

Jesus, the Destruction of Jerusalem, and the Coming of the Son of Man in Luke 21:5-38

Robert H. Stein

In Luke 21:5-38 we encounter Jesus' third and largest pronouncement in this Gospel concerning the destruction of the Jewish temple and the city of Jerusalem. The two earlier pronouncements in 13:34-35 and 19:41-44 are much shorter and less detailed. Along with the parallel accounts in Matthew 23:37-39, 24:1-44, and Mark 13:1-37, we find numerous other examples of Jesus' foretelling

the destruction of Jerusalem in Mark 14:58; 15:29; John 2:19-20; Acts 6:14. In addition we find an acted out parable of this in Jesus' cleansing of the temple (Mark 11:12-25), and there are suggestions of this in the parable of the pounds (19:11-27) and parable of the vineyard (Mark 12:1-11/Luke 20:19-18). Consequently, Jesus' prophetic proclamation of the temple's destruction is one of the most certain aspects of his teaching and was a major cause of his death. Like the OT prophets

Jesus boldly warned of God's forthcoming destruction of Israel's glorious temple.

LUKE 21:5-7: THE INTRODUCTION AND KEY TO UNDERSTANDING LUKE 21:5-38

The discourse opens with an anonymous "some" commenting to Jesus over the beauty and magnificence of the temple. In Mark 13:1 the "some" is referred to as "one of the disciples" and in Matthew 24:1 as "his disciples." Luke may have used "some" to direct Jesus' reply to his gentile audience and Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). The beautiful stones and the "offerings" are specifically mentioned. The beauty and size of the temple made it the equal, if not the superior, of many of the famous "seven wonders of the world." The temple built by Zerubbabel and Haggai around 515 B.C., after Israel's return from exile in Babylon, underwent a massive rebuilding program involving the entire temple mount, as well as the temple, by Herod the Great. Begun in 20 B.C. (cf. John 2:20), it continued unabated until A.D. 63.

ROBERT H. STEIN is Senior Professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Dr. Stein earned the Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary, and also taught at Bethel College and Bethel Theological Seminary from 1969-1997. He is a renowned scholar and has written numerous books, articles, and reviews, including *Studying the Synoptic Gospels: Origin and Interpretation* (Baker, 2001), *Jesus the Messiah: A Survey of the Life of Christ* (InterVarsity, 1996), and *Luke in the New American Commentary series* (B&H, 1992).

Josephus describes its beauty in his *Wars* (5.5.1-6 §§184-227) and *Antiquities* 15.11.1-7 §§380-425. He mentions one of the stones in the foundation as being sixty-seven by seven by nine feet and that the stones of the temple were thirty-seven by twelve by eighteen feet in size!¹ The offerings would have included such things as the golden and bronze doors, golden grape clusters, tapestries, etc. Although the temple, itself, was not the largest of its day, the entire temple complex measuring about 1.5 million square feet was.²

Jesus' prophecy of the temple's coming destruction, and by implication the city of Jerusalem as well, must have been surprising (and sacrilegious) to many. The huge size of the stones involved in the temple complex and the massive walls of the city gave a sense of security. Jerusalem was a mighty fortress. The steep Kidron Valley to the east and the Hinnom Valley to the south and west made only the northern side of the city vulnerable to attack, and the mighty towers located in the walls made an attack extremely difficult. Added to this was the false sense that God would not let his holy place be destroyed by the pagan Romans. Of course, this is exactly what God permitted the pagan Babylonians to do in 587 B.C.! Jesus was not awed by the "stones and offerings" of the temple. He saw beneath the surface and realized that underneath the cosmetic beauty of the temple lay all kinds of uncleanness (Matt 23:27-28). The previous account of the widow's mites (21:1-4) reveals that Jesus judged the inner, spiritual reality of an act, not its external appearance. Thus the widow's two copper coins were a greater gift than the large gifts given by others. We find a similar situation in the life of Paul when he saw the beauty of the Athenian acropolis and the magnificence of the Parthenon. Instead of delighting in their architectural glory, he was appalled at the idolatry (Acts 17:16, 23) and ignorance (17:23, 29-31) they represented.

Jesus responds, "The days will come" (21:6). This is not a technical term for the coming of the Son of Man and the end of the world, but to a future time. This time can refer to the arrest of

Jesus (5:35), the destruction of Jerusalem (23:29; cf. 19:43), or the coming of the Son of Man (17:22). Here it refers to a future event—the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem. These two events are not identical but are intimately associated together. In Jeremiah 7:13-20; Lamentations 2:7-9; and Micah 3:12 they are tied together. Furthermore, since the temple lay within the walled city of Jerusalem, there was no way to destroy the temple without destroying the city. The fierce defense by the Jewish people of their temple and city would assure that the future destruction would involve both. The reference to there not being left "one stone upon another that will not be thrown down" (21:6) is hyperbolic in nature, since only exaggerated language can do justice to the horrific nature of the events of A.D. 70.³

The key verse for understanding our passage involves the two questions addressed to Jesus in 21:7: "Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?" The whole understanding of Luke 21:5-38 ultimately depends on the interpretation of these two questions. Several issues come into play here. One involves the relationship of these questions with the statement of Jesus concerning the destruction of the temple in 21:6. It is important to note that the two questions seek clarification of Jesus' statement in the previous verse. The two questions about "these things" concern Jesus' statement about the destruction of "these things," i.e., the destruction of the temple in 21:6. Another issue involves whether the two questions concern two different events or two aspects of the same event. The fact that both questions involve "these things" (*tauta*) reveals that the issue being dealt with concerns the destruction of the temple referred to by Jesus in the previous verse. The two questions are essentially a form of synonymous parallelism in which two aspects of the temple's destruction are referred to. One involves the *time* ("when" [*pote*]) of the destruction, and the other involves the appearance of a *sign* (*to sēmeion*) indicating that the destruction was imminent, but

that there was still time for escape (21:20-21). In the parallel account in Mark 13:4 the two questions read, “Tell us, when will these things (*tauta*) be, and what will be the sign (*to sēmeion*) when all these things (*tauta ... panta*) are about to be accomplished.” Although some scholars argue that in Mark these are two different questions (one dealing with the destruction of the temple and the other with the coming of the Son of Man), they are best understood as an example of synonymous parallelism dealing with two different aspects of the destruction of the temple.⁴ This is clearly how Luke interprets the two questions for he uses the exact same referent, “these things” (*tauta*), in both questions! The two questions in 21:7 are the key to interpreting what follows because they indicate that what follows in 21:8-23 concerns the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.⁵

The request for a sign is not viewed negatively by Jesus, for there is no rebuke addressed to the questioners. The question is not an attempt to test or trap Jesus. Nor is it an attempt to satisfy the curiosity of his questioners and provide eschatological information to complete their apocalyptic charts of the end times. It is rather a desire to be forewarned and prepared for the fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy contained in 21:6. It reveals their faith in Jesus as a teacher and a prophet, and their desire to escape the coming destruction he predicted. As in Mark 13:14-16 and Matthew 24:15-18, Jesus proceeds to give them an answer to this question in 21:20-21. This sign will allow them to escape the horrors associated with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, if they heed the warning to flee.

LUKE 21:8-19: NON-SIGNS OF THE IMMINENT DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM

LUKE 21:8-11: WARNING NOT TO CONFUSE COMING EVENTS WITH THE SIGN OF THE TEMPLE’S DESTRUCTION

It should be assumed that the reply of Jesus in

21:8-19 is directed to the two questions asked in the previous verse. Thus, unless indicated otherwise, the following warnings and statement concern the coming destruction of the temple that Jesus has foretold in 21:6. Jesus warns that messianic pretenders would come claiming to be “he,” i.e., the Messiah. They would not be claiming to be Jesus of Nazareth, but rather claiming to be who Jesus of Nazareth is—the Christ or Messiah (cf. 1:32-33; 2:11, 25-32; 9:18-20; 22:67-71; 23:2, 35, 39; 24:26, 46). Along with messianic pretenders claiming that “The time is at hand!” there would occur various rumors of wars and insurrections. They should not be led astray by this, however, into thinking that the destruction of Jerusalem was immediately at hand, for “it will not be at once” (21:9).⁶ In addition, wars between nations and kingdoms along with natural disasters such as earthquakes, famines, plagues, and even cosmic signs will occur. These are not, however, signs indicating that the destruction of Jerusalem is imminent. The sign asked about in 21:7 involves something quite different and will be described in 21:20-21.⁷ Note that the question of the disciples asked in 21:7 involves a sign (singular), whereas 21:8-11 involves various events (plural) that are not referred to as “signs.”

The teachings of 21:8-11 are directed by Jesus to “some” (21:5), or the disciples according to the parallel accounts in Matthew and Mark, and they concern the destruction of Jerusalem. Luke, writing after the destruction of Jerusalem, nevertheless must have thought that these warnings were applicable to his readers as well.⁸ The danger of interpreting the events of 21:8-11 as harbingers of the awaited *parousia* was an ever present danger, as the history of the church has made evident (cf. 2 Thess 2:1-2). Probably Luke also sought to emphasize to Theophilus and his readers that Jesus knew about and foretold of the destruction of Jerusalem and of various circumstances associated with it. He also knew and foretold that there would be an interval of time between his ministry and the destruction of Jerusalem, as well as between the

destruction of the Jerusalem and his *parousia*. The former had already taken place, but the latter was still future (cf. 18:7-8; 19:11; 2 Pet. 3:3-8).

LUKE 21:12-19: PERSECUTION FACING JESUS' FOLLOWERS

As in the parallel accounts in Mark and Matthew, after the warning not to be misled by various events into thinking the destruction of the temple was imminent, Luke includes various teachings of Jesus concerning the persecutions his followers will encounter. He has already warned them of this by Jesus' teachings in 9:23-26. Whereas Mark and Matthew refer to their being delivered over to "councils [*sunedria*] and synagogues [*synagōgas*]," Luke 21:12 has "synagogues and prisons." This is probably because he makes no mention of Christians appearing before such Jewish councils in Acts, and references to appearing before Jewish councils would not have been especially relevant for Luke's Gentile readers living outside Judea. References to Christians appearing before synagogues and prison, however, occur frequently in Acts.⁹ Whereas being delivered over to synagogues refers to persecution by Jewish leaders, appearing before kings and governors refers to persecution coming from Gentile leaders.¹⁰ The cause for their appearing before these officials is "for my name's sake." Although this expression (and related ones) are common in the NT (John 15:21; 1 Pet 4:14, 16; 3 John 7; Rev 2:3), they occur most frequently in Luke-Acts (Luke 9:48-49; 10:17; 21:17; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 3:6, 16; 4:10, 17, 18, 30; 5:28, 40-41; 8:16; 9:15-16, 21, 27). Whereas 21:13 can be interpreted "this will bear witness on your behalf in the day of judgment," it is best interpreted as the serendipitous result of their trials serving as an opportunity of witnessing for Christ to kings, governors, prison guards, and other officials. Luke 24:48 and Acts 1:8; 4:33 favor the latter interpretation, as does the parallel in Mark 13:10.

The exhortation to "Settle it therefore in your minds" (21:14) serves as an encouragement to Jesus' followers. Being largely uneducated and for

the most part illiterate (probably less than twenty percent could read), the promise that Jesus, himself, would give them wisdom and "a mouth," i.e., give them the words to speak, would be a great encouragement to them as they stood before powerful rulers and authorities whose power, knowledge, and education far exceeded theirs. It is surprising that Luke, who strongly emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit, replaces Mark 13:11 "it is not you who speak but the Holy Spirit" (cf. also Matt 10:20) with Jesus saying, "I [myself, the "I" is emphatic] will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict" (21:15). This may be due to Luke's earlier reference to the role of the Holy Spirit in this regard in 12:11-12. Luke gives several examples of this God-given wisdom in Acts 4:13-14; 6:10; 13:8-12.

The extent that Christians may experience persecutions is further described by it coming even from one's own family. Parents, brothers, family, and friends, will "put them to death." This probably means that they will deliver their Christians relatives over to hostile authorities and this will result in death for some. In addition they should be prepared to be hated by "all" for the sake of Jesus (21:17). The exaggerated use of "all" is meant for emphasis (cf. 1:48; 2:1, 3; 6:17; 7:29; 12:7; 15:1; 19:7). The fact that it is an exaggeration can be seen from such passages as Acts 2:47; 3:9-10; 4:21; 5:13, where Christians are held in high esteem by the people, but Luke in Acts does refer to Christians dying for their faith in several places (7:54-60; 9:1; 12:1-2; 26:10). Yet despite such persecution and even death, ultimately "not a hair of [their] head will perish" (21:18). The proverbial nature of this saying is evident from 12:7; Acts 27:34; 1 Samuel 14:45; 2 Samuel 14:11; and 1 Kings 1:52. Its truthfulness, in light of eternity, is demonstrated by 12:4-7 and such passages as Romans 8:31-39 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-57. The section begun in 21:12 ends in 21:19 with the promise that by faithful endurance (cf. 8:15) they will gain their lives (lit. "souls") or as the parallels in Mark and Mat-

thew state, “they will be saved” (cf. also 18:28-30; John 10:28).¹¹

LUKE 21:20-24: THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM AND THE SIGN PRECEDING IT

All three Synoptic Gospels mark the beginning of this new section with “when you see” (*hotan idēte*). The “when” recalls the “when” of the first question asked Jesus in 21:7 “when will these things be” and prepares for the “Then” of 21:21. Whereas Mark 13:14 and Matthew 24:15 refer to the appearance of the “abomination of desolation” (*erēmōseōs*) being the sign that would serve as a warning to flee Judea immediately, Luke refers to seeing “Jerusalem surrounded by armies” as the sign indicating that the city’s desolation (*erēmōsis*) was at hand. Although Matthew and Mark refer to a recurrence of the pollution of the temple, known as the abomination of desolation, that took place in 167 B.C. under Antiochus Epiphanes IV of Syria, Luke refers to a “desolation” associated with the Roman armies. This may be due to Theophilus and Luke’s other Gentile readers being less familiar with the celebration of the cleansing of the temple in 164 B.C. by the Maccabees that is called Hanukah and has been celebrated yearly ever since. Each December Jews recalled the abomination of desolation of 167 B.C. in which Antiochus Epiphanes IV defiled the temple by building an altar to Zeus upon the sacred altar of burnt offering and sacrificing swine upon it. Hanukah, or the Feast of Lights, commemorates the cleansing of the temple and the miracle of how the one day supply of sacred oil that was available burned continuously for seven days, until a new supply of sacred oil was produced.

A similar abomination would serve as a warning to flee Jerusalem in order to escape Jerusalem’s destruction and avoid the Jewish Holocaust of A.D. 70 (Mark 13:14; Matt 24:15). In Luke the approaching of the Roman armies would serve as such a warning, for once the Romans encircled Jerusalem and built a wall around it, as they did

later at Masada, escape would no longer be possible. The warning is directed to “those ... in Judea” and “those ... inside the city.” The reference to these two groups prohibits a mirror reading of the passage that seeks to apply this warning to the situation of the first readers of the Synoptic Gospels. For the readers of Matthew and Luke the destruction of Jerusalem was a past event. Thus, whereas for the disciples (Mark 13:3; Matt 24:3) living in Judea and Jerusalem these teachings of Jesus, passed down orally by the eyewitnesses and ministers of the word (Luke 1:2), would have been life-saving and allowed them time to flee the scene, this was not so for the readers of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They were excluded from this danger by distance and time. According to Eusebius (*Eccl. Hist.* 3.5.3) the Christian church in Judea and Jerusalem fled to the city of Pella in the northeastern part of the Jordan Valley due to an oracle they received. Thus they escaped the horrors that befell Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside. Whether this oracle refers to the warning to flee found in the Synoptic Gospel is, however, debated. Another warning relevant to Jesus’ followers in Judea but not for the Gospel readers involves resisting the temptation to flee into Jerusalem to seek safety from the approaching Roman armies (21:21c; cf. Gen 19:17-20; 1 Macc 2:27-28). The present participle is usually translated as an aorist participle “when you see Jerusalem ‘surrounded,’” but it is better translated as “when you see Jerusalem being surrounded.”¹² This envisions a time before the complete encirclement of Jerusalem by the Roman army, when flight from the city was still possible (cf. Josephus, *Wars* 7.8.5 §§304).

The description of the horrors coming upon Judea and Jerusalem portrays these events not simply as Roman vengeance against a rebellious, Jewish citizenry but as divine vengeance. Rome, as Babylon in 587 B.C., was God’s instrument of wrath, but the ultimate cause was God. This was his wrath: for the nation’s oppressing the poor (18:7; 20:47); rejecting its Messiah (13:33-35;

20:13-18); not recognizing the time when God visited the nation and offered the kingdom to her (19:44); rejecting the gospel message (Acts 13:46-48; 18:5-6; 28:25-28); but above all because of the involvement of the leaders of Israel in the death of God's Son (9:22; 18:31-33; 19:47; 20:14-19; 22:1-2, 47-23:25).¹³ The divine nature of this vengeance is reinforced by referring to it as "fulfill[ing] all that is written (21:22)."

"Alas" (*ouai*) introduces two poignant examples involving those most vulnerable to the events coming upon Jerusalem—pregnant women and women nursing infants. Their plight would be most severe, whether in seeking to flee from the area or in seeking to survive the siege of Jerusalem with its accompanying famine and disease. Once a blessing, their condition would now become a curse (cf. Josephus, *Wars* 6.3.4 §§201-13). Luke omits the reference to praying that this flight not be in winter when the weather and flooding streams and wadis would make flight more difficult. He may have done this because he knew that the siege of Jerusalem took place in April to late August, the dry season. This "great distress" can be translated in 21:23 as occurring upon the "earth" or upon the "land." The term *gēs* can refer to either. However, the context is Judea (21:21; cf. 4:25) and involves the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 not the end of history, as the references to Judea and Jerusalem in 21:21 indicate. Thus it is better to understand *gēs* as referring to the "land [of Israel]."

Only two possibilities are listed as consequences of the siege and destruction of Jerusalem—death and captivity (21:24). Josephus states that the Roman war against the Jews and Jerusalem resulted in 1.1 million people being killed (*Wars* 6.9.3 §§420) and 97,000 more led away into slavery (*Wars* 6.9.3 §§420). Even if Josephus's numbers are inflated, the scope of the human disaster was enormous. The section ends with a reference to Jerusalem being trampled upon until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled (cf. Ps 79:1; Isa 63:18; Dan 8:13; Rev 11:2). The "until" may

suggest that Israel's judgment might not be final, but that she might experience a future restoration (cf. 13:35; Rom 11:11-32).

LUKE 21:25-28: THE COMING OF THE SON OF MAN

Having dealt with the questions concerning the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem (21:6-7), Jesus now moves on to a new subject that has not been mentioned in 21:5-24—the consummation of the kingdom of God with the coming of the Son of Man.¹⁴ Whereas the destruction of Jerusalem is described with historical-prophetic imagery (the one exception is "great signs *from* heaven" [21:11]), the coming of the Son of Man involves cosmic-apocalyptic imagery ("world" [21:26], "the powers of the heavens" [21:26], and "the whole earth" [21:35]), indicating that we are dealing with two different events. Luke also indicates this by omitting Mark's introductory "But in those days" from the parallel account in Mark 13:24.

We frequently find the use of cosmic expressions such as "sun and moon and stars" in the OT (Amos 8:9; Jer 4:23-27; Ezek 32:7-8; Isa 13:9-11; cf. also Hab 3:11; Joel 2:10, 30-31; 3:15) and NT (Acts 2:17-21; Rev 6:12ff.). These cosmic signs refer to a theophany in which God will: bring judgment and destroy Samaria by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.; destroy Jerusalem by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon in 587 B.C.; destroy the army of Hophra, pharaoh of Egypt by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar in 585 B.C.; and overthrow Babylon by the Medes in 539 B.C. Whereas such language frequently refers to a theophanic event in which God is going to act in a special way in history bringing blessing and/or woe, the metaphorical language should not necessarily be interpreted "literalistically,"¹⁵ as the examples listed above indicate. We find similar imagery in the OT to "on the earth distress of nations in perplexity" (21:25; cf. Isa. 3:24-4:1; 33:9; 34:1-15; Jer. 4:28-31; Nah. 1:4-5), and the "powers of heaven will be shaken" (21:26; cf. Isa 13:13; 34:4; Dan 8:10; Hag 2:21)."

The temporal designation “And then (*tote*)” in 21:27 does not refer back to the “when” (*hotan*) of 21:7, which picks up the “when” of Jerusalem’s destruction (21:6). This question about the destruction of Jerusalem has already been answered by the “when” of 21:20-24 which describes that destruction. The “then” of 21:27 refers to a new and different event which has not been referred to in 21:5-24—the coming of the Son of Man. Luke’s readers already have read about this elsewhere in the Gospel (9:26; 12:40; 17:22, 24, 26, 30; 18:8), but this has not been referred to, up to now, in the present chapter.

The traditional interpretation of the coming of the Son of Man understands this as an event still future in which the Son of Man will visibly return from heaven to judge both living and dead and bring history, as we know it, to its conclusion. Several non-literal interpretations of this and related passages have been suggested. One argues that the language is a figurative critique of the social and political makeup of the present world order and various proposed changes (the Jesus Seminar). Another “demythologizes” the language of these passages and sees in them an existential truth depicting the conflict between the bondage brought by the flesh and the law and the freedom that comes with the Spirit (Rudolf Bultmann). Both of these interpretations have little interest in understanding the conscious, intended meaning of the biblical writers in all this. Another, more recent interpretation argues that Jesus and the Gospel writers intended that the “end-of-the-world” language in 21:25-28 and other related passages, should be interpreted metaphorically as referring to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and the “return of the elect from exile” predicted by the prophets.¹⁶ As a result the coming of the Son of Man does not refer to a future event in which he visibly comes and brings history to its conclusion, but an event contemporaneous with the destruction of Jerusalem in which Jesus is “vindicated.”

When Jerusalem is destroyed, and Jesus’ peo-

ple escape from the ruin just in time, *that will be* YHWH becoming king, bringing about the liberation of his true covenant people, the true return from exile, the beginning of the new world order.¹⁷

The return of the Son of Man, however, cannot be interpreted simply as “good first-century metaphorical language for two things: the defeat of the enemies of the true people of God, and the vindication of the true people themselves.”¹⁸ This is evident when we attempt to substitute this definition for the “coming of the Son of Man” in such passages as 9:26; 12:40; Mark 8:38; 14:62; 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17; 1 Corinthians 15:22-23; and others.¹⁹ The Lukan account of the ascension is especially relevant at this point. As the disciples “see” Jesus ascending into heaven, the angelic messengers say that “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come *in the same way as you saw him go into heaven*” (Acts 1:11, emphasis mine). Clearly a visible coming of a historical figure, Jesus Christ—the Son of Man, is in the mind of the author of the third Gospel here, and all purely metaphorical interpretations of this event do not do justice to the way the biblical authors understand this event. The coming of the Son of Man cannot be depersonalized into an event in which the Son of Man does not visibly appear!

The section ends with an exhortation and encouragement. When these things (the things associated with the coming of the Son of man described in 21:25-28, *not* the things associated with the destruction of Jerusalem in 21:5-24) begin to take place, believers are to “straighten up and raise [their] heads” (21:28). This action is one of confidence and hope (Judg 8:28; Job 10:15; Ps 24:7, 9; 83:2). In the midst of crisis, distress, and fear, Jesus’ followers are assured that the Lord will be near (21:14-15), for he promised never to forsake them (cf. Deut 31:6; Ps 94:14; Heb 13:5). He will always be with them (Matt 28:20), and their ultimate redemption, involving the resurrection of their bodies (Rom 8:23) is approaching (18:7-8).

LUKE 21:29-33: A PARABLE CONCERNING THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM

After referring to the coming of the Son of Man in 21:25-28, Luke, like Mark and Matthew, inserts Jesus' parable of the fig tree. In the parable we have a picture in which the emergence of leaves in a fig tree, and other trees, foretells the approach of summer. The reality part of the analogy in the parable is that the occurrence of "these things" (*tauta*) indicates that the kingdom of God near. Because of the "already/not yet" dimension of the kingdom of God, the exact nature of the kingdom of God's presence is uncertain.²⁰ The reference to this generation not passing away before the kingdom's arrival (21:32) recalls 9:27, where Jesus says, "But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God." Here the event to which Jesus refers is most likely the transfiguration which immediately follows and in which Peter, James, and John see Jesus in his glory.²¹ In 21:32 the appearance of the kingdom of God refers to either the destruction of Jerusalem (21:5-24) or the future coming of the Son of Man (21:25-28). Two arguments favoring interpreting the parable of the fig tree as referring to the *parousia* are that this passage follows immediately the coming of the Son of Man described in 21:25-28 and that the "these things" in 21:31 recalls the "these things" in 21:28. More likely, however, it refers to the destruction of Jerusalem because: (1) the "these things" and "all [these things]" in 21:31-32 bring to mind the two-fold "these things" in 21:7 which refers to the destruction of Jerusalem mentioned in 21:6; (2) the "sign" mentioned as preceding the destruction of Jerusalem in 21:7 is described in 21:20 and involves Jerusalem being surrounded by armies; and (3) the reference to this generation not passing away before this takes place (21:32) fits well the generation of Jesus and the disciples which did live to see the destruction of Jerusalem, whereas it did not live to see the coming of the Son of Man. An aspect of the arrival and manifestation of the kingdom of God

did, however, occur in the lifetime of the disciples in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.²² Jesus concludes the parable of the fig tree and its teaching with a strong affirmation: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away (21:33)." This affirmation receives the emphatic *ou mē*: "in no way will my words [that I have just told you] pass away [unfulfilled]."

LUKE 21:34-38: WARNINGS TO REMAIN WATCHFUL

Luke ends 21:5-38 with Jesus' exhortation to be vigilant (21:34-36) and an editorial conclusion to the chapter (21:37-38). "Take heed to yourselves" (*prosechete*) brings to mind its appearance in 12:1; 17:3; Acts 5:35; and 20:28 (cf. also Luke 20:46). The importance of guarding one's heart (the seat of the attitudes of one's inner being), avoiding drunkenness (apparently more of a problem in the early church than Christians like to admit [cf. 1 Cor 11:21; Eph 5:18]) and the anxieties of life that can choke the word of God making it unfruitful (8:14) are mentioned. These exhortations are intended to keep Jesus' followers from being unprepared, so that "that day" not come upon them as a trap.²³ The coming of "it," i.e., the Son of Man (21:36), will not be a secretive event for a select few but will be manifest to all humanity. Whereas the destruction of the temple involved primarily Judea and Jerusalem (21:21), the coming of the Son of Man will involve the "whole earth" (*pasēs tēs gēs* [21:35]). A second exhortation follows, "Stay awake at all times, praying" for strength to escape what lies ahead. The coming of the Son of Man will bring judgment and woe for unbelievers; for believers it brings joy or sorrow—joy for the faithful who "watch," but sorrow for those unprepared. After these final words of Jesus, Luke concludes the teachings of Jesus in chapter twenty-one and his ministry in Jerusalem (19:28-21:36) with a concluding summary (21:37-38).

SUMMARY OF LUKE 21:5-38

Clarity for understanding Jesus' teachings concerning the destruction of Jerusalem and the

temple and the coming of the Son of Man, requires that we understand them as different events and not intermingle aspects of one with the other. The early part of Jesus' discourse centers around his prophecy concerning the temple's destruction (21:5-6), the two-fold question as to when this will take place and the sign that will precede it (21:7), and Jesus' reply to the question (21:8-24). The "sign" is specifically referred to in 21:20 and is followed by the exhortation to flee from Judea and Jerusalem to the mountains for safety. Up to 21:24 this all involves the destruction of the Jerusalem and no mention has been made of the coming of the Son of Man. However, in 21:25-28 the theme changes from the destruction of Jerusalem to the coming of the Son of Man. Luke expects his readers to interpret the coming of the Son of Man in light of the context that he has already provided in his Gospel (9:26; 12:40; 17:22, 24, 26, 30; 18:8) and the context of the church traditions that they had been taught (1:1-4; cf. 1 Thess. 4:15-17; 1 Cor. 15:22-23; etc.) Consequently, they were prepared to understand any teaching concerning the coming of the Son of Man in a more literal, not figurative, manner as a visible appearing of the Son of Man (Acts 1:9, 11).

Jesus' teachings on the destruction of Jerusalem and the coming of the Son of Man conclude with a parable (21:29-33) and several exhortations (21:34-38). In the parable he uses the analogy of a fig tree and how an indicatory sign, the beginning of its leafing process, indicates that the coming of summer is at hand. In a similar way the appearance of "these things" (21:31), i.e., "these things" of 21:7, and its indicator sign, the beginning of Jerusalem's encirclement by the Roman army (21:20), signify that Jerusalem's destruction is at hand. And this will all take place in the lifetime of Jesus' generation (21:32). As to the coming *parousia*, several exhortations are given to prepare the readers for the sudden appearance of the Son of Man lest they should be caught unprepared.

ENDNOTES

¹See *Wars* 5.5.6 §§224 and *Antiquities* 15.11.3 §§392. D. Bahat, "Jerusalem Down Under: Tunneling along Herod's Temple Mount Wall," *Biblical Archaeological Review* 21 (1995): 6:39 refers to a recently discovered stone forty-two by fourteen by eleven feet in size estimated as weighing about six hundred tons. He also mentions two other stones forty and twenty-five feet in length.

²Cf. b. *Sukkah* 51b "Our Rabbis taught ... He who has not seen Jerusalem in her splendour, has never seen a desirable city in his life. He who has not seen the Temple in its full construction has never seen a glorious building in his life." Cf. also Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.11.3 §§396 and *Wars* 5.5.6 §§222-23.

³For the use of hyperbole and exaggeration in the Bible, see R. H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 174-88.

⁴See R. H. Stein, *Mark* (Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 590-91.

⁵Since the temple was located within the walled city of Jerusalem, no enemy could destroy it until the mighty walls and towers of fortress Jerusalem were first overcome. Thus the destruction of the temple assumed the destruction of the city as well. Furthermore, for the Romans their main concern was the destruction of Jerusalem, the center of Jewish resistance, not the destruction of the temple.

⁶The parallels read "the end [the destruction of Jerusalem] is not yet" (Mark 13:7; Matt 24:6).

⁷Although some prophetic prognosticators suggest that the events described in 21:8-11 are signs of the end times and the coming of the Son of Man, we must remember that the event being discussed is the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in A.D. 70. In addition it should be noted that these events are not even signs of the imminent destruction of the temple and Jerusalem!

⁸For the author's understanding of the probable date when the Gospel of Luke was written, see R. H. Stein, *Luke* (The New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 24-26. The strongest arguments

for Luke having been written sometime between A.D. 70-90 are his use of the Gospel of Mark as a basic source (there is strong tradition that Mark was written after the death of Peter in the late sixties) and certain references in Luke that suggest that he wrote after the destruction of Jerusalem (13:35a; 19:43-44; 21:20; 23:28-31).

⁹For Christians appearing before synagogues, see Acts 9:2; 22:19; 26:11; cf. also 2 Cor 11:24; for Christians experiencing imprisonment, see Acts 5:18-19, 22, 25; 8:3; 12:4-6, 17, 16:16-40; 22:4; 26:10.

¹⁰For Christians appearing before kings, see Acts 12:1-11; 25:13-26:32 (cf. 9:15); for Christians appearing before governors, see Acts 23:24-24:27; 25:1-26:32.

¹¹See S. Brown, *Apostasy and Perseverance in the Theology of Luke* (Analecta Biblica; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969), 48-50.

¹²J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (X-XXIV)* (The Anchor Bible; Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), 1344.

¹³Stein, *Luke*, 521.

¹⁴Note how these two subjects are identified together in 17:20-37 and 19:11-27.

¹⁵The present writer understands the “literal” meaning of a text as what the author consciously meant by the words used in the text. At times this involves recognizing that the author may be using the words figuratively or hyperbolically. A “literalistic” interpretation involves understanding the words of a text strictly according to the range of meanings found in a dictionary with no concern as to what the author

sought to convey by those words.

¹⁶So E. P. Gould, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel according to St. Mark* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1896), 240-55; T. R. Hatina, “The Focus of Mark 13:24-27: The Parousia, or the Destruction of the Temple?” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 6 (1996): 43-66; N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 339-68; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (The New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2002), 530-540; S. McKnight, *A New Vision for Israel: The Teachings of Jesus in National Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 134-39.

¹⁷Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 364.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 362.

¹⁹It is not the destruction of Jerusalem that vindicates Jesus. It is the resurrection! This can be clearly seen if one substitutes “the destruction of Jerusalem” for “by his resurrection from the dead” in Romans 1:4 where Paul writes that Jesus was “declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness [by the destruction of Jerusalem].”

²⁰See R. H. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus’ Teachings* (rev. ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), pp. 69-81.

²¹See Stein, *Luke*, 287.

²²The reader will note that this interpretation is different from what the author says in Stein, *Luke*, 525-29.

²³“As a trap” is better understood as concluding 13:34 than as an introduction to 13:35).