

Jesus's Interpretation of Tragedies, Disasters and Traumas in Luke 13:1–5

1. Introduction

The “Why?” question emerges inevitably whenever a tragedy or trauma happens in our human lives. The case was hardly different in prehistoric times, in the Old Testament, or in Jesus's era. It is an intriguing question therefore what Jesus' attitude and approach would have been to such unexpected disasters.

Between the end of Lk 12 and the beginning of Lk 13 there is a topical and temporal connection. The topic of both sections is the necessity of conversion, while the temporal link is Christ's journey to Jerusalem.¹ Jesus receives a report on recent news, and he is expected to comment on these tragic events. Luke does not mention why the people tell Jesus about this event.² Those questioning him have in their mind the inseparable connection between sin and calamity.³ They require from Jesus to shed light on the sinfulness of those lost in the tragedies. We do not find an account of these events in other historical sources, which does not diminish the reality of these events. Some scholars suggested that Josephus should have recorded these events as they seem to be part of the political dimensions of Pilate's acts. Josephus's accounts are more concerned with the period when Pilate was prefect than with all the other periods of his mandate. Although the events are not sustained by other historical sources, it would not be the only one left unmentioned from Pilate's era. These two events are related only in Luke, who may have connected what he found in his source(s) with the parable of the barren fig tree. In Luke's narrative, the story “in its immediate context accentuates a Lukan concern regarding the realisation of God's justice (Luke 7:29) in spite of

¹ Hendriksen, William: *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke* (New Testament Commentary). The Banner of Truth, Edinburgh 1984, 693.

² Morris, Leon: *Luke* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries). Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester 1990, 242.

³ Wilcock, Michael: *The Message of Luke*. Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester 1979, 138.

marginalisation (4:18–19; 6:20–23) and/or sufferings of the innocent (13:2; see Acts 9:16).⁴ The story is linked to what Luke related earlier in chapter 12 and concerns the coming judgement. The passage was a constituent part of the chiasmic parables source and finds its place in the section called “The journey to Jerusalem”. According to another view, Lk 13,1–5 constitutes a “pronouncement story”, as Vincent Taylor termed it. Rudolf Bultmann considers this pericope a “unitary composition” which serves Luke as an introduction to the parable. Bultmann seems to regard these verses as a controversy-dialogue occasioned by a question from the people present, but later on he treats them as a scholastic dialogue, an apophthegm formulated by the early church “in the spirit of Jesus” and in dependence on Josephus. The material probably lacked a narrative setting and is to be seen as an admonishing teaching of Jesus based on contemporary experiences. I incline to accept the view of J. Blinzler, who argues that the episode might well be historical. In my view, the passage contains a genuine Jesus-saying.

2. The execution of the Galileans

“The narrative moves to a new scene but the theme of judgement continues from the previous chapter. Some people saw disaster as punishment for, and therefore evidence of, sin, as mentioned earlier, and it is part of the argument of the ‘historical’ and prophetic books of the Old Testament that Israel was punished for her disobedience by military defeat at the hand of foreign powers. Here Jesus refuses to draw directly the conclusion that those who had suffered in two recent incidents were necessarily either greater sinners or more guiltier (debtors) than anyone else. Rather, their fate stands as a warning to every one of the urgency of repentance.”⁵

Luke continues his report informing the readers that some were present at that time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled (μίγνυμι, Mt 27,34; Rev 8,7; 15,2) with their sacrifices. It can be easily imagined that these Galileans were involved in activities hostile to the state, and thus Pilate’s harsh and insensitive nature was triggered by their acts. An idiomatic use of the

⁴ Parsons, Mikeal C.: *Luke: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist*. Hendrickson, Peabody 2007, 61.

⁵ Lieu, Judith: *The Gospel of Luke* (Epworth Commentaries). Epworth, Peterborough 1997, 106.

“mingling of blood” is known in Jewish literature,⁶ which in one text is even applied to putting someone to death in the temple (see Philo, *De spec. leg.* 3.91). The idiom may be literal, or it may be used figuratively. In any case it requires that the related spilling of blood take place in the same time and probably at the same place. Since laymen were allowed to perform their own Passover sacrifices, this may very well have been the occasion behind the story. Passover time was often a time of political unrest, a time when Jewish patriotic feelings ran high and Roman concerns were justifiably aroused. Jesus was crucified under precisely such circumstances. These Galileans were seemingly caught up in some sort of plot or activity deemed treasonable by Pontius Pilate. Whatever the circumstances, the death of these unfortunate pilgrims evokes, the question that Jesus asks in verse 2, a question that reflects the Pharisaic belief of misfortune, was often brought on by God in retaliation for sin (see Jn 9,1–2).⁷ A number of events to which allusion is possibly being made include: “1. the affair of the ensigns in *Jos. Bel.* 2:169-174; *Ant.* 18:55–59, but this took place in Caesarea in AD 26; 2. the tumults associated with the building of an aqueduct (*Jos. Bel.* 2:175-177; *Ant.* 18:60–62), but this incident involved the murder of Judaeans with cudgels outside the temple; 3. an attack on some Samaritans (*Jos. Ant.* 18:85–87), but this took place in AD 36; 4. the slaughter of about 3,000 Jews offering Passover sacrifices by Archelaus in 4 BC (*Jos. Bel.* 2:8–13; *Ant.* 17:213–218). This incident, however, took place some thirty years earlier and was committed by a different ruler; moreover, the murder of 3,000 men would not bear comparison with an accident to 18.”⁸

The report was aimed to challenge Jesus to comment on the significance of these events. The answer given works within the framework of sin and punishment, but those who brought the issue to Jesus’ attention could perhaps be understood to have been looking for a political statement. This was also the case in Acts 1:6, where the disciples interrogated their Master, but Jesus returned a sobering answer (cf. verses 8 and 9).

⁶ Strack, Herman L. – Billerbeck, Paul: *Das Evangelium nach Markus, Lukas und Johannes und die Apostelgeschichte erläutert aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch). Beck, Munich 1965, 2.193.

⁷ Evans, Craig A.: *Luke* (New International Biblical Commentary – New Testament Series). Hendrickson, Peabody 1990, 204–205.

⁸ Marshall, I. Howard: *The Gospel of Luke. A Commentary on the Greek Text* (The New International Greek Testament Commentary). Paternoster, Exeter 1998, 553.

In Lk 13 Jesus takes up the challenge. Luke's introductory formula (ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν) appears to be a Septuagintism. Jesus asks if the murdered persons were greater sinners than all the others, literally "sinned beyond all the Galileans." As Luke is using the preposition παρά followed by an accusative, he preserves a Semitic expression, a circumlocution for comparison instead of Aramaic or Hebrew *min*, "from". This use of παρά in a comparative sense is found again in Lk 13:4 and 18:14.⁹ Jesus emphatically negates his own question with οὐχί (cf. 12,51). Unless the hearers repent, that is of their sin in general, they will all be destroyed in the same way. This is hardly to be taken literally of a similar slaughter, although it could refer to the destruction of Jerusalem, which Jesus foresaw. More likely πύργος (Lk 13:4) refers to the last judgement. Accordingly, the point of the argument is that natural calamities afford no proof that those who suffer of those are worse sinners than anybody else. Far more important is the fact that all sinners face the judgement of God unless they repent.¹⁰

An association between sin and calamity has a firm background in Jewish thought (cf. Job 4:7; 8:4,20; 22:5; Ps 1:4; 37:20; Ex 20:5; Jn 9:2–3) and is implicitly accepted by Jesus here.¹¹ Jesus will, however, dispute the possibility of determining the degree of sinfulness from the experience of calamity and aims to shift the focus away from passing the judgement on others to putting one's own house in order. Three horizons of God's judgement are identified within Luke's works: human history, after death and final judgement. Only the first is intended here (even more so in the parallel verse 5). But this should hardly be overemphasised, as all three horizons are understood as closely interconnected. In one way or another disaster will strike all those who will not repent in the face of the new situation¹² emerging with the arrival and ministry of Jesus and by his proclamation on of the kingdom of God. The approaching destruction of Jerusalem is not specifically anticipated here but it takes its place in connection with this kind of thinking. "Luke sees the judgment of God as falling on people in the flow of human history, after

⁹ Fitzmyer, Joseph A.: *The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV* (The Anchor Bible 28A). Doubleday, New York 1985, 1007.

¹⁰ Gooding, David: *According to Luke. A New Exposition of the Third Gospel*. Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester 1987, 208.

¹¹ Klein, Hans: *Das Lukasevangelium* (Meyers Kritisch-Exegetischer Kommentar). Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2006, 472.

¹² Danker, Frederick W.: *Luke* (Proclamation Commentaries). Fortress, Philadelphia 1976, 95.

death, and on the final judgment day. The wording here literally supports the first, but in the Gospel account the three are too closely intertwined to be neatly separated.”¹³

3. The eighteen killed by the collapse of the Tower of Siloam

“Jesus reinforces his point by adding a second example of his own. Eighteen men were killed when a tower fell at Siloam.”¹⁴ The Greek word for tower (πύργος) “can also mean ‘farm building’.” Siloam was the basin “associated with the water supply from Gihon to Jerusalem; it lay near the junction of the S and E walls, and the tower may have been part of the fortifications in this area.”¹⁵ Siloam was the name given to the reservoir near the southeast corner of Jerusalem’s walls (cf. Isa 8:6, where it is spelled “Shiloah”), mentioned by Josephus (*War* 5.145) and John (Jn 9:7.11). A tower at this point in the wall is otherwise unknown.¹⁶ “Pilate built an aqueduct to improve water supply, and it is also possible that the tower and its collapse had something to do with this building operation. Nothing is otherwise known of the disaster,¹⁷ an incident too trifling to figure in a history book. Nevertheless, there is a rabbinic statement that no building ever collapsed in Jerusalem (Aboth RN 35; SB II, 97),¹⁸ but this is unlikely to be a reliable evidence against the statement here. The victims are described as “debtors” (ὀφειλέται), which is a translation variant for “sinners”, and indicates that the story has a Semitic background.”¹⁹

In these verses “Luke continued the theme of 12:57–59 on the need to be reconciled to God. The particular expression he used to describe how this comes about is a favorite, ‘repent.’ John the Baptist’s message (3:8) and Jesus’ earlier preaching (5:23) is repeated, and it would be at the heart of the church’s preaching in Acts as well.” In this passage “the universal need for repentance is emphasized. It was not only Galilean sinners or victims of tragedy in Jerusalem who needed to

¹³ Nolland, John: *Luke 9:21–18:34* (Word Biblical Commentary 35B). Word, Dallas 1993, 719.

¹⁴ Marshall, Howard I.: *op. cit.* 554.

¹⁵ Marshall, Howard I.: *op. cit.* 554.

¹⁶ Nolland, John: *op. cit.* 718.

¹⁷ Ellis, E. Earle: *The Gospel of Luke* (New Century Bible). Marshall, Morgan & Scott, London 1974, 184.

¹⁸ Strack, Herman L. –Billerbeck, Paul: *op. cit.* 2.197.

¹⁹ Marshall: *op. cit.* 554.

repent; all of Jesus' (and Luke's) audience must repent lest they come under the divine judgment.

A second and related Lukan emphasis in this passage is the coming of the divine judgment. As in Jeremiah's time, so now God sent a prophet, his Son (and John the Baptist before him), to preach a message of repentance and judgment. There was still time, but the time was short. If the listeners did not repent, then judgment would come; and like the Galileans killed by Pilate and the Jerusalem-ites upon whom the tower of Siloam fell, they too would perish. This warning, along with the reference to Jerusalem (13:4), could not help but remind Luke's readers of the city's tragic destruction in A.D. 70. The exclusion of most Jews from God's kingdom, a theme repeated continually in Acts (13:46–47; 18:6; 28:26–30), would also be understood. Despite the respite from judgment, Israel brought forth no "fruit in keeping with repentance" (Luke 3:8). Jesus foresaw that his preaching, like Jeremiah's, would also fall on deaf ears, and so he grieved over Israel (13:34–35; cf. 21:24). The axe, already at the root (3:9), would be swung and the fallen tree thrown into the fire. Clearly Luke understood the events of A.D. 70 as the fulfilment of this divine judgment. Yet Luke also wanted his readers to understand that what happened to Israel was also a warning to them. After hearing the word, they too had to bring forth fruit (8:12–15) lest their own repentance be in vain."²⁰

Those who hear these words and read them, should be aware that the Prophet is heading toward the capital where such atrocities are likely to happen.²¹ Jesus is as inclusive in his comments as the problem is universal: Why did this tragedy happen to this people? "The question is as old as the human race, finding classic expression in Job, Psalm 37, and Psalm 73. According to John 9:2, disciples of Jesus asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" The question assumes a direct correlation between suffering and sin,²² a correlation that in some cases is unmistakably evident. However, is the connection of such a general nature that one can say the good are prosperous and

²⁰ Stein, Robert H.: *Luke* (New American Commentary 24). Broadman & Holman, Nashville, 1992, 371.

²¹ Johnson, Luke Timothy: *The Gospel of Luke* (Sacra Pagina 3). Liturgical Press, Collegeville 1991, 213.

²² Kálvin János: *Evangéliumi harmónia I. Magyarázat a Máté, Márk és Lukács összhangba hozott evangéliumához* (Hungarian translation by Gusztáv Rábold). Székelyudvarhely 1940, 2.168.

healthy, while the evil sink into poverty and illness? Some biblical writers say yes—for example, the composer of Psalm 1. Many have agreed. So influential has been this notion that many have looked upon their own lack of success or experiences of loss as divine punishment. In fact, some have argued against acts of charity toward such persons because such acts would interfere with God's punishment. On the other hand, Jesus announced God's favour on the poor, the maimed, the blind and the crippled. The common observation that sometimes the evil prosper and sometimes the righteous suffer should have shattered the ancient dogmas. The present persons come to Jesus and want to know if violence and suffering are random or according to the divine law. Jesus rejects such attempts at calculation, not only because they are futile but also because they deflect attention from the primary issue: the obligation of every person to live in penitence²³ and trust before God,²⁴ and that penitent trust is not to be linked to life's sorrows or life's joys. Life in the kingdom of God is not an elevated game of gaining favours and avoiding losses. Without repentance, all is lost anyway."²⁵

4. Conclusion

The first event mentioned in Lk 13:1–3 about Pilate's killing is likely to be a political situation. It is most probably referring to Pilate, who often governed in a rather commanding and insensitive manner, reacted in a murderous way to the supposed opposition or deed committed by the Galilean citizens. His behaviour caused a lot of trauma among people. The second event mentioned probably refers to a disaster, whereby eighteen people from Jerusalem were crushed to death by the collapsed tower of Siloam. In both cases there are human casualties, caused by a ruler and by an unfortunate incident. Both are earthly happenings requiring a spiritual explanation.

The controversy story – as Robert H. Stein names it – and the parable that follows it are unique to Luke's Gospel. The first alludes to a recent incident in which

²³ Goulder, Michael D.: *Luke: A New Paradigm* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 20). Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 1989, 560.

²⁴ Caird, G. B.: *Saint Luke* (The Pelican New Testament Commentaries). Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1974, 169.

²⁵ Craddock, Fred B.: *Luke* (Interpretation Series: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching). John Knox, Louisville 1990, 168–169.

Pontius Pilate had killed a number of Galileans while they were offering sacrifices in the temple. In addition, Jesus recounted another tragedy, the collapse of the tower of Siloam that killed eighteen citizens of Jerusalem. Neither of these events is recorded by other sources. Jesus pointed out that in both incidents the victims of these tragedies were neither especially evil, nor without sin. The lesson drawn from these examples is the audience's need to repent, but how these illustrations relate to repentance is vaguely drawn. One possibility is that the fate of these people was meant as a warning that sudden death was a real possibility and therefore Jesus' hearers and Luke's readers needed to prepare through repentance (see Lk 12:20). A second possibility is that these tragedies were meant to teach that unless Jesus' audience repented, they too would perish. That both groups were killed at Jerusalem may suggest to the readers of this account after A.D. 70 that the message of "you will perish" (13:35) had been a call for Israel's repentance. As they knew, this warning went unheeded having Jerusalem's destruction as a result. This interpretation is supported by the following parable, which alludes to the coming judgement, the hostility of the unrepentant synagogue ruler (13:10–17), and above all by the lament in 13:34–35. A third possibility is that the two incidents are meant to teach that Jesus' audience would indeed also perish unless they repented, by alluding to the eternal and spiritual death. Jesus may have been using a real incident to illustrate a spiritual reality.²⁶ Luke could have been intended to combine all three interpretations, as an imminent warning, for the temple's destruction in A.D. 70 was a judgment on Israel both in a historical and in a spiritual sense.

Jesus does not shun the responsibility for taking a position. He neither gets around the problem of sin in this case, nor does he blame the victims of the fatalities pointing to their sinfulness. He reckons with sin but urges a new approach to the problem. Traumas and tragedies are due to happen, and only repentance can save people for eternal life. Jesus tackles the problem of traumas and tragedies. He accepts the issue of sin and draws attention to the problems of his listeners in order to avoid final judgement. The answer of Jesus to the tragic events is: repent and be reconciled with God, otherwise you will also perish.

²⁶Stein, Robert H.: *op. cit.* 369.