

Luke's Prelude to the Kingdom of God

The Fall of Jerusalem and the End of the Age — Luke 21:20-33

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Apocalyptic eschatology provides the indispensable background for understanding Jesus and the New Testament. This fact presents itself prominently in the Lukan apocalypse,¹ where we find a key to Luke's understanding of God's purpose in history. Luke's whole two-volume treatise on Christianity focuses on the establishment of the Messianic Kingdom at the Parousia.² With Matthew and Mark, Luke expects the Kingdom to arrive only after a period of concentrated Messianic woes — birth pangs announcing the dawn of a new age of history which will be the restoration (ἀποκατάστασις) of all things.³ It is to be the restoration so graphically described by all the Old Testament prophets.⁴

Luke's eschatology and christology go hand in hand. Both are thoroughly Jewish — derived from the Old Testament and showing an affinity with the intertestamental apocalypses. But we should not think that they are less Christian because of their Jewish origins. Luke has set both his Gospel and Acts within a framework held together by the Kingdom of God, both in its stage of preparation in the present age and in its manifestation at the Parousia. Jesus is the promised Messiah, destined at the Parousia to reign on David's throne.⁵ The Messiah's whole mission prior to his death was to herald the Kingdom by proclaiming it

¹ Chapter 21.

² Luke 21:31.

³ Acts 3:21.

⁴ Acts 3:21.

⁵ Luke 1:32, 33; 19:11-17; 22:28-30; Acts 3:21.

as Good News.⁶ The Kingdom is anticipated in the present evil age by a demonstration of its power to overthrow the works of Satan.⁷ Jesus is the promised liberator/King — the Lord Messiah of Psalm 110:1 and the 17th Psalm of Solomon.⁸ He is destined to remain in heaven at the right hand of the Father, following his ascension, until the time comes for the great renovation of the world foretold by the prophets.⁹ It is not surprising, therefore, that Luke sees the Pauline gospel as no different from that of Jesus. Paul preaches the Kingdom everywhere¹⁰ and concludes his ministry where Jesus began and ended his, by proclaiming “the Kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ” to Jew and Gentile alike.¹¹

Much of this biblical material follows a typical Jewish apocalyptic pattern. The climax of God’s purpose in history is reached when, amidst scenes of cosmic disturbance, the advent of Jesus in power and glory marks the arrival of the long-expected Kingdom of God: “When you see all these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near . . . when you see these things happening recognize that the Kingdom of God is near.”¹²

The detailed account of the “end” given by Luke in chapter 21 is thus no appendage tagged on to the end of his presentation of Jesus’ ministry. It is the indispensable denouement of the whole Messianic story, the resolution of all the tension built up by the clash of Christianity with Satan’s world. What then did Jesus forecast? What is it that Luke wishes us to understand? And what is his own special contribution to the apocalyptic material found also in Matthew 24 and Mark 13?

The history of the exegesis of our passage is plagued by much disagreement about the connection between the predicted desolation of Jerusalem¹³ and the end of the age marked by the arrival of the Son of Man in power and glory.¹⁴ Opinions are divided into four schools: 1) an

⁶ Luke 4:43.

⁷ Luke 10:9, 11.

⁸ “All will be saints and their King the Lord Messiah,” cp. Luke 2:11.

⁹ Acts 3:21.

¹⁰ Acts 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31.

¹¹ The texts show that Luke knew of no modern “dispensationalist” distinction between a gospel of the Kingdom for the Jews and a gospel of grace for the Gentiles. Luke recognizes one gospel only which Paul preached for salvation to Jew and Gentile (Acts 28:23, 31).

¹² Luke 21:28, 31.

¹³ Luke 21:20.

¹⁴ Verse 27.

application of Luke 21:20-33 to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 only; 2) an application to both AD 70 and the end, understood as separated by a long span of time, though blended by the evangelist; 3) an application to both events expected to be fulfilled within the generation living at the time of the prediction; 4) an application to both events destined to occur in quick succession immediately before the Parousia.

Our purpose is to show that the last of these four schemes is the only one which can reasonably be harmonized with the text, especially in the light of the clear connection of Luke's apocalypse both with its parallels in Matthew and Mark and with the critically important background material supplied by Daniel and other OT prophets. School 1 recognizes that the fall of Jerusalem is placed by Luke at the end of the age, but since it presupposes that Jesus must have been referring to the events of AD 70, it cannot allow a reference anywhere in the apocalypse to events at least 1900 years later. School 2 also sees the difficulty of separating the fall of Jerusalem from the end but feels compelled to do so because it is thought that Jesus did refer to his return in glory and because the fall of Jerusalem is now past history. School 3 maintains the close connection between the fall of Jerusalem and the end and is therefore forced to see all of our passage, including the reference to the Parousia, as fulfilled in AD 70.¹⁵ School 4 allows for the obvious association of the fall of Jerusalem with the end of the age and concludes that Jesus must therefore have had in mind a fall of Jerusalem lying in the (to him) distant future and followed immediately by the Parousia and the end of the age.

A sound exegesis of Luke 21:20-33 cannot afford to ignore the striking parallel between Luke's program for the end and that of Matthew 24 and Mark 13. There is a marked similarity of arrangement. Following Jesus' departure there will be false Christs,¹⁶ wars and persecutions.¹⁷ A desolation/tribulation in connection with Jerusalem will demand an immediate flight by Christians in the vicinity of the capital.¹⁸ Cosmic signs and the return of the Son of Man in glory will follow.

¹⁵ A variation of this view would be that Jesus expected a Parousia in AD 70, but it did not happen.

¹⁶ Or perhaps false *representatives* of Christ. Matthew's ἐγὼ εἶμι ὁ Χριστός is the equivalent of Luke's ἐγὼ εἶμι ("I am he"). Since these false teachers come in Christ's name, it is possible that they are claiming to represent Jesus. False Christs are distinguished from false prophets in Matt. 24:24.

¹⁷ Luke 21:8-19.

¹⁸ Verses 20-24.

It has been customary, based on the unwarranted presupposition that Jesus cannot have had in mind a destruction of Jerusalem other than the one which occurred in AD 70, to say that the events of AD 70 and the end cannot be disentangled. Some of the events must be referred to AD 70; others must be a description of the end; some might involve both AD 70 and the end. An equally unsatisfactory reading has necessitated finding a dividing point somewhere in the chapter to allow for the lapse of an unspecified amount of time. *The facts are that neither in Luke 21 nor in Mark 13 or Matthew 24 is there a hint of a gap which could accommodate a reference to events in AD 70 and the end of the age at least 1900 years later!*¹⁹

We take as our starting point the similarity of framework found in the three synoptic apocalypses. The chronological connecting adverbs provided by Matthew and Mark are so clear that it is impossible to think of a huge gap between the appearance of the abomination of desolation²⁰ and the Parousia. We emphasize the point by citing the remark of James Buswell.²¹ Referring to Matthew 24:29 he says: "The time expression 'immediately after' represents a chronological transition so sharp and clear and forceful that to ignore it would be a major error in hermeneutics." Heinrich Meyer makes the same point:

It is exegetically certain that Jesus spoke of the destruction of Jerusalem as an event that was to take place immediately before His Second Coming . . . the attempts to twist the word 'immediately'²² from its proper meaning are inconsistent with the laws of purely objective exegesis . . . a whole host of strange and fanciful interpretations have been given in consequence of its having been assumed that Jesus could not possibly have intended to say that the second advent was to follow immediately upon the destruction of Jerusalem. This assumption, however, is contrary to all exegetical rule.²³

The sequence in Mark's version is no less clear. He says that "in *those* days, after *that* tribulation, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not

¹⁹ Cp. Desmond Ford: "It is evident that the disciples had in view a single event only, of which the fall of Jerusalem was a significant part" (*The Abomination of Desolation in Biblical Eschatology*, University Press of America, 1979, 68).

²⁰ Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14.

²¹ *Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, Zondervan, 1962, 396.

²² Matt. 24:29.

²³ *Commentary on Matthew*, Alpha Publications, 1979, 420, 421, 434.

give its light . . . and then they will see the son of man coming in clouds with power and great glory.”²⁴

Attempts to find a way of dividing the Jerusalem crisis from the end of the age simply cannot succeed. In Mark 13 some select verse 24²⁵ as the point of division, but it is obviously tied to the preceding verse. Others prefer verse 20, despite the obvious link with verse 19. Still others fix on verse 21 but only by ignoring the “then” which links the statement to the preceding and following passages. “The majority settle for verse 19 despite the fact that ‘those days’ connects the verse to the previous description.”²⁶

The single complex of events, comprising an unparalleled time of distress, cosmic signs and the ensuing Parousia, is found just as clearly in Luke 21:20-27. Verse 20 foresees the surrounding of Jerusalem by armies as the trigger for those in Judea to flee to the mountains. There is an ultimacy about the terrible days which follow. They are “days of vengeance in order that all things which are written may be fulfilled.”²⁷ Jerusalem’s great distress will be caused by its mistreatment at the hands of the Gentiles “until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.”²⁸ Luke’s connection between verses 24 and 25 no more allows for a chasm of intervening time than Matthew’s “immediately after” or Mark’s “in those days, after that tribulation.” Luke simply links the tribulation with the heavenly signs and the Parousia with an “and.”

Among recent German scholars it is almost universally held that Luke has historicized Mark and made allowance for a time lag of great length between AD 70 and the end. But as we have seen from the simple connectives “and”²⁹ and “and then”³⁰ there is no possibility of introducing an indefinite period of time. In Luke 21 Jerusalem’s fall is still viewed eschatologically, though no less historically for that.³¹ Luke has maintained exactly the same pattern as Mark and Matthew though he substituted the surrounding armies for the appearance of the abomination of

²⁴ Mark 13:26.

²⁵ Parallel to Luke 21:25.

²⁶ Ford, 68.

²⁷ Luke 21:22.

²⁸ Verse 24.

²⁹ Verse 25.

³⁰ Verse 27.

³¹ Apocalyptic eschatology in the OT and NT does not describe the end of history, but the end of the evil age of Satan’s rule and the beginning of the Kingdom of God under the Messiah’s and the saints’ supervision.

desolation in the temple. Both Howard Marshall and E.E. Ellis agree that Luke has not historicized Mark.³²

Attempts to escape the dilemma presented by Luke 21 and parallels show the desperation of commentators who are determined to find in the account an event in AD 70. Faced with the added difficulty that "this generation will not pass until all these things take place,"³³ Dodd declares that "when the profound realities underlying a situation are depicted in the dramatic form of historical prediction, the certainty and the inevitability of the spiritual process involved are expressed in terms of the immediate imminence of the event."³⁴ Cullman tried a similar solution:

*L'élément essentiel de la proximité du Royaume n'est donc pas la date finale, mais bien la certitude que l'oeuvre expiatoire de Christ sur la Croix constitue l'étape décisive dans l'approche du Royaume de Dieu.*³⁵

But such evasions of the chronological framework of the Lukan apocalypse are quite unsatisfactory.

The severity of the problem is shown by Feuillet's exegetical wrestling:

*Alors en effet on se trouve réduit à cette alternative. Ou bien il faut soutenir que Jésus s'est trompé en faisant coïncider dans sa réponse les deux événements . . . ou bien il faut chercher dans le présent discours certains traits qui permettent de distinguer les deux événements et de montrer que le Christ ne les a pas confondus. Mais cette entreprise des commentateurs paraît être une véritable gageure . . . Les documents qui nous rapportent son discours ne permettent de faire aucune discrimination nette entre les deux événements.*³⁶

³² I. Marshall, *Luke the Historian and Theologian*, London, 1970, 135. E. E. Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke*, London, 1966, 244ff.

³³ Luke 21:32.

³⁴ *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 71.

³⁵ "The essential element in the proximity of the Kingdom is therefore not the final date, but the certainty that Christ's atoning work on the Cross constitutes the decisive stage in the approach of the Kingdom" (*Le Retour du Christ, Espérance de L'Eglise selon le Nouveau Testament*, Neuchatel-Paris, 1945, 27).

³⁶ "So we are reduced to these alternatives. Either we must maintain that Jesus was wrong in making the two events coincide . . . or we must discover in his discourse evidence allowing us to distinguish the two events and thus to show that Jesus did not confuse them . . . But the efforts of commentators to show a break between the two events appear to be a lost cause . . . The documents reporting his discourse will not permit any clear distinction between the two events" ("Le discours de Jésus sur

Feuillet's difficulty is the result of two presuppositions, the second of which must be challenged. 1. Jesus and the disciples who questioned him closely associate the fall of Jerusalem with the Parousia. 2. The fall of Jerusalem to which Jesus referred (or in the case of Mark and Matthew the appearance of the abomination of desolation) occurred in AD 70. The conclusion based upon these premises must be that Jesus was mistaken about his return. The problem is only compounded by his assertion that "all things" would come to pass within a generation — words which receive the strongest possible emphasis from Jesus: "heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."³⁷

Since it cannot be argued that Luke makes room for any disassociation of the two crises, and since a mistaken judgment about the time of his second coming would render Jesus a false prophet, Desmond Ford³⁸ maintains that the prediction was contingent upon certain events, just as Jonah's prediction of the fall of Nineveh depended on the continuing sin of the city.³⁹ This solution is original but hardly plausible. There is no hint in Luke 21 (or parallels) that the events foreseen may not happen, under certain circumstances. The prophecy is a straightforward account of what surely must come to pass.

There is another solution which resolves our problem with much less difficulty. Jesus and the disciples did indeed expect the Parousia to occur immediately after an unprecedented period of misery in Jerusalem. The time of distress for Jerusalem is not the one which occurred in AD 70, but one lying yet in the future just before the second coming. This, after all, is what the Lukan apocalypse describes:

When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is at hand . . . these are days of vengeance in order that all things which are written may be fulfilled . . . Jerusalem will be trampled down until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. And there will be signs in the sun and moon and stars and upon earth dismay among nations . . . and then they will see the son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. But when these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift your heads because your redemption is drawing near.⁴⁰

la ruine du temple d'après Marc 13 et Luc 21, 5-36," *Revue Biblique*, 1948, 486-489).

³⁷ Luke 21:33.

³⁸ *The Abomination of Desolation in Biblical Eschatology*, 75.

³⁹ Jonah 3:4, 10.

⁴⁰ Luke 21:20, 22, 24, 25, 27, 28.

A number of features of this prophecy alert us to the fact that Jesus was not describing the crisis of AD 70. Firstly the command to flee at the appearance of armies surrounding the city does not correspond to the flight of the believers in AD 70.⁴¹ Secondly the days of distress are days in which all things which have been written are to be fulfilled.⁴² Luke has in mind the numerous passages in OT prophecy which expect a final restoration of Israel⁴³ after an immediately preceding time of trouble. Particularly significant are the links between Luke 21 and Isaiah and Daniel. The latter describe a crisis just preceding the Day of the Lord, not one separated by centuries from it. Thirdly the close parallels with Mark and Matthew require that Luke's chronological arrangement follow theirs. The appearance of the abomination in Mark is the well-known event of Daniel's apocalypse on which all three synoptic apocalypses as well as that of 2 Thessalonians 2 and Revelation are based. Luke has chosen to depict the same critical event in terms more immediately understandable to his Gentile audience, but with the same awareness of Daniel. The original words of Jesus may have been approximately as follows:

When you see Jerusalem encompassed with armies then know that its desolation is at hand; when you see the abomination of desolation standing in the holy place where it ought not (let him that reads understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains and let those who are in the midst of it depart.

It is quite certain that Jesus had in mind a complete picture of the events of the end drawn from Daniel, especially chapters 7-12. The final verses of Daniel 11 picture a diabolical tyrant extending his influence across the Middle East at "the time of the end."⁴⁴ His appearance culminates in a "time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time."⁴⁵ The resurrection of the dead follows immediately.⁴⁶ The final

⁴¹ See C.H. Dodd, "The Fall of Jerusalem and the Abomination of Desolation," *Journal of Roman Studies* XXXVII, 1947, 47-54, and J.O. Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, 401-405.

⁴² Verse 22.

⁴³ Cp. Acts 1:6.

⁴⁴ Dan. 11:35, 40.

⁴⁵ Dan. 12:1.

⁴⁶ Dan. 12:2.

trial of believers is given a quite specific time designation: “a time, times, and half a time” or its approximate equivalent, 1290 days.⁴⁷ From the appearance of the abomination until the end exactly 1290 days will elapse. This material forms a coherent picture, found again in 2 Thessalonians 2 and Revelation. The principal figure of the end time, the Abomination of Desolation, was so important that the Jews called the whole book of Daniel the “desolating abomination” (rather in the same way Genesis was named after its opening words, “in the beginning”).⁴⁸

Luke, as well as Mark and Matthew, has reported how Jesus elaborated the predictions of Daniel with its distinctive portrait of an evil person (cp. Mark’s masculine participle modifying the neuter abomination⁴⁹) attacking Jerusalem in a final attempt to eliminate the true believers.

Luke’s connections with Daniel are in some cases different from Mark’s though he shares Mark’s reference to the time of great distress.⁵⁰ He has in mind the Gentile king of Daniel 7:25 who would “wear out the saints of the Most High . . . and they shall be given into his hand until a time, times and half a time.”⁵¹ The same eschatological tyrant of Daniel 8 was also in Luke’s mind when he wrote of Jerusalem being “trampled under foot until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.” In Daniel 8:13 an angel asks: “How long shall the sanctuary and the host of heaven be trampled under foot?” After 2300 days the sanctuary will be restored and “It shall be for a time, times and half a time; and when they have made an end of breaking in pieces the power of the holy people, all these things shall be finished.”⁵² The different time periods are perhaps to be accounted for by different termini, one possibly at Christ’s return, the other shortly after at the restoration of the temple.

It is with good reason that Luke describes the fulfillment of “all that is written,” because he draws from many different OT eschatological “pools” of information. Ezekiel 30:3 has not been overlooked: “The Day of Yahweh is near. It shall be a time of the nations.”⁵³ The assembling of

⁴⁷ Dan. 12:7, 11; cp. 7:25.

⁴⁸ Schegg, *Evangelium nach Matthäus*, III, 248, cited by Desmond Ford, *Abomination*, 112.

⁴⁹ Mark 13:14; ἑστηκότα — “standing.”

⁵⁰ Luke 21:23; Dan. 12:1.

⁵¹ Cp. Luke 21:23 — “wrath to this people.”

⁵² Dan. 12:7. Cp. Mark’s use of this phrase in Mark 13:4.

⁵³ Cp. Luke 21:24.

texts from the OT suggests that Jesus and Luke read much of the prophets' message as a description of the times leading into the Messianic Kingdom.⁵⁴ Luke has not omitted a widely circulated prophecy preserved in the book of Revelation where John is commanded to measure the temple but not the court "for it has been given unto the nations; and the holy city they shall tread under foot forty-two months."⁵⁵

Further echoes of the OT are heard in Luke's description of the "days of vengeance in order that all things which are written may be fulfilled."⁵⁶ One of these is the phrase in Daniel 8:19 where an angel is about to describe what will happen "at the *final period of indignation*, for it [the vision] pertains to the time of the end." Then follows a description of the career of the end-time tyrant. A passage in Isaiah 5:30⁵⁷ seems to have supplied material for Luke's account of Jesus' words in Luke 21:25 ("perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves"): "And it [the invading nation] shall growl over it [Israel] in that day like the roaring of the sea. If one looks to the land, behold there is darkness and distress; even the light is darkened by the clouds." The "roaring of the seas and the roaring of the waves" pictures the tumult of the peoples⁵⁸ and the darkening of the sun recalls the description of the Day of the Lord and the fall of Babylon in Isaiah 13:10.

If Luke, following the scheme found also in Mark and Matthew, places the fall of Jerusalem just before the second coming, what of the problematic "generation" in which all these things are to be completed?⁵⁹ Here again Luke parallels Mark's "What will be the sign when all these things will be completed,"⁶⁰ an echo of Daniel 12:7: "All these things will be completed." He records Jesus' solemn pronouncement: "This generation will not pass away till all things take place."⁶¹ A reasonable solution is that γενεά here means not a period of forty or seventy years but "age," inclusive of the evil society organized in its present form in opposition to

⁵⁴ Cp. 2 Thess. 2:8 where Paul finds the antichrist in the Assyrian of Isa. 11:4.

⁵⁵ Rev. 11:2.

⁵⁶ Verse 22.

⁵⁷ Describing the Assyrian invasion which seems to be an eschatological event as well as the episode in 701 BC.

⁵⁸ Ps. 65:7.

⁵⁹ 21:32.

⁶⁰ Mark 13:4.

⁶¹ Luke 21:32.

God — what Paul calls the “present evil age.”⁶² This meaning of γενεά goes back to the LXX where it translates the Hebrew *dor* (age). Jesus contrasts the present “generation” with the time initiated by his return (Mark 8:38)⁶³ and Peter calls on Christians to save themselves from more than just the contemporary generation.⁶⁴ Christians are to shine amidst a crooked “generation” or evil society.⁶⁵ This solution is more satisfactory than the “dispensationalist” argument that Jesus meant the future generation which sees “all these things,” rather than the one which heard him speak.

Finally it may be asked why it was that Jesus responded to a question about an existing temple⁶⁶ by giving a description of the fall of Jerusalem beyond that of AD 70. The answer may be found in the peculiarly Hebrew way of incorporating the idea of two or more temples on the same site as one temple. Thus in Haggai 2:3 “*This* temple in its former glory” is a different building; and “*this* house” will be filled with glory⁶⁷ though it will be a new building. The latter glory of “*this house*”⁶⁸ is to be a brand new edifice for the house in question has long since been destroyed. Similarly in the Lukan apocalypse it is possible for Jesus to refer to a destruction just prior to his return.

Our conclusion is that far fewer difficulties are encountered when we read the Lukan account of the end allowing its simple sequence to speak for itself. Luke evidently expected a final destruction and restoration of Jerusalem consequent upon the appearance of Jesus in his kingdom.⁶⁹ To stretch out the apocalypse to include events in AD 70 as well as the Parousia involves “the skillful twistings and turnings which are more becoming to blacksmiths than to exegetes.”⁷⁰ Moreover the source of the NT apocalypse is the OT, especially Daniel, and we find there a well-

⁶² Gal. 1:4, αἰών.

⁶³ Cp. Cranfield in *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, Cambridge, 1959, 284: “γενεά . . . is best taken in the sense ‘age,’ ‘period of time’ which is the primary meaning of the Hebrew ‘dor,’ the word it most often represents in the LXX and a possible meaning of γενεά.” Also Ludwig Albrecht’s *Neue Testament* commentary (Brunnen, Germany, 1920) on Matt. 24:34 where he translates γενεά as *Weltzeit* (world period).

⁶⁴ Acts 2:40.

⁶⁵ Phil. 2:15.

⁶⁶ Luke 21:6.

⁶⁷ Verse 7.

⁶⁸ Verse 9.

⁶⁹ Luke 21:31.

⁷⁰ Ford, 72.

defined complex of events dominated by antichrist and a subsequent restoration. The prophesied events encompass a period of a few years, not centuries. Luke and Jesus should be read in this light.