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Prof. Kato has written a very interesting article for the blog as a guest post, on one of the most familiar and least understood passages in the New Testament, the Beatitudes. I can’t say that I always agree with those who provide us with guest posts, but oh boy do I agree with this one. And for my money it gets especially interesting at the end, where he shows how Christians today should understand this most critical teaching of Jesus precisely in light of the fact that the apocalyptic end of the age that he predicted never happened. Even those of us who are not Christian should see the real merit and strength of this position — it ends up endorsing precisely the vision that many of us have.

Here is the post, in full. Please feel free to make comments and ask questions.

How Do We Interpret the Beatitudes When Their Original Apocalyptic Context Has not been Realized?

Julius-Kei Kato

Introduction

The Beatitudes, particularly in their Matthean form in Matt. 5:3-11, are some of the most recognizable and even popular teachings of Christianity and are all usually ascribed to Jesus himself in popular Christian preaching. Who has not heard of them romantically proclaimed as “the moral blueprint” of Christianity or the “epitome of Jesus’s teachings,” or the like? However, upon close exegetical and theological examination, I would say that the Beatitudes present one of the hardest parts of the gospels to interpret in a theological way.

At the university where I teach, it is not difficult to analyze these beatitudes in a literary and historical-critical way. The consensus of many critical biblical scholars about them can be summarized thus: They are found in Matthew 5 as part of the “Sermon on the Mount” and in Luke 6 as part of the “Sermon on the Plain”; they were probably found in the common Q source used by both Matthew and Luke which these evangelists then redacted to conform to each one’s particular emphasis, and so on.

But when the burning theological question is posed, namely, How does one make sense theologically and in the present time of these famous declarations of Jesus about who are “blessed” or “happy” in the reign of God I just find that many standard theological and homiletical explanations of the Beatitudes are just not robust enough because they fail to take serious consideration of what is most probably the original context of these declarations of Jesus—the Late Second Temple Jewish Apocalyptic Worldview which was espoused by a majority of Jews at the time. Needless to say, even the historical Jesus and his disciples lived and breathed in this apocalyptic environment and accepted its main presuppositions. One main foundation of that worldview was the belief that in their immediate future God was going to intervene directly in the chosen people’s history
in order to defeat Israel’s enemies and set everything right once again. Fast forward to today. It is plain to see that we who try to interpret the Beatitudes at this point in history would fail to understand their original meaning if we neglect this crucial contextual element.

The Original Beatitudes

A number of important commentators point out that if there is a historical core to the so-called Beatitudes as they are found in Matthew and Luke, the first three beatitudes in Luke 6 would most likely make the cut.[1]

Lk 6:20-22 reads thus in the NRSV:

20 Then [Jesus] (he) looked up at his disciples and said:
[1st] ‘Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
21 [2nd] ‘Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.
[3rd] ‘Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

So why would the first 3 Lukan Beatitudes be more historical? The reasons could be summarized thus: Jesus, the rabbi from Nazareth had, as primary audience and first concern, the really (and not only spiritually) downtrodden and marginalized classes of his own society who were under various forms of oppression. This audience is more faithfully reflected in Luke 6:20-21. Who were they? They were the truly and materially poor (v. 20), the truly physically hungry (v. 21) and those who were truly and constantly in tears because of their intense suffering and oppression (v. 21). The Beatitudes in Matt 5:3-11 (with the exception perhaps of v. 4 “Blessed are those who mourn...”) also seem to reflect a later process of “spiritualizing” the original message of the historical Jesus as best illustrated in Matthew’s editing the “Blessed are you poor” of Luke into a more spiritual “Blessed are the poor in spirit” in Matt 5:3.

I will concentrate then on the first three Beatitudes in Luke as probably coming from the historical Jesus himself and reflect on a possible theological interpretation of these not-yet-spiritualized teachings of Jesus.

The Great Dilemma

Hence, let us take the plainest meaning of the first three Beatitudes in Luke: The teaching proclaims that the poor, the hungry and the weeping are (in Greek) “makarioi”; “blessed” (traditional English translation), “happy” (more contemporary, plain English translation). The Scholars Bible of the Jesus Seminar renders makarioi into English as “Congratulations,”[2] that is, “worthy to be congratulated.”

I would like to point this out here as the theological interpretive crux of the problem. Why did Jesus proclaim the poor, the hungry, and the crushed-to-the-point-of-weeping people as worthy of congratulations? At first blush, Jesus’s proclamation just does not make sense. When and where in normal human circumstances have the poor, the hungry, and those broken by sorrow ever been deemed as blessed? The answer is: Never! Nowhere! So why did Jesus have the gall to make this declaration? Taken in its plainest sense, Jesus’s
declaration seems like the proverbial “pie in the sky,” (that is, something that never happens in real life). If you dangle such a ‘pie in the sky’ to the starving without offering any real food, your declaration becomes a cruel, insensitive, even offensive statement to people who do not need to have their difficulties further exacerbated. So, was Jesus such a cruelly insensitive rabbi?

One of the most common ways that interpreters deal with this interpretive dilemma is to say that the Beatitudes describe an “eschatological” and not really “normal historical” order. And herein lies the key to theologically interpreting the Beatitudes.

**The Original Context of the Beatitudes**

As mentioned briefly earlier, the notion of the beatitudes-as-eschatological is connected to its historical context. That context would be the apocalyptic hope of late Second Temple Judaism. It is seldom explicitly stated that the Beatitudes make historical sense only when they are set against the backdrop of an apocalyptic-eschatological “reversal of fortunes.” [3] In effect, that means that the historical Jesus as well as the original audience to whom the Beatitudes were directed, were hoping for an imminent world-changing intervention of God (also known as “the coming of God’s reign”) into their historical world. That would then create a new world order where, the (really) poor, the (literally) hungry, the weeping ones would be the beneficiaries of this reversal of fortunes brought about by divine action and will be truly (and not only spiritually) “blessed,” thus, truly worthy of being “congratulated.”

**When the Original Context is Gone**

Now when this suggested original context of first century apocalyptic hope is neglected, the Beatitudes can pose a daunting challenge for theological interpretation. Bereft of its original apocalyptic context, the declaration of “blessedness” can become just a cruel and unrealistic paean to an impossible utopic dream.

Of course, the apocalyptic eschaton, in the form in which many first century Jews believed it would come, never actually came. Where does that leave us in terms of theologically interpreting the Beatitudes? Are we condemned to make the Beatitudes part of the “opium” of the people by explaining that the promised rewards would be in a deferred state called “heaven” (as has happened in effect for most of Christian history)? Do we just ignore the elephant in the room that is actually screaming that the promised blessed state according to the Beatitudes is an impossible dream this side of the grave? Do we just turn the Beatitudes into profoundly spiritual-sounding platitudes that, again, are just not founded on the ordinary experiences of those they profess to congratulate?

**How to Interpret the Beatitudes Theologically when Apocalypse Has not Come?**

When the Christian communities realized that the expected imminent intervention of God was not so imminent after all, they started to re-consider some teachings of Jesus that directly hinged on an imminent coming of God’s reign. These efforts to interpret the beatitudes in a post-imminent-apocalyptic world are already found for example in Matthew’s redactional efforts to spiritualize the Beatitudes.

I’d like to propose that the fact that the Beatitudes’ original context of apocalyptic-eschatological hope has not been realized should be made clearly and explicitly the starting point of any theological way of interpreting the Beatitudes so that the
resulting interpretation would avoid—what I mentioned as—unhelpful and irrelevant treatments of the topic. And in that vein, I’d like to take some important hints from liberationist, postcolonial and minoritized (such as Asian/Asian-North American) biblical hermeneutical principles and practices. To put it simply: In the wake of the original apocalyptic context of the Beatitudes being unrealized, they should now be theologically interpreted through the lens of a realized, collaborative, incarnational eschatology by which the promised rewards of the Beatitudes no longer depend on an apocalyptic intervention of God but on the followers of Jesus (or practically anyone else [even agnostics/atheists] who think that Jesus was a great teacher) taking on a liberative praxis to create in some way and realize a new social order where the really poor, the truly hungry, the weeping and marginalized ones really come to experience now (not later in some heaven) some measure of the blessedness that God’s reign should bring with it.

In other words, I think that the way forward in interpreting the Beatitudes theologically today would be to understand them as a concrete call to action to realize a better local and/or global order in which the poor, the hungry, as well as the weeping, the excluded, the marginalized and disadvantaged ones are made the preferential recipients of distributive justice so that they would truly be “blessed” and worthy of “congratulations.” This is “theological” in a very broad sense where we can even take “theology” to refer humanistically to the finest aspirations and hopes translated into concrete efforts of humans to be compassionate and (distributively) just.

Needless to say, it is something that Dr. Ehrman in his noble efforts to provide for the needy (through this blog!) is definitely doing and, thus, he and all the blog members are in a deep way practitioners and realizers of the beatitudes!


What Are The Dead Sea Scrolls?