



## [Luke 21:7-28](#)

The trampling of Jerusalem by the Gentiles

**Date:** 1st CE

**Language:** Greek

**Category:** New Testament

**Title of work:** The Gospel According to Luke

**Reference:**

21:7-28

### **Commentary:**

This passage offers Luke's version of Jesus's teachings about the signs that the end of time is approaching, including the suffering that they will be subject to as his faithful followers, and the ultimate return (*parousia*) of the Son of Man (i.e. Jesus), upon which the redemption for Jesus's enduring followers will be realised. Given that Jesus's questioners address him as "teacher," which is the eleventh and final time he will be addressed in this way in Luke (see R. Alan Culpepper, "Luke," p. 399), it is unlikely that it is the disciples that are speaking to him, as this term is never used of him by the disciples. The opening questions ("when will these things take place?" and "what will be the sign...?") are in reference to the immediately preceding co-text, where Jesus has stated that there will come a day when not one stone of the Jerusalem Temple will be left intact (Luke 21:5-6). The specific details of the earthly and cosmic chaos that the eschaton will bring, including earthquakes, famines, plague, war, and the falling of nations and kingdoms, are shared with the other two Synoptic Gospel accounts of this episode (Mark 13:1-27 and Matthew 24:1-31), and indeed form part of a wider tradition of imagery in Jewish and early-Christian literature, where similar motifs are found (see also, for example, Isaiah 14:30; 51:19-20; 4 Ezra 16:18-22; Revelation 8:2-11:18; 15:1-16:21). However, there are also some significant differences between Luke's account and those of the other two Synoptic Gospel writers, which make his quite unique, and revealing of his wider theological and socio-political worldview.

As in Mark and Matthew's account, Luke's Jesus warns his audience not to assume that the end is going to happen too immediately, as there will first come deceivers, boasting Messianic status and claiming that the end has come. In Mark and Matthew these are explicitly referred to with the terms ?????????????? "false Messiah" and ?????????????? "false prophet." Josephus writes of various self-proclaimed prophets, including a man who rallied Samaritans on Mount Gerizim where he claimed he would dig up the sacred vessels buried by Moses, and an Egyptian who marched with followers to the Mount of Olives with the intention of trying to overthrow the Romans and become king (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XVIII.85-87; XX.169-172; *Jewish War* II.261-263). Next, Luke clarifies that before the fall of the city of Jerusalem and the ensuing disasters ("before all these things," verse 12), his followers will be dragged before authorities, both Jewish and Gentile ("synagogues and prisons," "kings and governors," verse 12), but should not worry about what to say at their trials, as he will imbue them with the correct responses to baffle their opponents (verses 14-15, see also Mark 13:11). The Lukan author makes use of this description of his followers' impending suffering later on in Acts, where over the course of the narrative, each stage of the persecution that he lists for his followers is shown to be fulfilled through the experience of one character or another (there are more than one instance of each, but see, for example, arresting at Acts 4:3; persecution at Acts 7:52; conflict in synagogues at Acts 6:9; imprisoning at Acts 5:18; kings and governors at Acts 12:1; 24:10; being given words to speak at Acts 18:9-10; inability of the opposition to refute at Acts 6:10; and execution at Acts 7:59-60) (see the useful, fuller chart in Mikeal Parsons, *Luke*, p. 301). Across Luke-Acts, then, the fate of the apostles is both predicted and realised. To offer some comfort in the face of this great peril, Jesus promises that endurance of this suffering will lead to his followers gaining their "lives" (Luke 21:18-19). The term ???? is often translated as "soul" here, such as in the NSRV, but in the attempt to theologise Jesus's statement, this ironically misses the point that Luke is making, linking martyrdom to the gaining of *eternal* life.

A significant Lukan divergence from the other two Synoptic accounts comes at Luke 21:24, when the author details the "trampling of Jerusalem by the Gentiles." Both Mark and Matthew refer instead at this point in the narrative sequence to what is often translated as an "abomination of desolation/desolating sacrilege standing where he should not" (?? ?????????? ??? ??????????) (see Mark 13:14 and [Matthew 24:15](#)). In both cases (depending on



when one dates the two Gospels) this may be in reference to the Roman conquest in 70 CE, when the Roman standards were placed in the Jerusalem Temple, and Titus is said to have entered the Holy of Holies (see Josephus, *Jewish War* VI.316; Genesis Rabbah 10:7). If a pre-70 CE dating is favoured (as is common in Markan scholarship), then the passage (which draws on the words of Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11) is interpreted prophetically, anticipating the fulfilment of the words of Daniel. For interpreters such as Mikeal Parsons (*Luke*, p. 302), Luke refers quite explicitly to the Roman armies besieging the city, at which stage escape is impossible. This is a logical conclusion, as by the time Luke writes in the late-first century CE, the sacking of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE would have taken place, and so Luke can quite clearly relate his source material directly to this event. David Garland argues that fleeing Jerusalem is not seen as an act of cowardice by the Lukan author, but rather a “deliberate break” with its “false theology of security that views it as sacrosanct and inviolable” (see David Garland, 2011, p. 833). Luke 21:23 states that there will be “wrath for this people” (i.e. Jerusalem), but it is not immediately obvious whether this wrath comes from God, or from its besiegers. One possibility of course, is that it is both, with God using the Roman armies in order to punish Jerusalem. Indeed, earlier in Luke’s Gospel he chastises a group of Jews who complain to him about violence done to a group of Galilean Jewish pilgrims by Pilate, the Roman governor (see [Luke 13:1-3](#)); rather than condemning the act of the Roman official, Jesus tells the complainers that they must repent or else also perish. It has often been stated, for example by Philip Esler, *Community and Gospel*, p. 203, that Luke is more concerned with highlighting Jewish sin than making specific anti-imperial statements (although for a counter view, see recently Pyung-Soo Seo, *Luke’s Jesus in the Roman Empire*), and the connection between God’s anger and Roman oppression makes sense in this context. There is also engagement of course with imagery from the Hebrew Bible, such as the horrors war causes to pregnant women and nursing mothers, (see Amos 1:13; Lamentations 2:11-12). Intertextual allusions run throughout the description, such as the inhabitants of Jerusalem falling “by the edge of the sword” (2 Samuel 15:14).

The end of the siege will occur when the “times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (verse 24). This phrase is generally interpreted either as referring to the ceasing of domination of God’s people by oppressing powers (perhaps drawing on the ideology of Daniel 2:21; 9:24-27), when in this context Rome will also be judged and decimated like Jerusalem before it (so, John Nolland, *Luke 18:55-24:53*, p. 1006), or alternatively to the Gentile mission, when Jesus’s message has spread to all (so, David Garland, *Luke*, p. 834). The debate remains open, but certainly, the verb ?????? (“to fulfil, complete, accomplish”) would be appropriate for the latter suggestion, and in some ways has more positive connotations that might be imagined for the downfall of an oppressive regime. This might also fit better with Luke’s wider aims, which do not seem to be particularly political.

**Bibliographical references:** Mikeal C. Parsons, [Luke](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015)

Philip F. Esler, [Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987)

David E. Garland, [Luke](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011)

John Nolland, [Luke 18:55-24:53](#) (Dallas: Word books, 1993)

Pyung-Soo Seo, [Luke’s Jesus in the Roman Empire and the Emperor in the Gospel of Luke](#) (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2015)

Joseph A. Fitzmyer, [The Gospel According to Luke](#) (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981)

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