

Harmonisation of the prophecies for the Last Days in Daniel, Matthew, Mark, Luke and the Apocalypse

In all three synoptic gospels, the discourse of Jesus on the last days (the eschatological discourse) is introduced by his prophecy of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem (Mark 13,1-2; Matt 24,1-2; Luke 21,5-6). A comparison shows that the content of this discourse is remarkably similar in all three reports (Mark 13, Matt 24, and Luke 21). In all three, the period of time embracing the last days is defined and described as the time when: *"those in Judaea must escape to the mountains; if a man is on the housetop, he must not come down or go inside to collect anything from his house; if a man is in the fields, he must not turn back to fetch his cloak. Alas for those with child, or with babies at the breast, when those days come! Pray that this may not be in winter"* (Mark 13,14-18; cf. Matt 24,16-18 and Luke 21,21-23).

However, there are significant differences between the reports of Matthew and Mark on the one hand, and Luke on the other. From the reports of Matthew and Mark, we can summarise the characteristics of the last days as follows:

1. *"...a time of great tribulation (θλιψις) unparalleled since God created the world, and such as never will be again. And if the Lord had not shortened that time no human being would have survived; but he did shorten that time, for the sake of the elect whom he chose"* (Mark 13,19-20; cf. Matt 24,21-22).
2. Before the start of this period, the gospel must first be preached to all the nations (Mark 13,10; cf. Matt 24,14).
3. The period begins with the setting up of the 'appalling abomination, of which the prophet Daniel spoke'. It is set up in the Holy Place (Matt 24,15), where it ought not to be (Mark 13,14).
4. Following signs in the heavens, this time of tribulation ends with the universal vision of the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory (Mark 13,24-27; cf. Matt 24,29-31).

In Luke's report, on the other hand, the last days are described with the following characteristics:

1. *"this is the time of retribution when all that scripture says must be fulfilled....For great misery (αναγκη) will descend on the land and retribution on this people. They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive to every gentile country; and Jerusalem will be trampled down by the gentiles until their time is complete"* (Luke 21,22-24).
2. This period begins with the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and of its temple (Luke 21,20).
3. Following signs in the heavens and on the earth, it ends with the universal vision of the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory (Luke 21,25-27; and also Luke 17,22-37).

Between the version of Matthew and Mark on the one hand, and that of

Luke on the other, there is a fundamental difference in the presentation of this final period of time. For Matthew and Mark it is a shortened period of time, which takes place after the gospel has been preached to all the nations, and before the second coming of the Lord (the Parousia).

Significantly, Luke omits to mention the preliminary need to complete the task of evangelising the nations, and also omits to mention that the last days will be shortened, because if not no human being would survive. Instead, Luke presents the last days as 'the time of the gentiles', by which is implied a relatively long period during which the gentiles exercise authority over the people and the land of Judaea.

It is important to note that although both versions of the prophecy agree that this final period of time will end with the Parousia, they differ about the nature of the event with which it begins. For Matthew and Mark the last days begin with the setting up of the 'appalling abomination' in the Holy Place. For Luke, they begin with the siege and subsequent destruction of Jerusalem and of its temple.

For an explanation of this difference we are directed to refer to the eschatological prophecy of Daniel; not only is that prophet explicitly named as a source in Matthew's report (Matt 24,15), but also characteristic expressions from his prophecy recur in all three reports of Jesus' eschatological discourse (e.g. 'the appalling abomination' - Dan 9,27; 11,31; 12,11; the trampling of Jerusalem - Dan 7,19.23; 8,13; the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven - Dan 7,13-14).

In his prophecy, Daniel refers to the final period in various ways:

1. as the time of great tribulation (צרה), unparalleled since nations first came into existence (Dan 12,1);
2. as the 'time, times and half-a-time' when the saints of the Most High will be handed over to the 'Prince' who will persecute them (Dan 7,25; 12,7);
3. as the 1,290 days (Dan 12,11), or half-a-week of years (Dan 9,27), which begin with:
 - a. the abolition of the 'continual sacrifice' and oblation (these offerings formed the basis of the daily services in the temple at Jerusalem);
 - b. the setting up of the 'appalling abomination' (שקוץ שומם) upon the 'wing' (כנף) of the temple (this is generally interpreted to refer to a sacrilegious idol erected and displayed in the temple area).

The difference between the versions of Matthew and Mark on the one hand, and Luke on the other, can be understood as a difference in the interpretation of which of these two events, in Daniel's prophecy, marks the start of the last days - the abolition of the continual sacrifice and oblation (3 a) or the setting up of the 'appalling abomination' (3 b).

Since the abolition of sacrifice and oblation followed inevitably from the

destruction of the temple at Jerusalem, it is this event which is interpreted by Luke to mark the onset of the final period. We deduce this from the fact that, according to Luke, the last days begin with the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by foreign armies (Luke 21,20-24). Since this destruction was convincingly accomplished by the Roman armies in 70 AD, it can be inferred from Luke's interpretation that the last days have already begun, and that we should now be watching for signs of, and preparing for, the final coming of the Lord at any time in the future (cf. Luke 21,29-36; 17,22-37).

On the other hand, Matthew and Mark interpret the setting up of the 'appalling abomination' to be the sign which marks the onset of a distressing, but brief, final period. Since no such event has yet occurred in this context, it is implied from this interpretation that the final, brief period has not yet begun, and must be expected at some time in the future, before the second coming of the Lord.

When considering which interpretation may be correct, we realise that neither interpretation excludes the other. In fact, it is helpful to consider both interpretations to be correct, and to represent the last days in alternative, but equally valid, ways. According to Luke, we are **already** in the last days, and according to Matthew and Mark we are **not** yet there. At the end of the period described by Luke, shortly before the Parousia, Matthew and Mark describe a brief and distressing intensification of the trouble that characterises the entire period. Matthew and Mark are describing the very last of the last days described by Luke.

In the canon of scripture, the last word on the subject of the last days is given in the Apocalypse. By reflecting each of these interpretations in its prophecy of the last days, this text confirms the validity of both.

Supporting Luke's interpretation, the text confirms that we are already in the last days, and close to the end: *"The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to him to show his servants what must soon take place....Blessed is the one who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and take to heart what is written in it, for the time is near"* (Rev 1,1.3). *"These words are faithful and true, and the Lord, God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place. And behold, I am coming quickly"* (Rev 22,6-7).

Although in the Apocalypse there is no explicit reference to the abolition of sacrifice and oblation, this event is clearly implied by the presentation of Jesus Christ as the sacrificial Lamb whose blood reconciles men to God (Rev 1,5-6; 5,9-10); in this way, it is understood that the divine purpose of all the sacrifices and oblations of the former temple is fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ. Following this sacrifice, there is no further need for the temple complex in Jerusalem and its daily rituals of sacrifice and oblation.

Furthermore, as in Luke's version of the prophecy, there are specific allusions to the destruction of the former temple and to the trampling of Jerusalem: firstly, in doing the work of measuring he was asked (Rev 11,1-2),

the writer of the prophecy (St. John) is participating in the construction of a new temple – a fact which indicates the rejection, if not the actual destruction, of the old temple; secondly, at some point during this period of construction, the Holy City (Jerusalem) is trampled by the gentiles for the duration of 42 months (Rev 11,2).

It is this reference to a period of 42 months that brings us to consider how the prophecy of the Apocalypse supports the other interpretation of Daniel's prophecy - the one developed by Matthew and Mark.

In the prophecy of the Apocalypse, the period of 42 months is also the time when the 'beast from the sea' exercises authority over every tribe and race and tongue and nation (Rev 13,5.7). During this time, he persecutes the saints (Rev 13,7.15-17) and makes them pass through the 'great tribulation' (Rev 7,14), witnessing their faith in Jesus Christ (Rev 13,9-10; 14,12-13). It is a shortened time (three-and-a-half years) which ends with the Parousia of the Lord (Rev 19,11-21). In these details, the Apocalypse re-presents not only the outline of the last days given by Matthew and Mark, but also the final period of a half-a-week of years, variously described in Daniel's eschatological prophecy (see above).

The little horn of the fourth beast seen by Daniel, and the 'abomination' set up by him, correspond, in the prophecy of the Apocalypse, to the eighth head (Rev 17,8.11) of the beast from the sea, who is worshipped through a sophisticated image of himself (Rev ch.13). It is this image (Rev 13,14-15), therefore, which corresponds to the 'appalling abomination' mentioned by both Daniel and the evangelists Matthew and Mark, and whose presence in the temple area signals the onset of the last days – the time of tribulation unparalleled since the nations first came into existence, the 'great tribulation' (Dan 12,1; Matt 24,21; Mark 13,19; Rev 7,14).

In summary, we first identified fundamental differences in the outline of the last days presented in the synoptic accounts of Jesus' eschatological discourse. With Luke's version on one hand, and Matthew and Mark's version on the other, we traced these differences to the eschatological prophecy of Daniel and identified them as two different but complementary interpretations. It is possible that Luke's point of view can be explained by the fact that he was writing after the historical destruction of the temple, and was therefore interpreting Daniel's prophecy in the light of that event.

Not only are both interpretations relevant to our present situation, but also both are confirmed by their reflection in the prophecy of the Apocalypse. In this prophecy, we find a 'harmony' of both interpretations with each other and with their source in the book of Daniel. The Apocalypse gives us the last word on the last days, and on the last of the last days - "*what is now, and what is to take place in the future*" (Rev 1,19).