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Apocalypse Now: Order and Chaos in Luke 21.5–38

LEE MAGNESS

Luke 21.5–38 comprises a powerful temple teaching by Jesus during the week before his death and resurrection. Although the passage is usually understood as predictive, inviting speculation regarding the future, it is properly understood as paranaetic, encouraging faithful living in the present. Several features of the passage commend it to careful exegetical analysis. Synoptically, in spite of close parallels in Matthew and Mark, the passage has distinctive language that invites comparison. Literarily, it represents the fascinating but often misunderstood genre of apocalypse, the characteristics of which provide interpretive insight. And pastorally, the discourse offers encouragement and instruction to Jesus' followers past and present.

Parallels to Luke 21.5–38 in Matthew and Mark

Like the Gospel of Luke, the Gospels of Matthew and Mark also record versions of an eschatological discourse during Jesus' final week. The general order of events is virtually identical, but the pericopes that immediately precede and follow the discourse vary. By prefacing the discourse with a lengthy rehearsal of Jesus' woes against scribes and Pharisees and by appending three parables of judgment, Matthew's account (24.1–51) highlights the theme of warning in the light of coming events. Both Mark (13.1–37) and Luke severely foreshorten the woes, positioning the question of the Messiah's identity (Mark 12.35–37; Luke 20.41–44) closer to the apocalyptic section. They both add the account of the widow's generous offering to the warning about scribes who "devour widows' houses" (Mark 12.41–44; Luke 21.1–4). And both move immediately from the apocalyptic passage to a report of the Passover plot against Jesus (Mark 14.1–2; Luke 22.1–2). The result for Luke, as well as for Mark, is a stronger connection with Jesus' messianic identity, with the generosity of Jesus' followers, and with his approaching suffering. A commensurately weaker connection is forged with the woes and the theme of judgment, which are foregrounded in Matthew.

Interpretations of Luke 21.5–38

Some treatments of Luke 21.5–38 do not accept the passage as the authentic teaching of Jesus, assuming that the author composed his material in the light of events that had already occurred around the time of the Jewish War (CE 66–70). Other treatments scour the passage in order to build up detailed projections of a sequence of events associated with Jesus' second coming. Many thoughtful interpretations of the passage attempt to take the passage seriously as the words of Jesus, and at the same time avoid an overly and exclusively futuristic reading. But there is still a tendency 1) to make sharp distinctions between references to the past (the fall of Jerusalem) and the future (the *Parousia*), with little regard for the present; 2) to emphasize the themes of historical and final judgment, with little regard for comfort and encouragement; 3) to focus on the literal fulfillment of Jesus' cosmic and national predictions, with little regard for the personal experience of his followers; and 4) to apply Jesus' teachings primarily to Christians living in the end times, with little regard for the experience of Jesus' listeners and Luke's readers. As appealing as these emphases may sound, they ignore the characteristics of ancient apocalypses, which should guide any interpretation of the passage.

The Characteristics of Apocalyptic Literature

Apocalyptic texts such as Luke 21.5–38 should be read according to the characteristics of the apocalyptic genre. First, there is the *context*. Most apocalypses are composed during times of crisis. The crisis may be military (Isaiah’s threat of invasion), or political (Ezekiel’s description of life in exile), or personal (Daniel’s persecution), or even agricultural (Joel’s locust plague). But some crisis has arrived or is on its way. Second, there is the *purpose*. Apocalypses are meant to comfort, to encourage, to give hope. There is plenty enough to frighten readers in the circumstances of their lives: they need cheer not fear. Third, apocalyptic literature employs *symbolism* to characterize the crisis and to convey the comfort. Fourth, apocalypses feature a distinctive sense of *temporality*. These texts sometimes reflect events from the historic past and sometimes anticipate events in the near or distant future. But past and future references always serve the overall purpose of apocalypses: to encourage real people experiencing real suffering associated with real circumstances in the present. And fifth, apocalyptic symbolism operates on three *planes*. The first level is cosmic. Upheaval affects the heavens—the sun, the moon, the stars—and the earth itself—earthquakes, famines, plagues. The second level is national. Wars of aggression and civil unrest impact people, groups and nations. The third level is personal. Examples of turmoil include physical suffering, persecution, geographical dislocation, family disruption and even death. But these three planes compress into one, the personal, in order to give added emphasis to the readers’ experience of suffering and hope.

Biblical apocalypses should be read as texts written by and for real people, suffering real turmoil, in their very real lives. They should be read as texts whose purpose is to offer concrete comfort and encouragement for the readers experiencing those chaotic circumstances. They should be read symbolically. Historical allusions and future predictions should always be read in the light of present realities; the goal is not an understanding of the past or knowledge of the future but a meaningful life in the present. And references to cosmic and national crises are always secondary to and illustrative of the personal circumstances of the readers.

The Structure of the Luke 21.5–38

A structural analysis of this section provides the literary basis for interpreting the passage. Each section includes (and usually climaxes with) a hopeful promise of order in the midst of chaos.

Section #1—21.5–6: Jesus’ teaching in the temple

Order → The disciples express admiration for the “orderly” stones.

...while some were speaking of the temple, that it was ordered with beautiful stones and objects of devotion... (21.5)¹

Chaos → Jesus predicts the physical destruction of temple buildings.

Section #2—21.7–8: Questions regarding the destruction

Chaos → Jesus warns the questioning disciples about being led astray.

Order → Jesus admonishes the disciples to keep their focus on him.

Look out that you are not led astray... Do not go after them. (21.8)

Section #3—21.9–19: National, cosmic and personal warnings

Chaos → Jesus warns of wars, earthquakes, famines, plagues, persecution.

Order → Jesus promises opportunity for testimony and personal safety.

Place then in your hearts not to prepare your defense beforehand, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom... And not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance gain your lives. (21.14–15, 18–19)

1. The author has provided his own translations of biblical texts.

Section #4—21.20–28: National, cosmic and personal warnings

Chaos → Jesus warns of Jerusalem's fall, cosmic crises and personal fear.

Order → Jesus promises his powerful return and redemption.

And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to occur, stand up straight and raise your heads, because your redemption is near. (21.27–28)

Section #5—21.29–33: Proper perspective on national, cosmic and personal crises

Chaos → Jesus warns that this generation will experience all these things.

Order → Jesus promises that the kingdom is near and his words abide.

...the kingdom of God is near... Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. (21.31, 33)

Section #6—21.34–36: Proper preparation for national, cosmic and personal crises

Chaos → Jesus warns against dissipation, anxiety and unpreparedness.

Order → Jesus promises that his disciples will stand before the Son of Man.

But stay awake in every season, praying that you be strong to escape all these things that are about to occur, and to stand before the Son of Man. (21.36)

Section #7—21.37–38: Jesus' continued teaching in the temple

An Apocalyptic Interpretation of Luke 21.5–38

Luke 21.5–6 (Section #1 above) provides the narrative setting for the apocalyptic teaching of Luke 21.7–36. It establishes the interplay between the categories of order and chaos. Unlike in Matthew where the disciples point out the “buildings” of the temple complex or in Mark where they comment on the “wonderful” stones and buildings, in Luke they admire the “orderliness” of the beautiful stones and objects of devotion that adorn the temple. This orderliness, Jesus quickly responds, will be reduced to rubble, “not stone upon stone,” a chaotic condition which foreshadows an even deeper, more pervasive chaos that will sweep across the cosmos and burrow deep into their own lives. Although many interpreters focus solely on the destruction of the physical temple, a truly apocalyptic approach invites readers to see the temple as a pregnant symbol of a whole system of redemption and religious hierarchy that crumbles with the coming of the Messiah. One edifice falls while another, built of living stones on the cornerstone that is the Christ, grows ever larger into a holy temple.

Throughout the rest of the discourse Jesus elaborates on these chaotic situations, which operate on every plane of existence. Then he sets forth the promise of order and stability that his disciples can experience in him. Luke 21.7–8 (Section #2 above) raises the specter of the personal chaos that accompanies curiosity about the timing of the temple's toppling. False messiahs who come in the name of Jesus, claiming to know times and seasons, even claiming to be Jesus, attempt to lead his followers astray. But there is a firm place to stand in the midst of this spiritual confusion—faithfully following Jesus, not “going after” them but “going after” him, expressed in the language of discipleship (“Come *after* me,” Luke 9.23).

Luke 21.9–19 (Section #3 above) warns of chaos on every plane. Wars and civil unrest continually disrupt national life. On the cosmic plane, dreadful portents stretch across the heavens, while earthquakes, famines and plagues strike from place to place throughout the earth. Personally speaking, the followers of Jesus can expect arrest and imprisonment, betrayal by friends and family, and widespread hatred. The persecution is both religious and political. The natural result of all this external chaos would be the internal chaos of fear. The casualties of war are not only the armed warriors arrayed against one another but the noncombatants whose lives are filled with abject terror: the terror of loss—loss of habit and home, loss of land and life, loss of stability. To them Jesus says, “Do not be terrified!” (21.9). Cosmic calamities also produce fear; they are by nature “*dreadful*” (21.11). And of course persecution, betrayal and hatred are fearful circumstances. Jesus'

ultimate intention is not to warn of future crises, much less to assure his followers of rescue from them, but to offer encouragement and hope in the facing of them. He does not promise protection from arrest and imprisonment, nor does he provide an airtight defense; he promises that their persecution will afford opportunities to testify to the one sure and stable circumstance in their lives, their faith (21.13–15). Some of them would experience a martyr's death, but all of them would be safe spiritually (21.16–17). What would be the appropriate response? Not fear or terror, but perseverance, the endurance of faith, and the steadfastness of hope (21.19). In fact the most accepted variant reading of verse nineteen contains not a verb of future promise—"you will gain your lives"—but an imperative—"gain your lives!"—which entails leaning into life eternal despite the dire circumstances.

In Luke 21.20–28 (Section #4 above), the same array of cosmic, national and personal crises appears. Jesus first prepares his followers for the national chaos of war. Jerusalem would once again be besieged by the nations, as it had been so often in the past and as it would be so often in the future. The impact that concerns Jesus is not political but personal: do not stay and fight but flee to safety. Some civilians would die in the fighting, some would be captured. Even those who escaped the sword, mothers and children, would suffer dislocation and deprivation. The whole cosmos—sun, moon and stars, earth and sea—would share the turmoil. On the personal level, all this chaos would inevitably elicit fear and foreboding. But it is precisely in the midst of this pervasive chaos that Jesus' presence would be powerfully and gloriously manifested. His disciples, bowed down with terror, bent low with fear, should stand—stand up, and stand firm—stable in the midst of the uncertainty because their redemption was certain (21.27–28).

Luke 21.29–33 (Section #5) reiterates the teachings of the previous panels by means of a brief parable: when trees sprout their spring leaves, you know that summer is near. So it is with "all these things"—all the cosmic and national and personal calamities that have befallen and will befall Jesus' followers. These events are not so much "signs" of the *coming* reality of God's sovereign reign. Jesus has already made it clear that "the kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed" (17.20). Instead "all these things" are an occasion for the realization that "the kingdom of God is near," in fact "here," in Jesus, and already "among you" (17.21). The very generation of disciples to whom Jesus is speaking will experience the unsettling chaos he describes—persecution will increase exponentially, wars of rebellion and oppression will sweep the land: it will seem like the heavens and the earth themselves are disintegrating. But the words of the Master—his promises, especially the promise of his presence—will remain unshaken and so will those who remain in his word.

That Luke 21.34–36 (Section #6 above), Jesus' final words in this discourse, focuses on personally chaotic circumstances should come as no surprise; in apocalyptic texts cosmic and national crises stand not so much on their own but as symbols of the crises that affect the personal lives of individuals. So Jesus warns his followers of the chaos that can seize control of their actions, thoughts and emotions. He admonishes them to watch out for intoxication of all kinds, all the behaviors that tempt them to lose their self-control, to give over God's reign in their lives to other worldly influences, including drunkenness itself. The same goes for anxiety, the tendency to focus on the fearful circumstances of their lives rather than the Lord and his words, the source of their spiritual stability. And they need to stay awake, alert in prayer, confident that they will "escape all these things"—not the calamities themselves but the crippling consequences. They will still stand before the Judge justified, before the Master redeemed, and before the King saved. These are hard words, but they are hopeful words. It is no wonder that Luke 21.37–38 (Section #7) describes the common people, so vulnerable to all the instability of life, flocking to the temple early in the morning to listen to his challenging but comforting exhortations.

An Application of Luke 21.5–38

How do we respond to this climactic teaching of Jesus to his disciples, a teaching which we tend to ignore, to relegate to the unfathomable realm of the apocalyptic, or to mine only for data regarding the date of the second coming? How do we respond meaningfully to this important teaching?

1. We remember that chaos and disorder should come as no surprise to the disciples of Jesus. He knew that the things we think are the most stable are sure to crumble—even the temple. The systems of religious ritual and political power that order and arrange our lives will one by one be reduced to rubble.

2. We recognize that this chaos and disorder affects every arena of existence. The cosmos reels with astronomical cataclysms and planetary disruptions. Earthquakes and tsunamis, tornadoes and hurricanes, shake us and submerge us and strike us. Nations strong and stable are rocked by rebellion and weakened by warfare. Ecological crises undermine our agriculture and our economies. Such instability has its effect on our personal lives as well—physical, emotional and familial.
3. No matter what the circumstances, we do not wander off after end-times prophets (21.8). We stand firm on the truth not the timing. No matter what the circumstances, we are not afraid (21.9). We stand firm on the God who created and controls, even if terrifying events befall our nation. No matter what the circumstances, we look for opportunities, not for escape from these inevitable calamities but for evangelistic witness (21.14–15). When hated, we hold on to our hope; when persecuted, we endure (21.18–19). Crises are the reminders of Christ’s coming. When all else falls, we stand tall, heads high: we are the redeemed (21.27–28). When nations pass into oblivion, we remember that God’s kingdom is eternal. If everything else in heaven and on earth were to pass away, we remember that God’s word will not pass away (21.31–33). So we stay awake, avoiding moral dissipation, all forms of intoxication, and the avalanches of anxiety. We stand—even if the tectonic plates of our lives are shifting and shaking—on God our Sovereign and Jesus Christ our Savior (21.34–36).

The timing of the events alluded to in our passage is simply not a matter for concern, as Jesus affirms in 21.7–8. There are always cosmic calamities, there is never a time without war, and our personal lives are always wracked with one tragedy or another. It has always been, and it always will be. The point is not to predict the next crisis nor is it to predict the second coming or the end of the age, but to stand fast, stand firm, and stand in faith on the promise of our place in God’s powerful kingdom and of Jesus’ presence in our personal lives. As the apostle Paul says at the conclusion of his own eschatological teaching in 1 Thessalonians 4.18, “Comfort, encourage one another with these words.”

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