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The Significance of Vultures in Luke 17:37

The proverb in Luke, “where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather” (17:37) is certainly a taste of Jesus’ enigmatic wisdom, to say the least. This phrase, though seemingly abstract and obscure, can offer the careful reader a glimpse into Luke’s understanding of the kingdom of God. Because of the uniqueness of the text and the infrequent parallel of the subject matter, it can often be confusing or overlooked all together. Regardless, an attempt to uncover the ambiguity of the passage is advantageous to an understanding of Luke’s perspective of Jesus. The uncovering of the passage shows us the nature of the kingdom of God: inevitable, overpowering, and unexpected.

The context around Luke 17:37 is crucial to an understanding of the passage. This particular verse is a conclusion to a discourse between Jesus and the disciples that has been shifted from the Pharisees, which begins with verse 22. The passage, beginning with verse 22 is structured into an almost poetic form, “inverted, conceptual parallelism” or an A-B-C-B-A pattern (Green, p.631). The beginning portion of the passage parallels the ending, and thus verse 37 is meant to echo verses 22-24 and round off the discourse. Consequently, the “B” forms in the pattern parallel each other, and the “C” is the emphasis, or climax of the passage. From this relationship we can begin to understand the significance of verse 37.

The climax is a warning from Jesus of the sudden, unexpected, and abrupt nature that will characterize that “days of the Son of Man”. Because these days will be

inescapable, Jesus here warns the disciples to be ready at all times. Examples are given of Noah and Lot and their incapability to be prepared for the suddenness of “the day that the Son of Man is revealed”. These examples (vv. 26-30) show the revealing will be so abrupt that there will be no warning; there is nothing the disciples can do to foresee it. There is an emphasis here on the lack of control that people have regarding the time of their fate and their knowledge of it. “Human calculations about God’s activity are futile, if not arrogant and irrelevant” (Craddock, 204). This lack of control exemplifies the sovereignty of God’s nature and timing. When reflecting upon this theme, it is interesting to note that Jesus’ statement in verse 37 is an echo of the passage in Job, “and where the slain are, there it (an eagle) is” (39:30). The context of this passage is a description of God’s control over all creation and its actions. Here, God in a somewhat mocking tone is describing to Job all the wonders of the creation that He, not Job or any man, controls and organizes. It is by his wisdom, and not humankind’s that creation ticks in perfect harmony and unified purpose. This theme, or climax, epitomizes the rest of the text and is set in between the echoes of the rest of the passage.

The opening of the passage, which verse 37 echoes, illustrates the desire and inability to be able to predetermine the time, location, and nature of the days of the son of man, “the days are coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man” (v. 22). This desire, however, is denied to the disciples by Jesus. The disciples may vainly estimate the time of the Parousia or become unprepared, but it will surely overwhelm them without warning. This overwhelming will come as certainly and completely “as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other” (v. 24). “Here Jesus depicts that ‘day’ as unmistakable, worldwide, sudden, (and)

inescapable...” (Green, p. 631). Within this A-B-C-B-A form, Jesus’ proverb of the vultures is thus echoing this message. The wonder and desire of the disciples is repeated as they ask, “where, Lord?” (v. 37). Just as vultures will certainly and overwhelmingly gather to a corpse, so certain and overwhelming will be the day of the Son of Man. “They will no more need a special sign than do the vultures: they will recognize the Son of Man wherever he appears with the same surety with which the vulture finds the carrion” (Topel, p. 410). The context, however, is not the only insight we are given to understand the perplexity of the passage.

The language in and behind this passage provides crucial imagery that engages readers and draws them in to a deeper understanding of the coming of the Son of Man. It is important to note the completeness of the consumption of a carcass that occurs when vultures “gather”. There are several different species of vultures that occupy Israel today, all with different physical features that characterize the way in which they feed. There are varying sizes and strengths of beaks and talons of the different kinds of vultures, and those with the larger and stronger beaks are able to begin ripping the carcass and begin eating of the carcass first. Smaller and smaller vultures follow until the carcass is completely picked clean. “Thus the proverb speaks probably of different genera of vultures flying together from diverse nesting grounds to collaborate in stripping the carcass” (Topel, p.406). This new dimension of the gathering of vultures helps to further illustrate the utter completeness of the revealing of the Son of Man. Nothing will be left to be revealed just as vultures will leave nothing left of the carcass.

The lack of warning of the day of the Son of Man is also exemplified in this proverb. Prior to verse 37, Jesus explains there will be no warning when the Son of Man

comes, “on that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other left” (v. 34). Despite this explanation, the disciples ask to know “where” it will take place. As it is clear that the disciples do not understand, Jesus dodges their question with an answer that again demonstrates his point: there will be no warning, no one will know until it has already happened. Vultures that have gathered to a body are a sign that death has already occurred. “When the disciples, in spite of this absolute and clear denial that there will be prior sign, nevertheless ask for a local sign of the event, Jesus gives them a *post factum* sign which bears out what he has been saying all along: that there are no prior signs of the arrival of the final reign of God” (Topel, p. 411). The disciples ask for a sign, but Jesus’ answer reveals that the only sign they will receive will be after his day has already taken place. Just as there was uncertainty amongst the disciples of this answer’s meaning, there is disagreement about its interpretation today.

There is discrepancy about the authentic translation of “vulture”, as it could also be interpreted as “eagle”. The Greek word that is translated to “vulture” in English is a broader term for “birds of prey” because both the eagle and the vulture are indistinguishable from below when they are in flight (Topel, p. 405). Those who translate the Greek, “aetos”, to mean “eagle”, usually understand the proverb as a reference to eagle which precedes every legion in the Roman army (Fitzmyer, p. 1173). This often leads to the conclusion that this passage is referring to the destruction of the temple at the hands of the Romans in 70 A.D. This is unlikely however, for two reasons. First, Luke distinguishes between the destruction of Jerusalem (21:20-24) and the days of the Son of Man (21:25-28). Secondly, it was generally understood that vultures and not

eagles fed on dead carcasses, and the context here clearly denotes the feeding of a dead body and thus, vulture is the appropriate translation as opposed to eagle (Topel, p. 405).

These contextual clues and lingual imageries give the reader a much broader insight into the Jesus' notion of the "days of the Son of Man". The message for us today is apparent, whether we interpret the "days of the Son of Man" as an internal experience, or a futuristic apocalyptic coming of Christ. We are to be prepared for its impact, for there can be no contending the certainty and envelopment of its coming. This message, enigmatic though it may seem, is meant to convey a very clear and penetrating, and possibly uncomfortable, illustration. It does this well for the perceptive reader. The revelation of the Son of Man will come without restraint, without warning, and without deficiency.

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