

The Context for Luke 21:24

Copyright (c) 2007 by Frank W. Hardy, Ph.D.

Introduction

For purposes of this paper the context for Luke 21:24 is found in vss. 20-33. Elsewhere I have argued that in vs. 24 the expression "the times of the Gentiles" can be identified with the 1260 days (the "42 months" of Rev 11:2). Does this interpretation bear scrutiny when compared with other portions of Christ's end time discourse?

Verses 20-23

If the parallel between Luke 21 and both Matt 24 and Mark 13 holds, Jesus has more than one thing in mind as He speaks. There is the fate of literal Jerusalem, but there is more. The overview of future events that Jesus gives His disciples is not going to omit the role of those who accept and follow Him. That's not the perspective we're working with here.

The role of literal Jews

In Luke 21:20-23 Jesus starts by describing the situation of literal Jerusalem at the time of its destruction by the Romans.

"When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. ²¹ Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. ²² For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written. ²³ How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people." (Luke 21:20-23)

As regards literal Jews, the distress they suffered at this time did not end in A.D. 70. Yet to come were the Kitos War, or Diaspora Rebellion,¹ of 115-17 and the Bar Kokhba Revolt of 132-35.² According to Dio Cassius,

Fifty of their most important outposts and nine hundred and eighty-five of their most famous villages were razed to the ground. Five hundred and eighty thousand men were slain in the various raids and battles, and the number of those that perished by famine, disease and fire was past finding out. ² Thus nearly the whole of Judaea was made desolate, a result of which the people had had forewarning before the war.³

¹ This involved the Jews of Babylon, Cyrenaica (North Africa west of Egypt), Cyprus, and Egypt. See Solomon Grayzel, *A History of the Jews*, rev. ed. (New York: Mentor, 1968), pp. 173-74.

² Wikipedia has a good overview: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bar_Kokhba's_revolt.

³ *Roman History*, 49.14.

Besides the actual loss of life he caused, Hadrian tried to destroy the Jewish religion, he renamed Judea "Syria Palaestina" after two of their ancient enemies – the Syrians to the north and the Philistines to the south, he renamed Jerusalem "Aelia Capitolina," and he prohibited Jews from entering the city. After Bar Kokhba the Jews were without a homeland for almost 2000 years.

This is one part of what Jesus has in mind. When He speaks of armies surrounding Jerusalem, that was fulfilled in A.D. 70, but it was not limited to A.D. 70. There would be other armies in A.D. 135. However, although the Jews' distress would continue in the years following Bar Kokhba, there would be no city that could be called Jerusalem.

The Jews had seen "in Hadrian another Antiochus Epiphanes. And where there was an Antiochus, a Maccabee was bound to arise."⁴ The new Maccabee in this case was Bar Kokhba, but unfortunately for the Jews the circumstances Bar Kokhba had to deal with were not the same as those that confronted Judas Maccabeus. The analogy that seemed so persuasive at the time led to utter disaster.

The role of Christ's followers

The parallel with Rev 11:2 seals the Christian's understanding of Luke 21:24. Let us bring these two verses together for ease of comparison.

They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on [*patoumenē*] by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. (Luke 21:24)

But exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample [*patēsousin*] on the holy city for 42 months. (Rev 11:2)

The one passage says "Jerusalem," the other "the holy city." The one says "times," the other "42 months." Both use forms of the same Greek word *pateō* "trample." Is there any justification for seeing a parallel here? I think so. And what a parallel it is! The "42 months" of Rev 11:2 can be compared in turn with the "forty-two months" of Rev 13:5, with the "time, times and half a time" of Dan 7:25 and 12:7, and with the "1,260 days" of Rev 11:3 and 12:6. These passages have been discussed and compared extensively by Adventist writers, including the present one,⁵ and we need not repeat that discussion here. In the present context the point to notice is that the 1260 days provide a bridge between the wrath that would befall first Jews and then Christians before the middle ages and the signs of the second coming that would follow afterward. A bridge is widely different from a gap.

Just as Jews saw a new Antiochus in the person of Hadrian, so a minority of Christians would ultimately see a new Antiochus in the institution of the papacy. This was especially true after the first of the inquisitions was established in the twelfth century and it would continue to be true until Napoleon dissolved the last vestige of the Spanish inquisition in the nineteenth century.

⁴ Grayzel, idem, p. 175.

⁵ See <http://www.historicism.org/Documents/Luke2124.pdf>.

The oppression of literal Jews certainly continued during the middle ages, but the focus of the 1260 days prophecy shifts elsewhere. Other things were happening that had to do with Christ's followers. It turns out that the "church age" is not a prophetic void. It is a period that, seven times over, the Holy Spirit urges and insists that we study.

So there is a double meaning in Christ's words, but by vs. 24 the preponderance of His intent is focused on what would happen, not to those literal Jews who had separated themselves from Him (some had not), but to those from every ethnic background who had accepted Him and committed themselves to following Him. These were His people then and they are His people now. God's chosen people are those who accept His chosen Person. Here is the focus of this prophecy, and of every other. Different people have been His at different times in history, but in every age this is why prophecies are given and why various people have a part in them.

Verses 25-33

In Luke 21:25-28 there is a record of certain signs that would demonstrate to Jesus' followers that His coming was near. These do not all happen at once. They are spread out over time. At present some are past, others future. The signs are then followed by the parable of the fig tree (vss. 29-31), and this in turn is followed by Christ's statement that "this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened" (vs. 32) and the clarification that accompanies it (vs. 33).

Past signs

We begin with the terms "sun," "moon," and "stars." There are seventeen examples in the Bible where these terms all appear together in one verse. One is a general reference to the physical properties of the sun, moon, and stars (1 Cor 15:41), four are symbolic or poetic (Gen 37:9 [family]; Eccl 12:2 [aging]; Song 6:10 [greatness]; Rev 12:1 [purity]), three refer to idolatrous worship (Deut 4:19; 17:3; Jer 8:2), two refer to the creatorship of God in making all things (Ps 148:3; Jer 31:35), and in seven passages the sun, moon, and stars are used as signs (Isa 13:10; Ezek 32:7; Joel 2:10; 3:15; Matt 24:29; Luke 21:25; and Rev 8:12). Here we focus on the seven cases where sun, moon, and stars are used as signs.

The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light. (Isa 13:10)

When I snuff you out, I will cover the heavens and darken their stars; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon will not give its light. (Ezek 32:7)

Before them the earth shakes, the sky trembles, the sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine. (Joel 2:10)

The sun and moon will be darkened, and the stars no longer shine. (Joel 3:15).

"Immediately after the distress of those days "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken." (Matt 24:29)

"There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea." (Luke 21:25)

The fourth angel sounded his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark. A third of the day was without light, and also a third of the night. (Rev 8:12)

In Luke 21:25 Jesus says, "There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars," but He does not say what those signs are to be. In five other passages (all the others except Matt 24:29) the sign is said to be darkness. In Matt 24:29 He confirms the substance of the other statement, but goes on to add another sign to the list. "[T]he sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken."

Saying "the heavenly bodies will be shaken" is not just another way of saying the sun, moon, and stars will be darkened. He does not appear to be repeating Himself. This is an additional sign. While the others are past, the one He now adds is still future. Consider the parallel description given under the sixth seal in Rev 6:12-15.⁶

I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red,¹³ and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind.¹⁴ The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains.¹⁶ They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!"¹⁷ For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" (Rev 6:12-17)

This list is not identical to the one found in Luke. One sign is added before any of the others occur. That was the great Lisbon earthquake of November 1, 1755. Then the sun turns black and the moon is darkened by turning blood red (May 19, 1780). Later the stars fall to earth (November 13, 1833). History shows that the "stars" in this sign were meteorites. This much has already happened.

Future signs

After this Luke 21:26 says, "Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken" (Luke 21:26). Before the shaking of the heavenly bodies there is a period of "terror." That has a timely ring to it, and we will probably see more before we see less.

⁶ Under the fourth trumpet some of the same terms are used that we discuss here (see Rev 8:12), but the context is not directly comparable.

In Matt 24:29 the next event is that the heavenly bodies are shaken. In Rev 16:14 it says, "The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place." The shaking of the heavenly bodies either closely accompany each other or are different aspects of the same event. In any case both are immediately connected with the second coming itself (see Matt 24:30; Rev 6:15-17). Luke 21:26 does not mention islands being removed, just as Rev 6:14 does not mention the idea of widespread terror. We must take these passages together in order to get a complete sequence of events.

We are not told how much time will separate the events that remain. They could be spread over many years, as earlier signs were, or they could happen in quick succession. The connection of at least the last two of these signs with the second coming would indicate that not much time is involved. We now provide an overview of the signs in tabular form.

Table
Comparison of Signs

Event	Matt 24	Mark 13	Luke 21	Rev 6
Past				
Earthquake (1755)				vs. 12
Sun and moon darkened (1780)	vs. 29	vs. 24	vs. 25	vs. 12
Stars fall (1833)	vs. 29	vs. 25	vs. 25	vs. 13
Present				
Terror / anguish and perplexity			vs. 26	
Future				
Heavenly bodies shaken	vs. 29	vs. 25	vs. 26	
Sky recedes like a scroll				vs. 14
Islands removed				vs. 14

The parable of the fig tree

We need not spend a lot of time on the parable of the fig tree, but it is interesting that one of the points Jesus draws from it has to do with seeing. "When they [the fig and other trees] sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near" (vs. 30). And then again, "Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near" (vs. 31). This emphasis on seeing provides material help in our efforts to understand the next verse, which is a major crux of the present discourse and of Christ's words as recorded in the New Testament.

"This generation"

In Luke 21:32 Jesus makes the puzzling statement, "I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened." Our understanding of this statement depends crucially on which generation He has in mind. There are clues that can help us.

One clue is the fact that already when He said this Jesus knew He would be misunderstood later. That is why He immediately adds, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (vs. 33). If the events were to occur in His own day and time there would be no need for clarification. So He was not saying that any one of His first century hearers would remain alive until the second coming. That was never the claim. It was not until the generation that heard Him make the statement did pass away that vs. 33 became meaningful. Others would read His words in later generations and be confused by them. That's the reason for vs. 33. So what did He mean in vs. 32? The answer is woven into the fabric of the text itself.

Notice the fact that vs. 32 follows vs. 31. Thus, vss. 32-33 follow the parable of vss. 29-31 and the signs of vss. 25-28. The relative location of the verses is so obvious that one hesitates even to mention it, and so not everyone does, and we pass over this important structural detail without giving it the thought it deserves. Why is it important to notice where Jesus says "this generation will certainly not pass" and that the statement follows His description of the signs? It is because He is not talking about the generation that hears the words, but the generation that sees the signs. Here also is His reason for including the parable of the fig tree.

We cannot fault Christ in 2007 for not coming soon enough, because we have not yet seen the last of the signs He describes. We have seen some, but not all. The series has begun but not yet ended. If these things occupy an extended period of time, that merely demonstrates that God wants the signs to have their full effect on people's minds instead of suddenly passing like a vast fireworks display. It is not merely God's purpose to make certain things happen. It would not take much time to do that. Instead it is His purpose to make people think, and hopefully repent and be saved. In any event, Jesus meant it just the way He said it. This generation – the generation that sees the signs – is the one that will see the second coming.

Discussion

Two issues alluded to in the above discussion require comment. One has to do with the Israel of God and the other has to do with the second coming.

The Israel of God

In Luke 21 Jesus starts with a description of events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, but the significance of His words' do not die with Jewish aspirations for statehood in the first century. Nor do they silently wait for fulfillment until Jewish aspirations of statehood revive in the twentieth century. They combine what is ancient and literal with what comes later and is spiritual. In all of this God does not exclude from His vision of the future those who accept Him by faith. If He does, what value does faith have? (See Rom 4:14.)

A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. ²⁹ No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God. (Rom 2:28-29)

The covenant promises were given to Abraham because through such a man, and his descendants, they could reach their ultimate destination, which was Christ.

The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ. (Gal 3:16)

Paul here states that the promises were not primarily given to Abraham's "seeds" (i.e., the Jewish people, who are many). They were primarily given to Abraham's "seed" (i.e., Christ). Because of Him they became available to Old Testament Jews. Through Him they become available to us as well, and to anyone else who will believe God and respond with faith (see Rom 9:8). The Israelite nation enjoyed the blessings of Christ because of their association with Him through faith. Not all were faithful, just as not all of us are faithful, but that was the basis on which they received the covenant promises and blessings. Everything about the temple worship, the annual feasts, and so on, pointed forward to some aspect of what the coming Redeemer would eventually do. Some of what they pointed forward to He is still doing, as our great High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary (see Heb 8:1-2). Throughout Scripture – in both the Old and New Testaments; before, during, and after the event – God directs our attention to one focal point, which is Christ. Consider how Ellen White says this in the following quotation.

In every page, whether history, or precept, or prophecy, the Old Testament Scriptures are irradiated with the glory of the Son of God.⁷

Luke says the same thing in the following passage – first quoting Jesus in vs. 25-26 and then summarizing in vs. 27.

He [Jesus] said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:25-27)

Saying that "all the Scriptures" speak of Jesus is equivalent to saying "Moses and all the Prophets" speak of Him. Thus, according to Luke, all the Old Testament Scriptures, whether history, or precept, or prophecy (Moses and the Prophets = all the Scriptures) point forward to Christ. By including references to Him in everything they say they are irradiated with the glory of the Son of God in everything they say.

God accepted Abraham because Abraham accepted God, and looked forward by faith to the day when the Son of God would come as Redeemer of Israel (see John 8:56). Abraham looked forward to Christ by the same faith then that we use now when we look back to Christ. And so Abraham is the father of us all – i.e., of all who believe in any age – as Paul says in Rom 4:16.

Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring-- not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. (Rom 4:16)⁸

⁷ *The Desire of Ages*, p. 211.

Literalism does not give us a natural framework for understanding these things, and for this reason it does not provide a useful starting point for understanding the "times of the Gentiles." Gentiles in this context are those who do not respond to God by faith. The price of admission to Israel is faith. After the cross DNA has precisely nothing to do with salvation.

The second coming

The events that begin in Luke 21 (and Matt 24, and Mark 13) continue on through the middle ages and up to the second coming (Rev 6) in an essentially unbroken sequence. The longest stretch of time in this sequence takes the least time to tell. This is "the times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24), or "42 months" (Rev 11:2), "forty-two months" (Rev 13:5), "a time, times and half a time" (Dan 7:25), and so forth.

Toward the end of the above prophetic time period we start picking up signs that the second coming is near. These signs do not all occur on the day Jesus arrives. If they did, who would be forewarned by them? Jesus' coming will surprise those who are unprepared for it, but it will not surprise everyone. The warnings and signs He has given will do their work.

After saying all He has said about His promised return, we can sure that it is not Jesus' purpose to surprise anyone. He "wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). The Scriptures are freely available and anyone who wishes may study them, but not all interpretations of last events say the same things, nor do all have equal value.

Conclusion

Christ's words in Luke 21 must be understood on two levels. They start with events in the first century, but do not stop there. Nor do they skip over the next several centuries in silence. After the "times of the Gentiles," which Rev 11:2 identifies as a period of "42 months" (which translates historically to A.D. 538-1798), the very next thing is a discussion of signs that would take place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. From there we come to events in our own day, and then to future events associated with the second coming. The progression is substantially continuous.

When Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened" (Luke 21:32), He is not referring to the generation that hears the words, but the generation that sees the signs. Thus, He is not referring to people linked to Himself only by blood, but to people who are linked to Him by faith. We have not yet seen all of the signs. The "heavenly bodies," for example, have not yet been shaken. Will this happen soon? I believe it will, but we don't know when. His job is to come. Our job is to be ready.

⁸ A recommended resource for this topic is Hans K. LaRondelle's book, *The Israel of God in Prophecy: Principles of Prophetic Interpretation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University, 1983).