylact: *Hermeneia eis to kata Markon Euangelion*. In: *Patrologia Graeca*, t. 123 (reprint: Athenai 1990, pp. 487–682); *Catena in Evangelium S. Marci*. In: *Catena Graecorum Patrum in Novum Testamentum*. Ed. J.A. Cramer. Oxford 1840, pp. 259–447.

⁴ In the Gospel of Mark a narrative of the passion and death constitutes 19 per cent of the whole text, while in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke: about 15 per cent each. The author of the fourth Gospel devotes even more space to the final week of Jesus' life than the Synoptics, namely chapters 12–20, so he fills a half of his Book with this narrative. Cf. B. Witherington III: *New Testament History. A Narrative Account*. Grand Rapids 2001, pp. 21–22.

⁵ Although gospel is regarded as a separate genre, yet it has some features characteristic of other ancient biographical texts as well. Cf. A. Malina: *Ewangelia według św. Marka...*, p. 37.

⁶ This conviction was forcibly expressed by Augustine in *De consensu Evangelistarum*: "Mark follows him [Matthew – M.Cz.] closely, and looks like his attendant and epitomizer." Cf. Augustine: *De consensu Evangelistarum* I, 2, 4. Translations of Augustine's texts in: *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. First series*. Vol. 6. Ed. P. Schaff, trans. by S.D.F. Salmond. Buffalo 1888.

It was only in the 19th and 20th century that a breakthrough in the studies on the Gospels was made.

The originality of the Gospel of Mark is proved by the references to the Jesus' death which occur in the narration of His public activity from Galilee to Jerusalem (Mark 1:14–13:37). The other Synoptics include texts sounding exactly the same as those in the second Gospel or to a lesser extent highlighting the role of Jesus' death, particularly its significance for the formation of the disciples. Due to their character the interpretation of the motif of the death in the "pre-passion" texts of the Gospel of Mark, provided by the first Greek commentator of the whole Book, deserves closer attention.

Mark's Motif of Jesus' Death in Theophylact's Interpretation

The Bishop of Ohrid pays attention to the references to the end of Jesus' earthly life, which precede the actual narrative concerning His passion. The explanations of them provided by Theophylact prove the originality of the first Greek commentary on this Gospel because they form one of the first interpretation of the texts, which by the contemporary exegesis are referred to as an extensive introduction to the narration of Jesus' passion.

Mark 2:20

Jesus' answer to the question posed by John's disciples and the Pharisees, concerning the reason why His disciples do not keep fasts, may be regarded as the first mention of the death in the Gospel of Mark (Mark 2:19–20). Several elements in the text indicate the reference to Jesus' death. The identification of the bridegroom with Jesus and the disciples with the wedding guests is clearly highlighted in the Gospel of Mark. The ignoring of fasts by His followers mirrors the attitude of the wedding guests who go after the bridegroom. Owing to this Christocentric character of the mention of the taking away of the bridegroom, the version of the narrative which appears in the Gospel of Mark more unambiguously refers to Jesus' death than its identical formulations in the other Gospels (Matthew 9:15; Luke 5:35).

The Bishop of Ohrid is not the first commentator of this fragment. *Catena in Marcum*⁷ also interprets the mentioned text about taking the bridegroom away:

⁷ *Catena in Marcum* is a diversified compilation of fragments of the commentaries on the Synoptic Gospels written before the 6th century. It is also not a full commentary: the pericopes analysed

“that is he is taken up”⁸ (τοῦτ’ ἔστιν ἀναληφθῆ). The verb ἀναλαμβάνειν in the New Testament narratives refers to Jesus’ Ascension (literally: taking up, assumption; cf. Mark 16:19, Acts 1:2.11.22) and is used in the passive, which determines God as the subject of the action marked by the verb (*passivum theologicum*). *Catena in Marcum* does not interpret the verb ἀπαίρειν (to take, to take away), appearing in Mark’s text in the sense of Jesus’ death but in the sense of a glorious act that His Ascension was.

Theophylact quotes Mark’s text with the verb ἀπαίρειν, and he subsequently retains it in the interpretation of Jesus’ answer to the accusations made against His disciples: “I am the bridegroom and they should celebrate, and cannot fast. When I am taken away from this life, then having fallen into temptations, they will fast and be despondent.” The Bishop of Ohrid relates the taking away of the bridegroom from the wedding guests rather to the end of the earthly period of Jesus’ life, spent with the disciples, than to His departure from them at the moment of Ascension. The earthly dimension of His existence is implied by the adverbial “from this life” (ἀπὸ τοῦ βιοῦ τουτοῦ). This first reference to Jesus’ death in the Gospel of Mark commented on in *Catena in Marcum* and by Theophylact shows that the Bishop of Ohrid is not dependent in his analyses on *Catena in Marcum* and interprets the unambiguous verb ἀπαίρειν in the sense of the end of Jesus’ earthly life.

Mark 3:6

The second mention of the death, and the first one clearly referring to Jesus’ destiny is the subject of the gathering of his adversaries: “The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him” (Mark 3:6). This sentence closes the narrative about the healing of a man with a withered hand. The role of this sentence as a transition between two narratives is no doubt a reason why it is differently treated in the first commentaries. *Catena in Marcum* omits it both in the quoted fragments of the Gospel and in the commentary itself, linking the conspiring against Jesus neither with the miraculous healing nor with the withdrawal of the miracle-worker with his disciples.

The significance of the motif of death is proved by three references to it in a concise commentary. First, Theophylact determines the purpose of the statements of Jesus’ adversaries, using a phrase containing the verb appearing in the Greek text of the Gospel of Mark: “to destroy the Lord” (ἀπόλῃσαι τὸν Κύριον).

by the bishop of Ohrid are omitted; whereas John Chrysostom in his commentary to the Gospel of Matthew dealt only with a few pericopes, undoubtedly those of Mark (Mark 10:17–27; 14:65). Even if Theophylact collects many of these interpretations, he is the first one to undertake to analyse Mark after providing an interpretation of all the pericopes of Matthew.

⁸ W.R.S. Lamb: *The Catena in Marcum. A Byzantine Anthology of Early Commentary on Mark*. Leiden–Boston 2012, p. 250.

The commentators do not notice a special significance of the used verb in the narration of the second Gospel.⁹

The use of the verb in Theophylact's commentary closely corresponds to Mark's precise differentiation between two types of actions taken by Christ's opponents. In the narrative about Jesus' public activity in Jerusalem the Evangelist differentiates between their efforts aiming at finding a way how to destroy Him (ἀπολλύειν) and those intended to devise a method of killing Him (ἀποκτείνειν – Mark 14:1). Firstly, the chief priests and the scribes begin seeking a way to destroy him (Mark 11:18; the same verb in 3:6). The use of the verb ἀπολλύειν does not yet determine a way of eliminating Jesus; the aim is rather a moral elimination than physical annihilation. Thus, their subsequent questions show that they strive to harm Jesus in the eyes of the listeners by persuading Him to make statements that could ridicule Him (Mark 11:28, Mark 12:13, Mark 12:18). Only after their failure (cf. Mark 12:34) do they start looking for a way to kill Him. However, the killing is not the final aim. They do not only want to physically get rid of Him but – still – also to deprive Him of the respect of people. That is why they are considering the possibility of arresting Him, since for the moral elimination it is necessary to pass a judicial sentence. Thus the reference to the activity of the Pharisees and Herodians can be noticed in Mark's presentation of the motif of Jesus' death. Both they and the chief priests and the scribes do not only want to kill Jesus but also to destroy Him morally as a criminal.

The second mention of Jesus' death appears in the explanation of Jesus' withdrawal from His adversaries. The fragments of other Gospels (Matthew 4:12, Luke 4:29–30) reveal the connection between Jesus' withdrawal and the danger that His life becomes exposed to. In contrast to the mentioned texts, Mark (3:6–7) does not clearly present the withdrawal of Jesus from his adversaries as a reaction to their efforts to trap Him. Theophylact, however – probably under the influence of these texts – follows this line of interpretation of the sequence of these events: the plotting of His adversaries (Mark 3:6) and His withdrawal to the lake (Mark 3:7). Nevertheless, the Bishop of Ohrid does not restrict himself only to recognizing the connection between these two events but gives them an additional theological meaning: “And he withdraws, as the time of his passion has not yet come” (ὁ τοῦ πάθους καιρός). Theophylact uses the term καιρός, and not χρόνος, which may prove the influence of the New Testament interpretations of the earthly age as a special time given by God. In the Gospel of Mark the term καιρός ap-

⁹ They sometimes convey the strong meaning of the verb by referring to the killing in a sense of destruction; cf. J.R. Edwards: *The Gospel according to Mark*. Grand Rapids 2002, p. 101: “[...] the Pharisees and the Herodians ‘began to plot... how they might kill Jesus.’” Although C. Stade correctly quotes the text of translation (using the translation from the King James Version), yet, the verb used by Theophylact is cited imprecisely: “to kill the Lord,” cf. *The Explanation of the Holy Gospel according to Mark by Blessed Theophylact, Archbishop of Ohrid and Bulgaria*. Trans. C. Stade. House Springs 2008, p. 32.

pears in Jesus' programme statement (Mark 1:14) and determines the time of the relationship between the disciples and Jesus (Mark 10:30), and the eschatological time, which is, however, closely connected with the time of Jesus' activity (Mark 11:13; 12:2; 13:33); yet it does not signify the time of Jesus' passion.¹⁰

The third mention is an example of the lack of cohesion in Theophylact's interpretation of the actions taken by Jesus' adversaries: "Consider that, on the one hand, the Herodians, of the flesh and skin, want to kill Jesus" (ἀποκτείνειν βούλονται τὸν Ἰησοῦν). Although the Gospel is very precise in its use of the terms referring to Jesus' death, limiting the use of the verb "to kill" to the predictions of the passion, death and resurrection of the Son of Man, and to the appearances of the members of the Sanhedrin from their gathering three days before the Passover (Mark 14:1–2), still, the Bishop of Ohrid already uses this term in the narrative about the first period of Jesus' activity.

Mark 8:31

The verb "to kill" (ἀποκτείνειν), referring to Jesus' death, appears for the first time in Jesus' teaching which is reserved solely for the disciples following Him on the way to Jerusalem. The first commentators of Mark do not differentiate three predictions of the destiny of the Son of Man on account of the occurrence of this verb (8:31; 9:31; 10:32–34). They notice neither their roles in the structure of his Gospel nor their significance for its theology. Although the references of Jesus' death are not limited to those three, but only in these three cases Jesus' words about the passion, death and resurrection of the Son of Man are addressed to His disciples identified as the Twelve, while they react to these predictions with incomprehension, and because of these reactions they receive additional preaching from him. Jesus' teaching – incomplete at the beginning – corresponds to their imperfect understanding of the sense of a bond with Him, which is expressed in the section of the Gospel called His way to Jerusalem (Mark 8:27–10:52).

The first prediction of the destiny of the Son of Man is accurately interpreted by Theophylact as a revelation of the mystery of the cross, which remains limited due to the incomplete understanding of His disciples: "When Jesus noticed that they confessed that he is the true Messiah, he revealed¹¹ to them the mystery

¹⁰ Theophylact uses the noun *καιρός* in a sense close to John's idea of the time of the passion, which in his Gospel is denoted by the noun *ώρα* (John 2:4; 7:30).

¹¹ C. Stade translated the verb *ἐκκαλύπτειν* in the following way: "When He saw that they had confessed Him to be the true Messiah, then He also **began to reveal** to them the mystery of the cross, although not in its entirety" [emphasis – M.Cz.], cf. *The Explanation of the Holy Gospel according to Mark...*, p. 69. Theophylact does not write about "the beginning" of the revelation. The verb "to begin" appears in the analysed text: *καὶ ἤρξατο διδάσκειν* (Mark 8:31).

of the cross (ἐκκαλύπτει τὸ τοῦ σταυροῦ μυστήριον), although not in its entirety (εἰ καὶ μὴ γυμνῶς πάντη). Since they neither yet understood (συνίεσαν) what he said, nor imagined what to rise [from the dead] (τί ἐστὶν τὸ ἀναστῆναι) means.” The commentator pays attention to the central subject of Jesus’ teaching on His way to Jerusalem which is the mystery of His cross. Similarly to *Catena in Marcum*, in his explanation the noun “mystery” appears in the singular, which corresponds with the second Gospel; whereas the other Synoptics apply the plural form (τὰ μυστήρια in Matthew 13:11 and Luke 8:10). In Mark this noun appears in Jesus’ declaration about giving the mystery of the Kingdom of God to the disciples (Mark 4:10) – directly before the first mention of the verb “to understand” (Mark 4:12; cf. Matthew 13:13–14; Luke 8:10).

The connection between the mystery confided to the disciples and their difficulties with understanding it is closer to the Gospel of Mark in Theophylact’s commentary than in *Catena in Marcum*. While explaining the first prediction of the destiny of the Son of Man with the use of the terms typical of the Gospel of Mark, Theophylact describes Jesus’ pedagogy, who adapts His teaching to the disciples’ limitations in their comprehending of His person and activity. When confronted with His death, they experience a double difficulty: both caused by His absence and by the lack of His activity. Their limitations in the understanding become apparent in their reactions after two miracles of the feeding of the multitude (6:35–44; 8:1–10): they recognize neither His presence nor His deeds. In these texts Mark uses the verb “to understand” (συνιέναι). He applies it first in his negative opinion of their reaction to theophany, which expresses their lack of comprehension of the sense of the last miracle: “they had not understood about the loaves” (Mark 6:52). Next, he uses it twice in the rhetorical questions expressing the miracle-worker’s appeal for understanding, addressed to the witnesses of these miracles: “Do you not yet perceive or understand? [...] Do you not yet understand?” (Mark 8:17.21). Such an allusion made by Theophylact about the disciples’ ignorance of the sense of rising from the dead parallels Mark’s connection between the motif of incomprehension and Jesus’ death.

The originality of Theophylact commenting on Mark can be also observed in juxtaposition with the explanation of the first prediction of the destiny of the Son of Man in *Catena in Marcum*. The Bishop of Ohrid does not quote the content of Peter’s verbal opposition. *Catena in Marcum* refers to the parallel text in the first Gospel (Matthew 16:22). Moreover, Theophylact does not take up the theme from the third Gospel, as *Catena in Marcum* does, attributing the disciples’ lack of understanding to the outside influence: the word revealed was “hidden from them.” In such a way Luke explains the reactions of the disciples to the third prediction of Jesus’ destiny (Luke 18:34). This explanation does not fit in the conception of Mark, who sees the reason for their lack of understanding in their refusal to accept the necessity of Jesus’ death as the plan of God and not in the outside activity of the subject hindering the full cognition by hiding the truth.

In conclusion, Theophylact accurately notices the connection between the incomprehension of Jesus' disciples and the incomplete cognition of the truth of His death. If a disciple does not understand the sense of belonging to Him, he cannot accept the revelation of the mystery of the cross as a consequence for his own life. The commentator pays attention to this relation in the explanation of the next fragment (Mark 8:34–37). Firstly, he derives the value of the acceptance of the cross by a disciple from a type of death: "Let him take up the cross, that is a shameful death, as the cross was then regarded as shameful." Next, he claims that what distinguishes the disciple who takes up the cross from others condemned to the same kind of death is his belonging to Jesus: "But because many were crucified for being bandits, he adds something else after the crucifixion: that we should have a virtue. Because that is what 'follow me' means." The special attention given to the necessity of belonging to Jesus explains why Theophylact begins the explanation of the first prediction of the destiny of the Son of Man with the statement of the incomplete revelation of the mystery of the cross due to the incomprehension of the disciples. In other words, the incomplete revelation of the mystery of the cross is not the reason for this incomprehension but its consequence, in such a sense that in view of their ignorance the teaching is adapted to their limitations.

Mark 9:2–8

Mark's narrative about the transfiguration does not contain any explicit references to Jesus' death. Such a reference can be found in the parallel text of the third Gospel (Luke 9:31), which depicts Jesus' talk with Moses and Elijah: two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure (ἔλεγον τὴν ἔξοδον αὐτοῦ), which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. While interpreting a general note of the appearance of Elijah and Moses, who talked with Jesus (Mark 9:4), Theophylact supplements its content with Luke's version: "What were the prophets talking with Him about? About His cross and His death." One might see here the influence of *Catena in Marcum*, which supplements Mark in a similar way, pointing out the lack of information about the content of the talk in Mark's text: "While the present Evangelist does not specify, the others add, 'they were speaking about the glory which he was to fulfil in Jerusalem,' that is to say, the Passion and the Cross: for so they always call it."¹² However, Theophylact does not change Luke's mention of the appearance of Moses and Elijah in glory in the statement about the fulfilling of Jesus' glory in Jerusalem. While analysing this fragment, he only writes about the glory which is to be revealed to His disciples after the end of the world because "now he revealed himself without glory (ἐν ἄδοξίᾳ ἐφάνη) as the crucified and the carpenter's son."

¹² W.R.S. Lamb: *The Catena in Marcum*..., pp. 330–331.

Thus, the Bishop of Ohrid identifies the subject of the talk only with His cross and death, and not with glory. Similarly, earlier he interprets the taking away of the bridegroom in the parable in the sense of Jesus being taken away from the earthly life; whereas *Catena in Marcum* presents the same event as taking Him to heaven. Another characteristic feature of Theophylact's analyses is the explanation of the motives of the disciples reacting to the events taking place in the foreground of the narration. Peter's words prove that he did not want Jesus to be crucified to bring salvation to people: "Truly, Peter was not in his own mind, as he did not want Jesus to go down to be crucified for our salvation (εἰς τὸ σταυρωθῆναι πρὸς σωτηρίαν ἡμῶν), but wished He could stay forever up on the mountain."

Mark 9:9–10

In the predictions of the destiny of the Son of Man the resurrection is denoted by the verb "to rise" (ἀνίσταται), which does not have a complement "from the dead" (ἐκ νεκρῶν). This complement appears twice in this fragment of Mark. In none of the predictions such a complement about the rising from the dead is necessary because each of the predictions, before mentioning His rising from the dead, has a reference to His death caused by the activity of: the elders, the chief priests and the scribes – in the first one (8:31); people – in the second one (9:31); the chief priests and the scribes – in the third one (10:31–34).

The order of silence given to the witnesses of the transfiguration contains the expression "rising from the dead." In Theophylact's explanation of the order of silence and the reactions of the disciples, it appears three times. In the first case, its presence is redundant in comparison with the rule of using it in the Gospel of Mark, since the commentator clearly mentions Jesus' death, describing Him as crucified and alluding to the cross when he points out the aim of this order of silence: "to prevent people from being shocked at hearing first such glorious things about Christ and then seeing Him crucified. But when he rose from the dead, the right time came to speak about glorious [things] about Christ, which took place before the cross." This double way of describing Jesus' death is typical of Theophylact, who highlights the significance of the cross. *Catena in Marcum* does not have this emphasis: the mention of the cross appears in the commentary to this fragment of the Gospel only once, whereas the next reference deals with Jesus' suffering, not with His death itself. While bringing up the discussion of the disciples, *Catena in Marcum* seeks the reason for their reactions in the incomprehension of the mystery of the resurrection. Theophylact differs from such a perspective: while explaining the first prediction of the destiny of the Son of Man, he related the incomprehension of the disciples to the incomplete revelation of the mystery of the cross to them.

Two other references to Jesus' death which appear in Theophylact are dependent on *Catena in Marcum*. The subject of both commentaries constitutes a reaction

of the disciples to the order of silence. After quoting the sentence from the Gospel informing about their discussion, Theophylact provides an explanation for the reason of such a reaction: “And the apostles ‘kept the matter to themselves, discussing what ‘rising from the dead’ meant.’ Because they did not know yet, he says, that He must rise from the dead.” From Mark’s text one cannot draw a simple conclusion that the disciples understood the reference to the rising from the dead in the sense of Jesus’ resurrection. The difficulty of the disciples results from the time limitation of the ordered silence. The disciples’ discussion is in line with their view of the concept of the rising from the dead, which in Judaism during the Second Temple period is presented as an event of the end times. From their point of view, a possible beginning of the narrative of the transfiguration must have no sense in the light of such a vision of the resurrection. Theophylact’s misunderstanding of the true sense results from his seeking the explanation of the difficulty of the disciples regarding the issue of the resurrection, which is in harmony with the fourth Gospel – as *Catena in Marcum* proves: “But not understanding the mystery of the resurrection, although they kept the word to themselves, they were discussing what ‘rising from the dead’ might mean. Since as the Evangelist says: they did not know yet that He must rise from the dead, even after the promise was fulfilled.” In the Gospel of Mark the inevitability of the resurrection indirectly results from the necessity of the fulfilment of the whole plan of God, whose first stage is that “the Son of Man must suffer many things” (Mark 8:31). On the other hand, the motif of the necessity of the resurrection is present in the fourth Gospel. This event is essential because it is the work of God who lifts up His Son (John 12:32.34; 20:9).

Mark 9:11–13

In the Gospel of Mark a question posed by the witnesses of the transfiguration and concerning the doctrine of the scribes, and Jesus’ answer (Mark 9:11–13) constitutes one narration with the order of silence and the discussion of the disciples about the meaning of the resurrection (Mark 9:9–10). Following *Catena in Marcum*, Theophylact analyses the question and the answer as a separate fragment. What is more, their explanations coincide also in both their indirect references to Jesus’ death, when they quote His comparison of the suffering of the Son of Man with the destiny of John the Baptist, and in their interpretations of the conduct of the addressees of Jesus’ predecessor as an expression of their lack of faith. The theme of the Jews’ lack of faith in Christ appears in both commentaries.¹³ This lack

¹³ *Catena in Marcum* mentions only that when Elijah comes, “he will put right the unbelief of the Jews who are found at that time” (διορθώσεται τὴν ἀπιστίαν τῶν Ἰουδαίων τῶν τότε εὕρισκομένων), (*Catena in Evangelium S. Marci...*, p. 358; W.R.S. Lamb: *The Catena in Marcum...*, p. 335). Likewise, Theophylact writes: “When Thisbite Elijah comes, he will make peace among the disobedient Jews and lead them to faith” (Ὁ Θεσβίτης Ἠλίας ὅταν μέλλῃ ἐλθεῖν, εἰρήνην μέλλει ποιήσειν

of faith is to come to its end only with the coming of Elijah, who “will restore everything.” However, the Bishop of Ohrid draws a conclusion which is not present in *Catena in Marcum*: the Jews’ lack of faith in Christ is the cause of the sufferings He is to experience. Both in Theophylact’s commentary and in the analysed text there are no precise explanations of what kind of sufferings they speak about, or what is Mark’s depiction of the destiny of the Son of Man, who “must be treated with contempt” (ἐξουδενηθῆ) refers to. A different approach is taken in *Catena in Marcum*, which by linking what happened to John the Baptist (“they threw him to prison, abused and killed him, and his head was delivered on a plate”), with a destiny of the Son of Man who “will also suffer from them” in such a way, shows that Jesus’ sufferings will end with His death. Yet, it immediately adds: “With the recollection of the death of John he brought them a great consolation.” *Catena in Marcum* adopts here extensive fragments from John Chrysostom’s texts,¹⁴ where the sentence about consolation explains Jesus’ pedagogy, who combines the predictions of His passion with the miracles and the revelation of His dignity, so as to bring them not only the words prompting sadness, but also providing consolation by testimony of His dignity as the Son and of the power resulting from it. And here, after the transfiguration, Jesus behaves in the same way: comparing his destiny with the death of John, He brings them consolation.

Mark: 9:19

Theophylact interprets Jesus’ complaint about faithless people (Mark 9:19) in the same way as *Catena in Marcum* – as an expression of His desire for death, which for Him is less evil than staying with the unbelieving addressees of His activity. Theophylact is closer to Mark’s text when he points out the significance of the lack of faith, echoing the arguments of Mark, that is, treating it as a reason for the failure of the disciples. The disciples are not excluded from a wide circle of the addressees of this complaint. While for Theophylact the lack of faith among people is greater evil caused to Jesus than His own death, according to *Catena in Marcum* a more unbearable hardship is just staying with the generation, previously called by Jesus – in a version provided by this commentary – faithless and perverse. Here one can recognize the value of Theophylact’s explanation. While interpreting Jesus’ desire for death, caused by the behaviour of people, Theophy-

τοῖς ἀπειθοῦσιν Ἰουδαίοις, καὶ εἰς πίστιν τούτους ἐγαγεῖν), (Theophylact: *Hermeneia eis to kata Markon Euangelion...*, p. 584).

¹⁴ John Chrysostom in *Homily LVII*, 2 states: “Now in doing this, He by the greatness of the miracles was abating the excess of their sorrow, and in every way consoling them; even as here also, by the mention of John’s death, He afforded them much consolation”. Translations of John Chrysostom’s texts after: *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. First series*. Vol. 10. Ed. P. Schaff. Trans. G. Prevost. Oxford 1851 (digital edition: Albany 1996).

lact accurately quotes the text of the second Gospel since the addressee of the complaint is described only with one attribute: “O unbelieving generation” (Mark 9:19); whereas *Catena in Marcum* presents a version of the expression taken from the other Synoptics, who characterize the addressees of the complaint using attributes: “You unbelieving and perverse generation” (Matthew 17:17; Luke 9:41).

Mark 9:31

Theophylact notices a certain regularity in Jesus’ teaching about His passion and death, which has already been pointed out by *Catena in Marcum*: the words about His suffering are linked with the predictions that have positive overtones. Once again the Bishop of Ohrid more precisely comments Mark’s text for he emphasises also positive ideas which occur in the closest context of negative statements. On the one hand, like *Catena in Marcum*, he recognizes their occurrence next to the narratives about His miraculous activity, which is to convince the listeners of this teaching that He must suffer not because he is to be deprived of power. The greatness of the power He wields is proved by His miracles. On the other hand, Theophylact pays attention to the fact that after a sad prediction of being killed, Jesus adds the words of joy about His rising from the dead on the third day. In fact, in the Gospel of Mark the second prediction is given a positive meaning, not only thanks to its closeness to the account of the exorcism (Mark 9:14–29), but also because it contains, like the first and the third prediction (Mark 8:31; 10:33–34), both references: to Jesus’ death and His resurrection.

Mark 10:39

The request of the disciples is preceded by the third prediction of the destiny of the Son of Man. Its narrative frameworks and content are connected with the motif of Jesus’ and His disciples’ way to Jerusalem.

Theophylact’s independence in commenting Mark can be observed in his reference to the cross. *Catena in Marcum* claims that one should not blame the disciples for their inability to understand the sense of Jesus’ activity because “there were yet neither the cross nor the grace of the Spirit.”¹⁵ Such a view is close to Luke’s and John’s conceptions which attribute the disciples’ lack of understanding to the temporary hiding of the meaning of Jesus’ words and of the sense of the Scriptures, which shall be revealed to them at the moment of their meeting with the Risen Christ and their receiving of the Holy Spirit (Luke 18:34; 24:45; John 2:22; 7:39). Theophylact does not seek the reasons for their incomprehension in the outside

¹⁵ W.R.S. Lamb: *The Catena in Marcum...*, p. 367.

circumstances but in the limitations of the disciples themselves. Jesus' allusions to the baptism and the cup are not interpreted by them in the sense of His death on the cross because they understand it solely in the material sense (αἰσθητός), that is in the same sense as they understand the reign of God, perceiving it from the perspective of the earthly kingdom.

Mark 10:45

While commenting on the indignation of the Ten with the discussion of the sons of Zebedee with Jesus, Theophylact begins with the characteristics of the disciples: "acting in a human way, they are driven by envy." The Gospel of Mark attributes this motivation only to the chief priests, who, out of envy, hand Jesus over to Pilate (Mark 15:10; cf. Matthew 27:18). The Bishop of Ohrid indicates the internal deficiencies of the disciples: "The Christ heals them, on the one hand, silencing them firstly, so that they could come close to Him – as [the phrase] 'He called them together' suggests; on the other, He intends to show them that the seizure of adoration and the desire for the first places is of pagan character." The original element of the explanation offered by the Bishop of Ohrid is the presentation of this "calling together" as a process of healing the disciples.¹⁶ Although his explanation of Jesus' sentence about the Son of Man serving and giving his life as ransom (Mark 10:45) depends on the texts of Chrysostom and *Catena in Marcum*,¹⁷ it also exposes Jesus' pedagogy, who teaches the disciples about His death. The conduct of the Son of Man is given here as an example: Theophylact interprets His death as the greatest act of service towards those to whom this service is directed.

Mark 11:11–14

Although a pericope of the withered tree (Mark 11:11–14) lacks any references to Jesus' passion and death, they appear in the explanations of this fragment.¹⁸ Theophylact and *Catena in Marcum* adopt the explanation provided by the

¹⁶ John Chrysostom presents the whole answer of Jesus as healing, cf.: John Chrysostom: *Homily LXV*, 5.

¹⁷ Likewise, John Chrysostom in *Homily LXV*, 4.

¹⁸ While commenting on the triumphant entry to Jerusalem (a fragment of the explanation of Mark 11:1–6) Theophylact notices first that during the previous entries to Jerusalem Jesus did not act so openly to avoid instigating envy; thus paying attention to the motivation which Mark attributes to the chief priests during the process before Pilate (Mark 15:10; cf. Matthew 27:18). He explains this change in Jesus' behaviour, who now shows his glory (the change is also noted in *Catena in Marcum*: He did not act like that earlier because the time of his passion was not near), by the nearness of his passion (*Catena in Marcum*: "the cross is at the gates"). This interpretation is derived from John Chrysostom: *Homily LXVI*, 1.

Chrysostom,¹⁹ which says that the fig tree withered for the sake of the disciples, in order to show them Jesus' power, capable of destroying His opponents. This explanation does not, however, include the emphasis on Jesus' pedagogy towards the incomprehension of the disciples, which is typical of other places in Theophylact's commentary. In comparison to the earlier commentators the Bishop of Ohrid more clearly points out Jesus' death while writing about the opponents as those who wanted to crucify Him.

Mark 12:7–8

Theophylact does not allude to Jesus' death in his commentary on the pericope about the driving out those who are buying and selling in the temple, which contains information about the chief priests and the scribes who seek to destroy (ἀπολέσωσιν) Jesus (Mark 11:18). Almost the same group (composed of the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders) becomes the addressee of His parable about the wicked tenants to whom the son of the owner of the vineyard is sent: "But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill (ἀποκτείνωμεν) him, and the inheritance will be ours.' And they took him and killed (ἀπέκτειναν) him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy (ἀπολέσαι) those tenants and give the vineyard to others" (Mark 12:7–9). The Evangelist accentuates, on the one hand, the intention of the tenants to kill the son of the owner of the vineyard, yet on the other – the undoing of the killers as a punishment inflicted on them by the owner.

Theophylact accurately depicts the analysed fragment. He uses two verbs present in the parables referring to the destiny of: Jesus – "to kill" (ἀποκτείνειν); the tenants – "to destroy" (ἀπολλύειν). *Catena in Marcum* also relates the verb "to kill" (ἀποκτείνειν) to Jesus but it presents the destiny of the tenants as the punishing of the servants (ἐπὶ τιμωρίᾳ τῶν δούλων), while not only are they but also the people betrayed (παραδοθῆναι) to the Romans.

Theophylact reads the parable as a prediction of Jesus' destiny, interpreting the throwing out of the vineyards as the crucifixion outside Jerusalem (cf. also Hebrews 13:12). Here he understands the vineyard as the city, although earlier he claims that the vineyard means people whom the Lord planted.

¹⁹ John Chrysostom explains: "Wherefore then was it cursed? For the disciples' sakes, that they might have confidence. For because everywhere He conferred benefits, but punished no man; and it was needful that He should afford them a demonstrative proof of His power to take vengeance also, that both the disciples might learn, and the Jews, that being able to blast them that crucify Him, of His own will He submits, and does not blast them; and it was not His will to show forth this upon men; upon the plant did He furnish the proof of His might in taking vengeance." Cf. John Chrysostom: *Homily LXVII, 1*.

The Originality of Theophylact's Explanations

The common conviction of the influence of *Catena in Marcum* on Theophylact is responsible for the underestimation of the value of the commentaries written by the Bishop of Ohrid; however, the comparison of his explanations with the interpretations of the pericopes from the second Gospel offered by *Catena in Marcum* enables to precisely verify the opinions about his dependence on the earlier commentators. Among the above analysed commentaries on the fragments speaking about Jesus' death, one can find Theophylact's explanation of the plotting of the Pharisees and the Herodians against Jesus (Mark 3:6), which was omitted in *Catena in Marcum*. Theophylact, having noticed the differences between the Gospels, present even in the parallel texts, departs from the interpretations made by *Catena in Marcum*. While commenting on Jesus' statement about the taking away of the bridegroom, which forms an answer to the question posed by John's disciples and the Pharisees and concerning the reason why the Jesus' disciples do not keep fasts (Mark 2:20), *Catena in Marcum* interprets "the taking away of the bridegroom" as Jesus' Ascension; while Theophylact sees here the reference to His death, which corresponds with the text of the Gospel of Mark. Furthermore, the commentaries differ also in the understanding of the scene of the transfiguration (Mark 9:2–8). Although they both, falling under the influence of the Gospel of Luke, refer to "appearing in glory" (Luke 9:31), still, they interpret it differently. According to *Catena in Marcum* Jesus' glory is to fulfil itself in Jerusalem, whereas Theophylact stresses that it will be revealed to Jesus' disciples after the end of the world.

The originality of the Bishop of Ohrid is above all visible in his consistent reference to Mark's motif of the formation of the disciples, which is necessary due to their internal limitations: the lack of faith, thinking in the material categories, embarrassment, not accepting the necessity of Jesus' death as the plan of God. Theophylact explains the objection of the disciples to the first prediction of passion, death and resurrection of the Son of Man (Mark 8:31) with their inability to understand the sense of the belonging to Jesus, and *Catena in Marcum* – with their incomprehension of the mystery of resurrection. Commenting on the failure of the disciples in casting out the mute spirit from the boy (Mark 9:18), Theophylact points out the essential role of faith; the lack thereof among disciples is evil done to Jesus, which is greater than His death; whereas *Catena in Marcum* stresses the hardship experienced by Jesus during his stay with "the faithless and perverse generation." The necessity of the formation of the disciples is also highlighted by Theophylact when he explains the request of the sons of Zebedee (Mark 10:35). Here *Catena in Marcum* seeks the outside reasons for the lack of understanding of the mystery by the disciples; but Theophylact believes that the reasons are rather internal and result from the misunderstanding of the reign of God as the earthly kingdom.

Theophylact distinguishes Mark from other Gospels, at the same acknowledging their theological unanimity. This recognition of the theology, which is unique to Mark, is visible in the fragments analysed above. In accordance with the content of the Gospel Theophylact relates the taking away of the bridegroom to Jesus' death (Mark 2:20). While explaining the narrative of the plotting of the Pharisees and Herodians against Jesus how to destroy Him (Mark 3:6), he adopts the verb "to destroy," which plays a vital role in Mark's narration: it describes the actions of Jesus' adversaries which aim at ridiculing and destroying Him in the eyes of people, and only as a result of the failure of their efforts they decide to achieve their aim by killing Him. In the commentary to the first prediction of the destiny of the Son of Man (Mark 8:31) Theophylact uses the terms typical of this Gospel: the noun "mystery" (τὸ μυστήριον) in the singular, the verb "to understand" (συνιέναι) to refer to the ignorance of the disciples. He also places an emphasis on the themes which are important for the Gospel of Mark: the mystery of the cross as a subject of Jesus' teaching on his way to Jerusalem and the difficulties of the disciples in understanding it. The issue of the formation of the disciples is brought up by Theophylact several times: the lack of faith is the reason for their failure in casting out the mute spirit from the boy (Mark 9:19), the entry to Jerusalem is the background to the difficulties in understanding the content of the prediction of the destiny of the Son of Man (Mark 10:39), to which Jesus adapts the formation of the disciples, and the calling the disciples together to Him is an element of Jesus' pedagogy (10:45).

The distinction of Mark's theology from other Gospels, which is present in Theophylact's *Explanation*, becomes more visible in juxtaposition with *Catena in Marcum*. The latter does not notice the uniqueness of Mark and falls under the influence of the parallel pericopes in other Gospels. While commenting on Peter's objection (Mark 8:32) to the first prediction of the destiny of the Son of Man, *Catena in Marcum* quotes his words – which do not appear in Mark – after Matthew (16:22), and explains the incomprehension of the disciples with the fact that the meaning of these words was hidden from them – in the same way as Luke does in the third prediction (Luke 18:34). Further, it expresses Jesus' complaint (Mark 9:19) according to the version provided by other Synoptics: "You faithless and perverse generation" (Matthew 17:17; Luke 9:41) and gives the reason for the request made by the sons of Zebedee, explicitly following "another Evangelist" – paraphrasing a narrative introduction to the parable of the ten minas from the Gospel of Luke (19:11–28). And still more, it justifies the limitations of the disciples in their understanding of the sense of Jesus' activity with the notion typical of the Gospel of Luke and John, where the gift of understanding is given to the disciples at the meeting with the Risen Christ and in the Holy Spirit (Luke 18:34; 24:45; John 2:22; 7:39).