

"The Times of the Gentiles"

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

Introduction

In NIV the word "Gentiles," or "Gentile," appears 104 times in 97 verses. The last of these is Rev 11:2, which says, "But exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months." If there is any connection between "trampled" in Luke and "trample" in Revelation, and between the "times of the Gentiles" in the one passage and "42 months" in the other, then we have a rich fund of information to draw on in understanding what Jesus means by the expression "times of the Gentiles" in Luke 21:24.

Context

We now consider the context of the passage in question from two points of view – prophecy and history.

Prophecy

The period of "42 months" in Rev 11:2 is matched by a corresponding period of "forty-two months" in Rev 13:5. This is a strong parallel, but this is not the only one. The same period is spelled three different ways in Scripture, i.e., as a period of days (1260), months (42), and years ("a time, times and half a time" = 3½ times = 3½ years). These three descriptions occur in seven passages, from both Daniel and Revelation. They all describe one and the same period of history. See table 1.

Table 1
Seven Descriptions of One Prophetic Period

1260 Days	Forty-Two Months	A Time, Times and Half a Time (=3½ Years)
Rev 11:3 Rev 12:6	Rev 11:2 Rev 13:5	Dan 7:25 Dan 12:7 Rev 12:14

This period takes place during the middle ages, also known as the dark ages. The relationship that it bears to other major periods of Bible prophecy can be summarized as shown in fig. 1 (below). Note that this entire summary can be drawn without lifting one's pencil, by starting at the seventieth of the seventy "weeks" and placing the cross at its center.

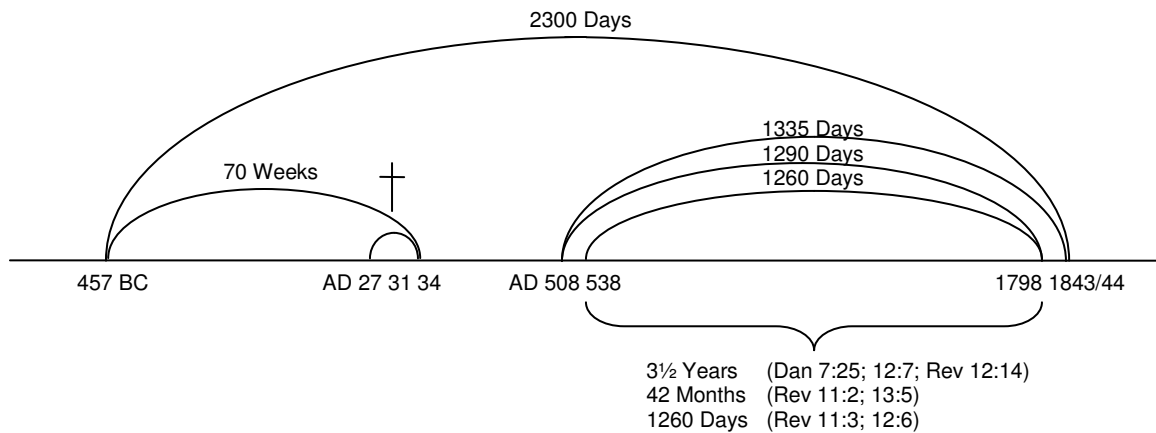


Fig. 1. Relationships among major periods of Bible prophecy from both Daniel and Revelation.

History

There are a couple of other passages that should be compared with what we have introduced so far.

I know your afflictions and your poverty-- yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. (Rev 2:9)

Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. (Rev 2:20)

In Rev 2:9 Jesus, through His servant John, speaks of "those who say they are Jews and are not." In vs. 20 He speaks of "that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess." Recall that Jezebel, although queen of Israel, was not Jewish by blood. She was the daughter of "Ethbaal king of the Sidonians" (1 Kgs 16:31). She could claim to be Jewish only by reason of her position, which in one sense was legitimately held, since she had married an Israelite king. Her status as a prophetess could be derived from her relationship to the priests of Baal, of whom she was patroness. She maintained a staff of 450 prophets of Baal and systematically murdered any prophets of Yahweh that she could find (see 1 Kgs 18:4, 13).

What Jesus says elsewhere

There is a literal component in what Jesus says here that applies in the first century and also a spiritual component that applies later. Neither part of this should be minimized. The precedent for a double interpretation is Matt 24, with parallels in Mark 13. There Jesus blends a literal prediction of the fall of Jerusalem in the first century with a description of events that would occur much later. Not everything in Matt 24 is confined to the time surrounding the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Christians would not be hated by all nations within the city of Jerusalem (see Matt 24:9). "All nations" do not live in one

city. At the same time, not everything is confined to the end of the age. Christians living in Jerusalem prior to A.D. 70 took Christ's warning literally and escaped from the city when they saw the Roman legions approach (see Matt 24:15-18). Thus, the two levels of fulfillment are superimposed over each other. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to guide us in identifying which strands of meaning belong here and which there.

In the same way the parallel discourse in Luke 21, which corresponds to Matt 24, applies both to the immediate circumstances of those who first heard Jesus speaking and to those living in later generations. When Jesus says, "There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people" (Luke 21:23), that would certainly include literal Jews in and around A.D. 70. Jerusalem really was "trampled on by the Gentiles" (vs. 24), i.e., by Roman Gentiles and their armies. It is also true, however, that during the middle ages spiritual Jews – the citizens of heavenly Jerusalem – were subjected to harsh persecution.

By saying "spiritual Jews" I do not mean to imply that there is something unreal about them. These are real people. Spiritual things are real. If we think they are not, what does that say about our faith? The persecution described in the fifth seal is described with allusive language, in spiritual terms, but the people it speaks of really did lose their lives.

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. ¹⁰ They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" ¹¹ Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed. (Rev 6:9-11)

It is not my purpose to take away what properly belongs to a literal fulfillment of Luke 21:24, or to remove it from its context. On the contrary I want to put it in its entire context. In regard to the expression "times of the Gentiles," my position is that this cannot be confined to the first century and that, in applying it to a later time, on biblical evidence it cannot be confined to literal Jews.

Language

We now look more closely at three specific terms that occur in the passage under review. These are "times," "Gentiles," and "Jerusalem."

"Times"

It would appear from what we have said so far that the "times of the Gentiles" in Luke 21:24 are related, and closely related, to the 1260 days of Bible prophecy that extend from A.D. 538 to 1798.

"Gentiles"

But Luke 21:24 says "Gentiles," and Rev 11:2 says "Jews." How can we justify applying these passages in a way that avoids their actual, biological, race-based implications? We can do this the same way that Paul does on a number of occasions, and for the same reasons.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:28)

Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. (Col 3:11)

Here Paul is saying that, in Christ, distinctions which used to apply no longer do. In Christ there is only faith which leads to obedience, or fear which leads to disbelief and inaction (see Matt 25:25). It might seem foolish to take biologically grounded terms and apply them with spiritual such intent, but Paul has addressed this issue as well.

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor 2:14).

On a natural level, of course, there is a continuing distinction between Jew and Gentile. There is even some discussion on the internet about being able to isolate a priestly line among Jews, distinguishing them from other Jews. (Pull up a browser and search on the words "Cohen" and "gene.") I am not urging anyone to believe or disbelieve such claims, but merely point out that they can be made. Spiritually, however, they cannot be. Or at least this is what Paul says.

In Christ there is no difference, on the one hand, between a Jew who believes in Jesus and a Gentile who believes in Jesus, and on the other hand, between a Jew who refuses to believe and a Gentile who refuses to believe. There is only faith or the absence of faith, i.e., there is only Christ – present in or absent from one's life.

"Jerusalem"

What about the term "Jerusalem," as used by Christ in Luke 21:24? The same term appears in Gal 4:25-26 to describe a group of people, in a way that has nothing to do with who has a home in literal Jerusalem and who does not. In vs. 26 Paul says, "The Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother." If Jerusalem is our mother, we are her children – her citizens. I suggest that Paul's use of the word "Jerusalem" is close to what Jesus also had in mind in our passage.

We must ask who or what was being "trampled on by the Gentiles" during the period in question. Literal Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70 and restored to Jewish control in 1947. By my count this is 1877 years. Is there a prophetic time period whose length is given as 1877 years? I am not aware of one. And yet, if we focus on "[t]he Jerusalem that is above," where there really are biblical time periods to draw on, how can we say that the city itself – or the sanctuary that is located within it – could be

trampled by any power here on earth? Is there a biblical precedent for saying such things? Is there a biblical precedent for this type of interpretation?

Consider the following passage. "It set itself up to be as great as the Prince of the host; it took away the daily sacrifice from him, and the place of his sanctuary was brought low" (Dan 8:11). "[T]he place of his sanctuary" was not brought low by physically removing it from heaven. That would be impossible. But on a spiritual level it could be brought low by getting people to ignore it. The truth – i.e., the truth about the sanctuary and Christ's role in its services – "was thrown down to the ground" (vs. 12) by being transferred from heaven to earth. It was transferred to the earth when human priests claiming to represent Christ started doing here what only He could rightfully do for us in heaven. In this way the human priest to which people came for confession and forgiveness gradually took over all of Christ's high priestly functions in the minds of the common people.

When God's saints are trampled, the Jerusalem which is their "mother" (Gal 4:26) is trampled. When their faith is cast down to the ground, the sanctuary which should be our rightful locus of faith is cast down. Christ, among others, predicted these things. Now that the events have occurred right on schedule, we should not be unkind in saying so, but we should be honest enough to call the historical facts what they are.

Discussion

Confusion on doctrinal matters, such as who is and is not our rightful Priest before God (see Heb 8:1) and who can and cannot forgive sin, is compared in Scripture with drunkenness (see Rev 17:6; cf. 2:20). In Luke 12:45 the themes of drunkenness and violence against one's fellow servants go together. The two naturally accompany each other, both in the parable and in the historical record.

But suppose the servant says to himself, 'My master is taking a long time in coming,' and he then begins to beat the menservants and maidservants and to eat and drink and get drunk. (Luke 12:45)

The period during which the sanctuary in heaven was cast down, by the people ignoring it and human priests taking over its functions, was also characterized by physical hardship and persecution. Notice that the figure of trampling ("Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles") appears also in Dan 7, in a related passage.

"He gave me this explanation: 'The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on earth. It will be different from all the other kingdoms and will devour the whole earth, trampling it down and crushing it.'" (Dan 7:23)

"Trampling it down and crushing it." That is vs. 23. These words are similar to those used by Christ (above). The time during which such trampling would occur is called "a time, times and half a time" in Dan 7:25 (see also 12:7; Rev 12:14; and other passages listed in table 1). It is called "the times of the Gentiles" in Luke 21:24 (see the parallel in Rev 11:2). These periods are one and the same.

When Christ says, in Matt 24:22 and Mark 13:20, that those days (i.e., the 1260 days) would be "shortened," what does He mean? The number 1260 does not change into another number, but through counteracting influences such as the Protestant Reformation, the severity of the treatment God's people receive during this period is cut short. For a variety of reasons, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries less persecution was possible than had taken place before.

Conclusion

There is a rich and detailed biblical context for interpreting Luke 21:24. Let us not approach the passage as though this were not the case. The expression "times of the Gentiles" invites speculation, so we badly need to get past that level of interpretation to the exegetical discipline and control that only a systematic comparison of parallel passages can provide.