

Questions about Luke 21

I've tried to group the various questions under the passages of Scripture to which they relate.

Invariably there is a need to interpret the Bible as a whole; proof-texts will never tell us how to interpret any portion of Scripture, so I am attempting to converge on an interpretation that makes good sense of all the relevant biblical data. This means that, whichever passage you look at first, there will be reasons why you'd wish you had already considered one of the others! So, for the sake of starting somewhere, the order of the (English) Bible it is.

Isaiah 13: Literal versus Spiritual

Question:

Why have you read these verses spiritually, when they should be taken literally?

Specifically, these verses profess to discuss “the day of the LORD;” should we not take this to be “the day of the LORD” (the general resurrection and final judgement), rather than spiritualizing it to refer to the fall of Babylon in history?

Isn't it true that God will judge Babylon as described – at the final judgement? This makes better sense of the passage, as it fits in with the “day of the LORD” language, and also allows the termination of sun and stars to be literal.

Answer:

1. We must not confuse “spiritual” with “metaphorical”. I am not interpreting the termination of the sun and the stars in a “spiritual” way; rather I am saying that this is a metaphor for something quite concrete – and a metaphor that we find elsewhere in the Bible. From Genesis 1 onwards, the heavenly bodies are used as common metaphors for earthly rulers.
2. We must not confuse “metaphorical” with “untrue”. (Without claiming to be offering a formal definition), a metaphor gives a clear way of explaining an event in terms of an analogous set of events. A metaphor will usually not be flagged up explicitly as such in the text, as using words such as “like” or “as” means we have a simile. Metaphors convey facts purported to be truth; literal speech conveys facts purported to be truth. The facts conveyed can be true or untrue; this is independent of whether they were conveyed literally or metaphorically.
3. What does the little phrase “the day of the LORD” mean? It seems to refer, predominantly, to a day that belongs to the LORD God, in the sense of being a day in which he is publicly vindicated. However there is no *a priori* reason why the phrase “the day of the LORD” needs to be used univocally throughout Scripture. God has had many days when he is seen to be in charge throughout history, including many not referred to as “the day of the LORD” (such as the Passover, the fall of Jericho, the conquest of Jerusalem under David, the exile in 587, and so on). The greatest “day of the LORD” of all will be the final return of Christ to judge the world and hand the kingdom back to his Father. However, the fact that the events referred to in Isaiah 13 are termed “the day of the LORD” need not mean that they refer to this climactic day.
4. If all the details of Isaiah 13 are literal, as opposed to metaphorical, then certainly a referent of the fall of Babylon at the hand of the Median army in the 6th Century B.C. would render verses 10-13 problematic. But if the referent were the final judgement of every human being when Jesus returns, other verses become just as problematic. The choice becomes, then, not *whether* there are metaphors but *which details* are metaphorical:
 - a. Verse 17 tells us that the Babylonians will be destroyed at the hands of the Medes. There is no Median nation today. One would have to posit either (i) God recreating a Median nation specifically so that they were alive when Christ returned. Then, when the former inhabitants of 6th Century B.C. Babylon are raised by Christ's voice, their punishment will be at the hands of these neo-Medes. Or (ii) Christ will first raise the deceased Medes of the 6th Century B.C., but suspend their judgement

until Christ has raised the Babylonians of the same era and used the Medes as instruments of judgement.

- b. Verses 20-22 tells us that the land of Babylon will never again be inhabited, except by wild beasts. If this is the reality after the final judgement, then it is hard to square with (i) the descriptions elsewhere in Scripture of the new creation, and (ii) the (presumably literal) descriptions of harmony between humanity and the rest of the animal kingdom at that point.
5. Isaiah 13 is only one passage referring to the sun, moon and stars being disrupted. Even if close study of Isaiah 13 led to the conclusion that it *must* refer to the final judgement, that would not require us to conclude that the Luke 21 *must* refer to the final judgement at this point. To conclude that, we would need to show that every Old Testament reference to the disruption of heavenly bodies must refer to the final judgement. In that respect, it is helpful to consider Ezekiel 32, for which the evidence that a temporal judgement is in view is more compelling than it is for Isaiah 13.
- a. Context: Ezekiel 32 is a lament for Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. Ezekiel writes the obituary of a still-reigning king; a clear way of signalling his imminent demise. It comes in the context of Ezekiel's oracles against the nations (chapters 25-32). Within that, chapters 29-32 all concern Egypt.
 - b. In 30:25, the agent of judgement will be Babylon.
 - i. This raises the same problems as the identification of Media in Isaiah 13:17. The OT prophetic oracles against the nations appear, on occasion, to identify the nation that will be the destroyer of another nation under judgement. In the case of Egypt, it will be Babylon.
 - ii. The picture that is building is of one nation destroying another.
 - iii. If all of this were to occur at the final judgement, we would have to see the former occupants of one nation (A) raised back to life, then another nation being raised up (B) and allowed to destroy A. Then another nation would be raised up (C) and allowed to destroy B, and so on.
 - iv. Furthermore, the nations that are described in the OT prophets as destroyers of other nations are *precisely* those nations that actually destroyed the nations in question – in history. So we would need nations A, B, C, and so on to be selected, not at random, but such that the *order* of the earlier history of these nations was preserved.
 - v. In other words, we would need world history to repeat itself again at the final judgement.
 - vi. Or, we could see those prophetic oracles as actually describing the rise and fall of the earthly empires that was playing out before their eyes.
 - c. The judgement on Egypt in 30:26 is to be scattered among the nations and dispersed throughout various countries. If this is their fate at the hands of the risen Christ after the final judgement it is a very toned-down version of hell.
 - d. Chapter 32 itself, in which the stars, sun and moon will all go dark (verses 7-8), describes a lament over the *king* in particular (as opposed to the whole nation). [This fits with the common metaphorical use of sun, moon and stars described above]. That this is judgement on an *individual* is highlighted by the use of second person *singular* pronouns (verse 4: “I will cast *you*... I will fling *you*... settle on *you*... gorge the beasts of the whole earth with *you*”; verse 5: “strew *your* flesh... *your* carcass”). If all the details in this oracle are literal, so that the references to sun, moon and stars are to those literal orbs, then verses 4-6 must be literal as well. This includes every wild animal on earth eating so much flesh from this *one* king that they are full. It includes the amount of blood shed from this one individual being enough to drench the land as in the days of Noah. This suggests that there is plenty of metaphor and hyperbole in verses 4-6, which allows us to consider verses 7-8 in non-literal senses as well.
6. To conclude: It makes most sense to me to see Isaiah 13 as prophesying the fall of Babylon, which was to occur in the 6th Century B.C.. Within that context, the darkening of the sun and other heavenly bodies is a metaphor for the end of the rule of the king of Babylon. From this we do not conclude that Luke 21 must refer to the fall of Jerusalem, as that is to conclude more than Isaiah 13 tells us. However, we do conclude that when we read, in Luke 21, of the heavenly bodies being shaken, then this *could* refer to an event in human history rather than the ultimate end of human history. We further conclude that if it did refer to an

event within human history, then this would be consistent with the use of the same metaphor in some OT texts.

Isaiah 13: The judgement of Babylon in the book of Revelation

Question

Isaiah 13 speaks of the judgement of Babylon. The book of Revelation speaks of this as a still-future event. Does this not mean that either (a) Isaiah 13 was speaking of an event that has not yet occurred, or that (b) Prophecy can have more than one referent and Babylon is both judged and still to be judged? In the case of (a), the sun, moon and stars are yet to fall; in the case of (b) the reference in Isaiah 13 to the end of the sun, moon and stars is a detail that only applies to the future fall of Babylon.

Answer

1. The question presupposes a lot about the book of Revelation, not least what that book refers to when it speaks of the fall of Babylon. Trying to establish how Revelation intends itself to be read, and then to justify the resultant reading, would take us far from Luke 21. It is probably unwise to assume an interpretation of Revelation, and then to decide upon the correct interpretation of Luke 21 based on those assumptions.
2. All the considerations on interpreting Isaiah 13 above still apply. In particular, other Old Testament texts speak of the judgement of other nations (such as Egypt) in similar terms, nations that are not treated in the same way as Babylon by Revelation. (Actually, Egypt gets a mention in Revelation 11:8, but that takes us really very quickly back to the previous paragraph. We need to interpret Revelation in such a way that saying Jesus was crucified in Egypt makes sense).
3. There is another option as to the relationship between Isaiah 13 and Revelation. We don't need to say that they refer to the same event. Instead, we could say that Isaiah 13 spoke of the fall of Babylon, which occurred in the 6th Century B.C.. Revelation knows of Isaiah 13's prophecy, and says that God will do something similar in the future. Much as the Old Testament prophets speak of the return from exile in Exodus terms, so Revelation speaks of ... in fall-of-Babylon terms.

Daniel 7: Empires

Question

Why did you identify the fourth empire as the Greek, rather than the Roman, empire?

Answer

Because the overlap of imagery between chapter 7 and chapter 8 suggests that the goat of chapter 8 is stands for the same kingdom as the 4th beast of chapter 7. Many of the details in chapter 8 line up with what we know of the history of the Greek empire.

Question

So why did you refer to Media and Persia as two empires, rather than as one (Medio-Persian) empire?

Answer

Chapter 7 and chapter 2 of Daniel both set out history in a 4-empire scheme, followed by God's kingdom being established until it grows to fill the whole earth. It makes good sense to see these two chapters as referring to the same set of 4 empires.

In chapter 2, the identification of the first empire is explicit: Babylon.

In chapter 7, there is good reason (see above) to identify the fourth empire as Greece.

That leaves two empires between Babylon and Greece: Media and Persia fit the bill.

Whilst it is true that the Medes and the Persians are considered, from many perspectives, to be a single world-empire, they are not identical and the history between them was complex. There are two reasons, within Daniel, why it is not inaccurate to separate them

1. Daniel was written not from the perspective of a dispassionate observer of world affairs, nor from the perspective of Jerusalem. Rather, Daniel was written from the perspective of an exiled Jew in Babylon. Given the way the power-struggle affected the city of Babylon, the separate histories of Media and Persia would have been of great interest to this group of Jews.
2. Daniel 8:3-4 shows awareness of the subtleties of the history of Media and Persia. The book of Daniel does not naively identify these as two empires, as though they had not allied in the way they did. Rather the book of Daniel identifies them as two empires who co-operated eventually with a very precise relationship between the two. The book distinguishes Media and Persia without separating them.

Daniel 7: Verses 23-25

Question

If the 4th kingdom in Daniel 7 is the Greek empire, what are the events related in verses 23-25?

Answer

Almost universally, scholars identify these events with the atrocities committed by the Greek King Antiochus IV, self-styled Antiochus “Epiphanes”. These events are recorded in the books of Maccabees. Although these are in the apocrypha rather than in the Hebrew Canon of the Old Testament, there is no reason to doubt that the historical events they record are substantially accurate. The record from Maccabees and elsewhere of Antiochus’ atrocities ties up well with Daniel 7:23-25.

Daniel 7: Jesus’ life and the Roman Empire

Question:

Jesus lived, died and ascended during the Roman Empire. How does that fit with saying that Jesus’ ascension (the coming of the Son of Man) occurred at the end of the Greek empire?

Answer:

1. The book of Daniel tells us how history will unfold and in what order. It also interprets what God is doing in the unfolding of that history. However, at most points, the book does not indicate the timescale within which those events will occur. (There are a few exceptions, such as Nebuchadnezzar’s “a time, times and half a time” in chapter 4). Nothing in the book leads us to expect big gaps, several centuries long, between the events recorded, but equally, nothing in the book leads us to expect that the next event foretold will always happen within three years.
2. Viewed in this light, the book foretells that the period of harsh oppression at the hands of Antiochus IV will be followed by the vindication of God’s people, as the Son of Man their representative (7:22) approaches the Ancient of Days on their behalf to be given authority. The Greek Empire is considered by some to have ended, from Jerusalem’s point of view, in B.C. 63 when Pompey invaded Jerusalem. Such prophecies as those found in Daniel 7 would have contributed to the heightened Messianic expectation found at the time of Jesus’ birth 60 years later.

Daniel 7: Coming versus Going

Question:

In Daniel 7, the Son of Man is seen “coming”; from the perspective of Daniel’s vision in the heavenly realms, this means the Son of Man goes into heaven. In Luke 21, the concern is the city of Jerusalem, and so to see the Son of Man “coming” means the Son of Man going to Jerusalem from heaven. Must this change of perspective from Daniel 7 to Luke 21 not require a change in meaning of “the coming of the Son of Man”?

Answer

In English, we have two different words for “come” (movement towards the implied speaker) and “go” (movement away from the implied speaker). Both Greek and Hebrew (notwithstanding that Daniel 7 is in Aramaic) have only one verb for this. The context determines whether movement towards or away is described.

In Daniel 7 it is clear that the movement is towards the Ancient of Days, because he came “to” him.

In Luke 21 we are told that people will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds and the direction is not made explicit. This means that it could be either way, and the context must determine. We certainly can't determine the meaning from the fact that most English translations opt for “come” rather than “go” in both cases.

Synoptic Gospels

Question:

In Luke, Jesus is only asked about the end of the temple. In Matthew, Jesus is also asked about the end of the age. This tells us that the context of the discussion was wider than just the end of the temple, so Jesus' answer needs to be interpreted accordingly. Surely he wasn't *just* answering a question about the temple?

Answer:

In the second sermon in the series we spent some time on this question. But briefly:

Mark and Luke both record Jesus only being asked about the temple's downfall; Matthew adds a question about the end of the age. One would need to consider carefully which “age” is being ended, but it is notable that Matthew and Mark both record more material than Luke. Both Matthew and Mark record a transition point in Jesus' teaching when Jesus stops talking about “these days” that will occur “within a generation”, and when Jesus starts talking about “that day and hour” concerning which “nobody knows” when. My own view is that Jesus starts to talk about his own personal return to raise and judge the world at this point. The material recorded in Luke all falls before that transition point, so Luke only talks about the end of the temple.

Luke 21:6 – “Every stone”

Question

In the first sermon you conceded that a small portion of one wall is left standing, and yet Jesus says that every stone will be torn down. Isn't Jesus usually more careful with his choice of words? Doesn't this indicate that this is not yet fulfilled?

Answer

I said “today all that remains is the Western Wall of what used to be the platform on which it was built.” The second temple was built upon a raised platform to give it further height and grandeur. It is a part of the retaining wall of that platform that remains. There is not even one brick or stone of Herod's temple itself still standing.

Luke 21:8-24 are literal, so why not 25ff?

Questions

The early Christians took Jesus' words in Luke 21:8-24 literally, and fled Jerusalem as a result. Shouldn't we therefore also take Luke 21:25ff literally? Why put a break in the text after 21:24 by spiritualising from 21:25 onwards?

Answer

This is a similar question to the one about Isaiah 13. I am not suggesting a “spiritual” meaning but identifying a metaphor. There is a big difference between spiritualising (giving a text a spiritual meaning that is not there on the surface) and identifying a metaphor (recognising an accepted and understood figure of speech within the text itself). Further, something conveyed with a metaphor is not inherently untrue.

There is no reason why a speech given by Jesus needs to be either (a) free of any metaphor at all, or (b) delivered using metaphor throughout. Jesus is at liberty to switch back and forth between literal speech and metaphors as he chooses; his concern will have been clarity of communication rather than achieving an arbitrary consistency in the figures of speech he adopts.

In fact, one reason I am persuaded by the interpretation of Luke 21 that I have adopted is precisely because it does *not* put an artificial break between verses 24 and 25. With complete continuity Jesus continues to speak on the same topic.

Mark 13 details – When did these happen?

Question

If Mark 13:3-31 and the whole of Luke 21 refers to events prior to A.D. 70, when did the following events referred to in Mark 13 occur?

- 13:8 (wars, earthquakes, famines)
- 13:10 (gospel preached to all nations)
- 13:14 (abomination of desolation)
- 13:19: (unequalled distress)
- 13:22 (false Christs and false prophets)
- 13:31 (gathering of the elect from the 4 winds)

Answer

1. In the previous question, an alternative was suggested to reading the whole of Luke as referring to the events of A.D. 66-70, with their build-up and aftermath. The alternative was that Luke 21:8-24 might refer to this, but Luke 21:25ff could refer to events still to occur in the distant future. The parallel in Mark 13 would put the division between 13:23 and 13:24. Whether one adopts my reading, or this alternative, all the events referred to in this question would still fall *before* A.D. 70 (with the exception of the gathering of the elect in 13:31). In other words, this question is a general question to ask of Mark 13; the interpretation I have been offering for these chapters is not what raises the question. With or without an “all within a generation” interpretation, this question is identical.
2. We need to notice how many of these Jesus identifies as *non-signs* that are not to be interpreted as signalling the imminence of the end. If any of these things were to intensify and increase in the period between A.D. 33 and A.D. 70 then they *would* indicate that the end was near. The fact that these events are not to be interpreted in this way strongly suggests that there will be no more of these kinds of things happening than in any other 40 year period. The danger is that people living then would read unwarranted conclusions into the “normal” run of wars, famines and so on. We therefore shouldn’t expect to identify these in any quantity.
3. In some respects, the fact that Jesus said these things would take place is all we need to know; we do not need extra evidence that they did. We would only have recourse to doubt the truthfulness of Jesus’ words if we had *positive* evidence that these events did *not* occur. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, we can simply assume that things happened as Jesus said they would.
4. Having said all which, R T France, *The Gospel of Mark*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2005) has some illuminating examples. For earthquakes he refers to 1st century primary sources that tell us of one in Jerusalem (A.D. 67), Philippi, Pompeii (A.D. 62) and Asia Minor (A.D. 61) (page 512). For famines we know from Acts and Corinthians that there was a major one in A.D. 46 across Judea. For wars, the Roman army was constantly flexing its muscles in this period. For Messianic pretenders France points us to Menahem in A.D. 66, Simon Bar-Giora in A.D. 69, and to a number of false prophets during the siege of Jerusalem (pages 528-529).
5. The gospel being preached to all nations depends on how you decide when “all nations” have been reached. What constitutes a nation (ethnos)? Does “all” here mean every nation without exception or every kind of nation without distinction? Perhaps it is best to follow Paul in Romans 15, who regarded the gospel as already “fully preached” across a large swathe of the region. Many towns were yet to hear the gospel, yet the fact that the church was established in Gentile territory was enough for Paul to say that. So the emphasis here is not on every family having heard the gospel but on the establishment of the Gentile church. Persecuted apostles can draw comfort from God’s plan to delay the end of Jerusalem until the Gentile church is up and running; there will be a period of overlap and God’s purposes are still advancing.

6. The abomination of desolation is, frankly, tricky. The options are many, none of them quite satisfactory. This verse still falls in the part of Mark 13 where most interpreters agree Jesus is talking about the fall of Jerusalem. The OT background is Daniel 9, which speaks of Antiochus IV setting a statue of Zeus in the temple for sacrifice, and forcing the Jewish daily offerings to cease. We need an explanation which (i) relates to Jerusalem and its temple, (ii) is akin to what Antiochus IV did, and (iii) is useful as a “sign”, in the sense of being clear enough to recognise whilst being early enough in the war for people still to have time to escape.
7. “Unequalled distress” could be hyperbolic. But, given the descriptions in Josephus’ writings of the conditions in Jerusalem during the Roman siege (including stories of infanticide), it was a very black period of history. We may reach for other instances of human suffering before or since, and try to argue that they were periods of greater distress. However, we need to be careful in doing so, as we did not live through that siege and do not know what it was like from a first-hand perspective.
8. I’m not saying that the gathering of the elect from the 4 corners happened before A.D. 70. In fact, Jesus seems to suggest that this will be done after the coming of the Son of Man in judgement on Jerusalem. This is still going on today.

Luke 21:27 and the Ascension

Question

Why did you say that Luke 21:27 refers to the ascension, when the verse does not mention this?

Answer

It’s not quite as simple as saying that Luke 21:27 describes the ascension. I hope I didn’t suggest that the line from Luke 21:27 to the ascension was as straight as that, and apologies if that is the impression I gave.

We’ve already seen that Luke 21:27 refers back to Daniel chapter 7, which speaks of a human figure being given authority over the nations on behalf of the people of God. Jesus is saying that this will be seen “then”, i.e. when the events of verses 25-26 occur.

I’ve been arguing that verses 25-26 describe the earth-shattering events of A.D. 66-70. This begs the question of when and how the Son of Man was seen coming (or going) in a cloud.

Luke-Acts is a two-volume integrated work. It is hard not to think of Acts 1:9 at this point. The other verse that comes to mind is Acts 7:55, where Stephen says to the Jews who are about to stone him, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” Putting those two verses together, we realise that at the ascension Jesus approached God in the clouds to stand at his right hand as ruler of this world. Luke 21:27 happened in Acts 1:9 and had already happened by Acts 7:55.

This raises a problem, however. Jesus describes people seeing this in the events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem; the events recorded in Acts are 35 years too early. I would argue that the Son of Man’s position of authority is seen in its effects; Jesus’ judgement on Jerusalem is where one can see that he occupies the position of Son of Man.

To put this another way: You can see Jesus’ come to God in the clouds in Acts 1. The definitive event where we see *that* he has come to God in the clouds is in the fall of Jerusalem. He takes authority 40 days after his resurrection; he shows his authority 40 years after his resurrection. This takes us back to Mark 13:10; there is a transition period when Jesus has taken authority over the nations, but the old order has not yet been dismantled in the way that it needs to be if Jesus’ authority is to be visible.

Luke 21:32, “This Generation”

Question

Could “this generation” not refer to the Jewish race; they will survive this ordeal?

Answer

I regard this as unlikely for two reasons.

First, lexically. There is no evidence that the Greek noun *genea* has any meaning other than a contemporaneous group of people. That group may be narrowed further (say, all the people alive at the same time who have a particular racial background). But there is no evidence for it having the meaning of “race”.

Second, contextually. The context is the disciples asking when the temple will be destroyed. In answering their question, Jesus is being irrelevant if he throws into the discussion the fact that the Jewish race will survive at least until some future event (“these things”). That was not what they were asking.

In short, if “this generation” refers to the Jewish race, we’re not giving value to the fact that it is “*this* generation”.

Question

Could “this generation” mean “this age”. All these things will happen before “this age” comes to a close.

Answer

Again, lexically, not really.

The other consideration is *which* age. For Jesus to say this and to be understood, there would need to be a generally understood convention of how time should be divided up into its constituent ages, and which age Jesus was living in when he was speaking. The only convention the Old Testament would point us to is “old covenant age” and “new covenant age”. If this were the sense of Jesus’ words, he would be saying that the old covenant would not come to a close until these things had happened. I would agree with that statement, but not because this verse says so.

The real problem is lexical. There are words that mean “age”; Jesus could have used *chronos*, *kairos*, or *aiōn*, but he used *genea* which does not mean age.

Question

Could Jesus only be referring to the bits of the preceding verses which refer to the fall of Jerusalem?

Answer

There are several problems with this view

1. If the previous two suggestions try to make Jesus mean something other than “this generation”, this view tries to make Jesus mean something other than “all these things”.
2. If this were so, Jesus’ statement would be true as a tautology. “This generation won’t pass away until all the things that will happen within a generation have happened” is true, but not enlightening.
3. If, after verse 24, Jesus stopped talking about the fall of Jerusalem and began to speak of the final judgement, why did Jesus wait until he had said what is in verses 25-31 before saying that “all these things” would happen within a generation? If he deferred verse 32 in this way, he has made himself decidedly unclear, as he has given the impression that he intended verses 25-31 to come under the scope of verse 32 as well.
4. The most obvious antecedent for “these things” is verse 7, “When will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?” Verse 32 revisits the disciples question, signalling that Jesus has now finished his reply. This, again, suggests strongly that verses 8-31 all are the “these things” that will occur within a generation.

Luke 21:35, “The Whole Earth”

Question

Given verse 35 says “the whole earth”, why did you interpret this verse as “the land of Israel”? Verse 23 is explicitly about wrath against this people, and their land. Why did you carry that on into verse 35 when the language changes to “the whole earth”? If verse 35 just concerns the land of Israel, why did Jesus not merely repeat the language and sentiments of verse 23?

Answer

The vocabulary in verses 23 and 35 is identical; in both cases Jesus’ uses the word *gê*. It is unfortunate that most English translations hide this fact by changing “land” to “earth”.

We mustn't over-generalise, but by and large, *gê* means either land as opposed to sea, or *a* land in particular (as in "the land of Galilee"). This is in contrast to *kosmos* which, by and large, means the whole globe (except in John's writings where it has a more specialist meaning, see below).

The similarity between verses 23 and 35 is one of the reasons why I felt verse 35 referred to the land of Israel. Jesus is picking up the statement of verse 23 and applying it in his warning section. Verse 21 warns those who live in Judea more widely to flee and hide because the distress will not just impact the capital city of Jerusalem. In that sense, verse 35 urges alertness because the *whole* land will be affected by this (as opposed to just the city).

New Testament / Fathers: Radio Silence?

Question

If the year A.D. 70 saw the completion of Jesus' installation by God as Son of Man, why is this important event not written about in the epistles or the writings of the church Fathers?

Answer

1. A.D. 70 was only the completion and demonstration of this process. As argued above, the ascension was the moment when Jesus was given authority over the nations by his Father.
2. Jesus' authority over the nations as *an accomplished fact* is discussed in the New Testament. Ephesians 1 would be a clear example.
3. The implication of this for the old temple with its structures is discussed at some length in Ephesians 2 and Hebrews 7-10.
4. As I indicated in the first sermon, this series has been the first opportunity I have had to do the detailed work on Luke 21. I've not yet had the time to work through the implications of this for other parts of the New Testament. But I do know which bits of the New Testament I now need to go away and study further, because they may relate more closely to the fall of Jerusalem than I previously realised. Those portions would include: 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 2 Timothy, Hebrews, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, Jude and Revelation.
5. As for the church Fathers, I am no expert in the Patristic writings. Many of them, I believe, did mention and discuss the fall of Jerusalem. The value of reading the writings of the Fathers is that they wrote much closer to the events of the 1st Century than we are. But they often take a different view on things from one another, so we would not expect to find a uniform "patristic view" on the fall of Jerusalem, any more than we would on any other topic. If you wanted to chase this up further, I suspect that Tertullian, Eusebius of Caesarea and Cyril of Jerusalem would all be worth reading, but I'm afraid I don't have time to do that work right now!

New Testament: Satan as "prince of this world"

Question

If Jesus is ruling the nations, why is Satan described as "the prince of this world" and "the god of this world". Texts include: John 14:30, 1 Corinthians 2:6-8, 2 Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 6:12; 1 John 5:19.

Answer

Let's look at these texts in turn

1. John 14:30 describes the "prince of this world" as coming, which is why Jesus will not be able to speak for long with his disciples. It does not seem unreasonable to read this as referring to Satan. He is about to come and do his worst to Jesus. This verse does not, however, rule out the idea that Jesus is now lord of the nations. (i) This was Satan's most foolish act. He put Jesus on the cross, and so effected his own defeat. Jesus said these words *before* he deposed Satan from his (usurped) place. (ii) Verse 30 continues "He has no hold on me." Jesus' subjection to Satan at the cross was voluntary, not because of some inherent position held by Satan.
2. 1 Corinthians 2:6-8 speaks of the "rulers of this world" (plural), and seems to refer to the religious and secular rulers who crucified Jesus, rather than to Satan as such.

3. In 2 Corinthians 4:4, Satan is described not as the God of this world, but the God of this *age*. That forces us to ask which age Satan is “god” of. The context is of the veil which remains over the old covenant (2 Corinthians 3); only in Christ is that veil taken away. I think 2 Corinthians 4:4 therefore speaks of the god of the old covenant age veiling the gospel such that Jewish unbelievers cannot see Christ in the old covenant.
4. Ephesians 6:12 needs to be read in the context of 1:20-21. In the first half of Ephesians, Paul tells the Christians in Ephesus of the secure position they have because they are seated with the resurrected Christ above every spiritual power. In chapter 6 he tells us that our struggle is against such powers. These are defeated powers, but that does not stop many Christians willingly giving them continued influence. The exhortation to “take your stand against the devil’s schemes” therefore refers back to Ephesians 4-5. The devil would have us doubt that he is defeated, and therefore not live consistently with his defeat. Instead, Ephesians 6 urges us to put on the armour that the Messiah himself wore into battle on our behalf, and live in the light of Satan’s prior defeat.
5. 1 John 5:19 follows on from verse 18, which reads “We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him.” The child of God is out of the reach of any harm that Satan might wish. Hence, verse 19, “We know that we are children of God”, and so this applies to us, Christians. By contrast, verse 19b, “the whole world is under the control of the evil one”. In John’s writings, “world” does not refer to the whole of humanity or the physical globe we know as planet earth. “The world” is human society insofar as it organises itself in rebellion to God and his Son. So 1 John 5:18-19 makes the point that when human society rebels against God, it puts itself under Satan’s wishes; this is unnecessary, since the Son of God came to destroy the devil’s work (3:8); instead we should be born of God and enjoy the fact that Jesus can stop the devil doing anything to us. So 1 John 5:19 speaks of Jesus’ authority over the devil; he has no authority over people unless they choose to remain in “the world” and put themselves under him.

We could add John 12:31; Jesus’ crucifixion is the point when the prince of this world is cast out and defeated.

The War to end all Wars

Question

You said that the war for control of this world was won 2000 years ago. Where was it won – in Jerusalem or in the heavenly realms? Did this bind Satan? Please elaborate.

Answer

John 12:31 – on the cross, Jesus defeated Satan. The binding of the strong man (Mark 3) was done then, such that his house can now be plundered. The resurrection was God’s vindication of his Son; this is how we know that his death was a victory not a defeat. With the ascension, he returns to his Father to be given the glory he had before worlds began (John 17). As argued above, those who nailed him to the cross were allowed to continue running their temple for a further 40 years before the one God raised as Lord and Christ (Acts 2) moved in judgement. The delay was to allow a truly international church to be established. Since then, Jesus has had the nations as his inheritance (Psalm 2, Revelation 2:27).

So the war was won on earth, not in heaven. But it was won at the crucifixion and the resurrection; the fall of Jerusalem was mopping-up after the victory, not the victory itself. As a result of this victory, there has been a change of authority in the heavenly realms.

New Testament: Jesus’ rule and the church

Question

In one of your sermons, you suggested that Jesus’ rule over the world can be seen by the presence of the church on earth. The Son of Man can be “seen” both in the fall of Jerusalem and in the existence of the church. Where in the New Testament do you learn this?

Answer

1. We've already seen from Mark 13 that Jesus did not dismantle the old covenant until the gospel had been proclaimed to all nations. That gospel is the message that Jesus is now lord, and so the worldwide spread of the gospel is seen by Jesus in Mark 13 as demonstration that he is lord. Whether this is part of what he means by saying that the Son of Man will then be "seen" I don't know.
2. Ephesians 3:10 says that God wants to demonstrate to the heavenly powers that the whole world will one day be in harmony with one another, united under submission to Christ. He does this through the existence of a mixed Jew-Gentile church, in harmony with one another, in submission to Christ. The existence of the church in this way is God's revelation of his wisdom and plan for the whole of history.