

Matthew 24:36-44. The Politics of the Coming of the Son of Man

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This section of the apocalyptic discourse in Matthew is a highly explicit description of the details of what will happen on the day of the coming of the Son of Man. The politics of the coming of the Son of Man were shaped by the political history of apocalyptic.

One origin of apocalyptic was a search to explain the mysteries of political change regarding the rise and fall of empires: Why do empires rise to great power and then inexplicably, virtually overnight, they are defeated and destroyed? For example, the great city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire, was conquered and substantially destroyed by the Babylonians in 612 BCE. Less than a century later in 539 BCE, the Persians under Cyrus the Great conquered and plundered Babylon.

The apocalyptic answer to this mystery was that these great battles were fought in the heavenly realms by the angels that represented each great empire. The outcomes of the earthly battles were determined by what happened in the heavenly battles.

A dimension of the apocalyptic myths was the destruction of the great capital cities and the need to flee instantly.

In Israel apocalyptic was adopted and reshaped in the framework of Israelite history and experience. Daniel 7-12 is the most extensive apocalyptic vision in the canonical Scriptures of the Old Testament. The Son of Man and the great Israelite angels, Michael and Gabriel, have prominent roles in Daniel's visions that include a vision of "the last days." The "last days" can refer to both the end of the age and the end of all things.

Matthew's presents the Son of Man as an apocalyptic vision of a new age being inaugurated in which the politics of Jesus will be established. Prior to this new age, there empires will be destroyed and the elect will be gathered to save them from destruction. This new age of the reign of the Son of Man is a promise of a new government. In Matthew's context in the aftermath of the Jewish-Roman War, with its catastrophic destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, this new age was a promise that the angels of Rome would be defeated, and the Son of Man triumph.

Matthew's audiences were encouraged by this vision to wait with hope for this new age of the Son of Man. The gathering of the elect, with its vivid imagery of one taken and one left behind, is a vision of the protection of those who believe in the Son of Man.

In Matthew this discourse is a prelude to the story of Jesus' death and resurrection. It is a context for hearing the story about the suffering and death of the Messiah. The discourse paints a vision of hope for those oppressed by the Roman Empire. It promises a new age in which the world will be delivered from the powers of sin and death, by the politics of love manifested in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

This is also good news for those who live in the 21st century. In the end, Matthew says, Jesus' politics will win.