

Jesus' Apocalyptic Message: Matthew 24–25 and Luke 21

The previous chapters situated questions about the end times within the biblical context of Creation and the Fall, relying foundationally on Genesis 1–3. For in describing the final days, the Book of Revelation, as have most apocalyptic works, has made heavy use of images from Creation and primeval times. Revelation has also relied heavily on biblical symbols and images found in the messages of the prophets, who kept trying to call God's people back from their sins to avoid the punishment (often referred to as God's "wrath") that their sins deserved. To provide language and symbolism needed for understanding Revelation, the second chapter brought to the fore these prophetic warnings with their sometimes ominous imagery.

Both chapters took a canonical perspective that was grounded in the presumption that God's revelation throughout Scripture has an underlying unity. Interpreting Genesis 1–3 with the help of later Old Testament and New Testament texts, especially the prologue of John's Gospel, the first chapter highlighted some links between Revelation and Genesis:

- In the beginning God created everything (out of nothing) simply by his word.
- Although one hears very little about Creation in today's homilies and religious education, it truly is the foundation of a biblical worldview and theology.

- Creation implies an absolute difference between God the Creator and everything and everyone else, including humans, who are created by God and utterly dependent on him for their very existence.

The prologue of John further revealed that the command or word by which God created everything (for example, in Genesis 1:3, “Let there be light”) was actually personal—the Word, who is the Son of God and who is himself God (John 1:1-3). That humans might be the crown and pinnacle of God’s creation, God “created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). Humans, however, were not satisfied with being in God’s image and exercising authority on God’s behalf over the rest of material creation. They tried themselves to “be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5). They “grasped” at “equality with God” (see Philippians 2:6) by disobeying his command, which had placed limits on their autonomy.

Such a flagrant affront to the Creator was beyond the ability of human creatures to repair. They had forfeited God’s offer of love and adoption as his sons and daughters and become hopelessly alienated from God, from one another, and from all other creatures. The Old Testament substantiates the rapid proliferation of human corruption and alienation from God. For example, Genesis 6:5 states, “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” Without God’s saving intervention on their behalf, humans were doomed to eternal separation from God, to hell.

Redemption

We have seen how John’s Gospel announces the good news of God’s response to this universal human plight. The creating

Word, the Son of God, “became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). The *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola imagine the Trinitarian God observing the human tragedy and agreeing to send the Son to rescue us:

The first Prelude is to bring up the narrative of the thing which I have to contemplate. Here, it is how the Three Divine Persons looked at all the plain or circuit of all the world, full of men, and how, seeing that all were going down to Hell, it is determined in Their Eternity that the Second Person shall become man to save the human race.¹

The entrance of the Son of God into our “flesh,” thus sharing in our condition, created a new era in human history. “In the beginning,” God delegated his rule and dominion over the earth to man as his image and representative. After humans rejected God’s authority over them in Genesis 3, nature in turn rebelled against man, so that instead of bearing fruit it would bear “thorns and thistles.” Only by toil, by struggling with recalcitrant nature, would man earn his bread “by the sweat of his brow” (see Genesis 3:17-19).

Victory over Satan

Several books of the Old and New Testaments express the realization that the dominion and rule over the world, which humans forfeited, was seized by Satan and his rebellious angels. It is as if God allowed this satanic domination over most of the earth but separated from it Abraham, through whom he would form a personal people and eventually a kingdom for himself to rule. God’s shepherding of his Old Testament people, through both kings and prophets, was to prepare for his eventually reclaiming “in the final days” rule over all the earth in the kingdom of God.

From the beginning God intended his choice of Abraham and his descendants to be a blessing for all the nations. In Genesis 12:3 God tells Abraham, “By you all the

families of the earth shall be blessed.”² Further, in the Hebrew, as interpreted by its Greek and Latin translations, God promises Abraham, after he demonstrated his willingness to sacrifice his only son, “And by your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 22:18).³ Christians read the collective term seed (or offspring) as a singular term for Abraham’s messianic descendant. Thus St. Paul argues, “Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, ‘And to offsprings,’ referring to many; but, referring to one, ‘And to your offspring,’ which is Christ” (Galatians 3:16).

The prevailing view in New Testament times was that Satan was exercising widespread control over the earth and many of its inhabitants, with the possible exception of this chosen people. That provides the plausibility, for example, of Satan’s claim of dominion in his efforts to tempt Jesus:

And the devil took him up, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, “To you I will give all this authority and their glory; *for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will.* If you, then, will worship me, it shall all be yours.”

LUKE 4:5-7, emphasis added

Similarly, Revelation 12–13 portrays the dragon, identified with Satan, assigning his authority to the beast (in its original reference, clearly the Roman Empire).

Abraham’s promised seed, Jesus (see Luke 1:54-55) preached that the “kingdom (reign or rule) of God” was near. Not much longer would Satan maintain the oppressive control over the world that he had held all those centuries. In his many exorcisms, Jesus confirmed the beginning of this overthrow of Satan’s domination. Thus Luke quotes Jesus: “But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Luke 11:20).

Although John's Gospel does not mention individual exorcisms, it makes an even more powerful claim. John's Gospel portrays Jesus' death on the cross as a kind of cosmic exorcism of Satan from his stranglehold over the world. As Jesus contemplates his impending passion, he proclaims, "Now is the judgment of this world, *now shall the ruler of this world be cast out*; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (John 12:31-32, emphasis added; see John 14:30: "For the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me").

A similar kind of cosmic exorcism through the cross will appear also in Revelation:

And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death."

REVELATION 12:9-11, emphasis added

The prominence here of Jesus' overturning Satan's rule helps explain why the early Church did not continue to emphasize the coming of the kingdom or rule of God, as Jesus himself did in his public ministry. Whereas Jesus accentuated the coming kingdom of God, the early Church emphasized Christology—that is, who Christ is. For through the Word or Son of God made flesh and glorified after the cross, the Church saw the reign of God being implemented by the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus sent or whom God sent in Jesus' name: "Being therefore exalted at the right hand of

God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear” (Acts 2:33); “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name...” (John 14:26).

Victory Over Sin

A related emphasis in the New Testament and early Church responded to the overcoming of the primeval temptation and sin of trying to “be like God” (Genesis 3:5). This was the theme of divinization through Christ. St. Athanasius sums up an exceptionally widespread patristic theme (from Irenaeus, to Augustine, to Athanasius, and beyond) that has become a centerpiece of the theology of the Eastern Churches: “The Son of God became man so that man could become God.”⁴ What Adam had ruined, Jesus as second Adam restored. “Then as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience many will be made righteous” (Romans 5:18-19, see 5:12-21).

St. Paul’s Letter to the Philippians spells out the disposition by which the new Adam reversed the rebellious disobedience of the first Adam, who had striven to “be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5).⁵

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-8

As Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger has put it, “Man can become God, not by making himself God [as he attempted to do in Genesis 3], but by allowing himself to be made ‘Son’.” It was in the gesture of the Son’s obedience that the kingdom or rule of God was realized.⁶

Human creatures dared to disobey the express command of their Creator, and they found themselves utterly unable to bring about reconciliation with him. As an act of merciful justice, the Son of God became man so that as both God and man he could reconcile the two and restore the filial relationship that God originally had offered Adam and Eve. Because of the Incarnation, man’s dignity as sons and daughters of God was restored. Because of the Incarnation, God himself entered into his material creation and now relates to it in an entirely new and more intimate way. All this will have great significance for Christian efforts to picture the end times and the concomitant new creation. Because of the Incarnation, the earthly, the concrete, the human, and the symbolic all become especially fitting source material for the images and visions of Revelation.

How does God’s incarnate Son go about reconciling God and man in a concrete way? From differing perspectives the four Gospels provide distinct accounts of Jesus’ ministry, death, and resurrection, by which humans are saved from their hopeless alienation from God. However, their basic portrait of who Jesus is and how he saved us is mutually consistent and complementary to a surprising degree. All the Gospels portray Jesus as acting as Son of God and as God’s anointed (Messiah or Christ); as preaching the Good News about the imminence of God’s salvation and kingdom; as forgiving sins, preaching repentance, healing the sick, having authority over Satan and his spirits, and so on. All the Gospels find their climax in Jesus’ self-offering and bloody sacrifice on the cross—“for our sins” and “according to the scriptures”—and in his resurrection from the dead, by

which he overcame death (see 1 Corinthians 15:3-4). All the Gospels demonstrate how, through Jesus, God overcame the result of sin, man's alienation from God.

Our Part

Contrary to some simplistic promises of "cheap grace," however, one's salvation by Jesus cannot simply be passively presumed, even after a profound initial act of faith in Jesus as one's Savior. The New Testament as a whole, and not only the Gospels, insists that the human choice and obedience that was at the heart of the Old Testament message of salvation is still required. The challenge of Deuteronomy remains: "See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil" (Deuteronomy 30:15). If God's people obey God and follow his ways, they shall find life and blessing.

But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear,
...you shall perish...I call heaven and earth to witness
against you this day, that I have set before you life and
death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you
and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your
God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him.

DEUTERONOMY 30:17, 18, 19-20

In the same way, Paul argues in the Letter to the Romans:

For [God] will render to every man according to his
works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for
glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life;
but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth,
but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury.

ROMANS 2:6-8

From "the beginning" in human creation to the "new creation" in Jesus, even until the present, the drama of human freedom in response to God's offer of love and adoption as his sons and daughters is ongoing. Will humans accept

God's offer, now made in Jesus, to be his adopted sons and daughters in a loving but obedient relationship to "our Father"? Or will humans continue to try to "be like God, knowing good and evil"?

God respects our dignity and freedom and our decisions and choices. In the Old Testament, obedience to God brought life and blessing; disobedience brought death and curse. What this means in the long run becomes clearer with the fuller revelation in Jesus in the New Testament. If we say yes to God and his commandments, we shall share in God's happiness forever in heaven. If we say no to God and choose our own will over God's, he will respect our decision and leave us to our own autonomous existence separate from him forever.

This, of course, is the essence of existence in hell. As C. S. Lewis put it, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, 'Thy will be done.'"⁷ Apart from this drama of the meaning and consequences of human free choices and decisions, the Book of Revelation and other apocalyptic writings make little sense.

End Times in the "Little Apocalypses" in the Gospels

A prominent part of Jesus' teaching during his earthly ministry proclaimed the end and goal of existence in this world. Each of the Synoptic Gospels—Mark, Matthew, and Luke—features a special set of sayings (in the form of a sermon) by Jesus about what believers can expect at the end of the present age. A good place to begin our study of his message about the end times is with the apocalyptic speeches and prophecies of Jesus reported in Matthew 24–25, Luke 17 and especially 21, and Mark 13.

The versions of Jesus' teaching about the end times in Matthew 24 and Luke 21 both follow the basic outline of Mark 13. Matthew's account follows Mark's closely but also

is the only one to add a set of parables about the end and the very important story of the Last or general Judgment, and Luke 21 provides chronological “adjustments” to the scenario of Mark 13 (and Matthew 24). So we shall focus first on Matthew 24–25 to present the most complete general end times scenario, and then on Luke 21 for the way in which it distinguishes discreet periods in the end times leading up to the Last Day. Whereas Mark and Matthew seem to imply a close link between the traumatic fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) and the final coming of the Son of Man in power, or possibly even an identification of those two events, Luke 21 clearly inserts between them at least one intermediate period, the “times of the Gentiles” (see Luke 21:24).

A scene in which Jesus’ followers admire the temple introduces all three accounts of the last days. In response to their admiration of the temple, Jesus prophesies that not one stone will be left upon another, but all will be thrown down (see Matthew 24:2; Mark 13:2; Luke 21:6). The disciples then ask two questions that lead into Jesus’ “apocalyptic discourse.” Their first question is “Tell us, when will this be?” (Matthew 24:3). This question *when* refers initially to the destruction of the temple just predicted.

The second question in all three accounts asks what warning sign there will be, a question that is related in differing ways to the question about when the temple will be destroyed. In Mark and Luke, both questions apparently relate to the temple’s destruction: “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign when these things are all to be accomplished?” (Mark 13:4; see Luke 21:7).

In Matthew, however, the second question explicitly goes beyond the fall of the temple to the coming or parousia of Jesus and to the ending of the age: “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?” (Matthew 24:3b, emphasis added). That the disciples asked the question in this way gives the

impression that the fall of Jerusalem and the glorious second coming of Jesus and the end of the age are basically one complex scenario of expected related happenings. Jesus' answer to these questions when and by what sign begins the actual lengthy sermon about the end times in all three Gospels.

Curiosity About the End Times

It must be human nature to be curious about when the end times will come and what are the signs by which we can forecast their coming. Contemporary end time scenarios are not only the featured component of many contemporary Bible studies, sermons, and even best-selling novels. Even at the time of Jesus and the beginnings of the Church, there were widespread rumors about the end times and messianic pretenders. Shortly after the Jewish War, which resulted in the destruction of the temple and of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, a Jewish writer, Josephus, who had observed the final siege of Jerusalem, described the numerous messianic pretenders and prophets who had stirred up the Jewish people to rebel against the rule of the Roman Empire. Perhaps in view of the disastrous result of following false prophets, Jesus' first reported response to the disciples' questions about when the end times would come and by what signs they would be foreshadowed is his emphatic caution against being led astray by false messiahs and false signs.

Thus in Matthew 24, Jesus begins his response to the disciples by refusing to answer their questions directly. Instead he warns them not to be misled by the many pretenders who will come in his name or claim to be the messiah. Those pretenders will lead many astray. Nor should the disciples be alarmed by wars and rumors of wars, "for this must take place, but the end is not yet" (Matthew 24:6). First will come wars among nations, famines and earthquakes, but they are only the beginning of the "birth-pangs" (24:7-8).