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JESUS AND “THE DANIEL CODE”

ABSTRACT

It is suggested that Jesus, who understood his Messianic calling in the light of the OT prophecies, utilized their symbolic apocalyptic language in his prophetic discourse. From this perspective Matthew 26:64 sheds important light on the meaning of Matthew 24:30b, i.e. that those who rejected him would realize, within a relatively short period, that He – the Suffering Servant – was indeed the Son of Man of Daniel 7. But Jesus also made some very definite statements in very sober language about the future, which provide an important key for our understanding of the prophetic discourse. While He enumerated a number of signs that would warn his disciples of the approach of God’s judgment on Jerusalem – together constituting “the budding fig tree” – He emphasized, on the other hand, that there will be no signs to warn them of the approach of his parousia.

1. INTRODUCTION

The destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman army under Titus, in 70 AD, was probably the greatest catastrophe in the history of ancient Israel.¹ The second temple “outdid in magnificence even the earlier one that Solomon had built” (Bruce 1982:131). Josephus tells us that the roof “was covered all over with plates of gold of great weight” that reflected the sun “with a very fiery splendour”. He added that there were also numerous spikes with sharp points “to prevent any pollution of it by birds”. The marble was of such a

1 “After 70 CE the proto-rabbinic movement left Jerusalem for good, never to return to the city and never again to make it their seat of authority. Recent archaeology clearly indicates that Jewish settlement in Jerusalem came to an almost complete end already with the first Jewish war. There are no Jewish [or Jewish-Christian] burials to be found there for the period between the [two Jewish] wars, whereas the archaeological remains of the Tenth Roman Legion Fretensis are abundant” (Skarsaune 2007b:756). Bauckham (2007:79) says that Jerusalem “was unpopulated after 70”. According to 2 Kings 25:12 the Babylonians left a number of people in the destroyed city. The number of exiles given in Jeremiah 52:30 does not suggest a total depopulation.

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points “to prevent any pollution of it by birds”. The marble was of such a pure quality that, from a distance, the temple “looked like a mountain covered with snow.”²

In the year 66 the inhabitants of Jerusalem expelled the corrupt governor Florus and discontinued the official prayers for the emperor (Bruce 1982:359). This was open rebellion, but, because of widespread confusion before and after Nero’s suicide (in 68), the Romans did not subdue Jerusalem until 70 AD.³ As the five-month siege of the city started around Passover, there were many more people in Jerusalem than was normally the case. During the siege many thousands died as a result of hunger, disease and fighting between various Zealot groups. As the situation deteriorated, the killing got worse, which resulted in indescribable suffering. Many more were killed when the army entered the city. The city and temple were totally destroyed, and the hopeless survivors sold into slavery.⁴

It is therefore not strange that Jesus warned Israel on more than one occasion about the approach of this terrible period (Lk 19:41-44; 23:28-31). When He visited the temple for the last time, He concluded his solemn warnings to the leaders of Israel with these ominous words: “Look, your house is left to you desolate” (Mt 23:38). As He was leaving the temple one of his disciples tried to draw his attention to its grandeur: “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!” But Jesus said, ‘Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down” (Mk 13:1, 2).

This was a shocking blow to their expectations, because, as we know, the disciples believed that Israel would be the “major player” in the Kingdom of God. Even after his resurrection they thought that Jesus would re-establish the Davidic Kingdom in some form (Acts 1:6). The possibility that the temple would be destroyed did not enter their minds. Presumably they assumed that it would only be destroyed when the world would come to an end (Kik 1971:83). Hence their question: “Tell us when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Mt 24:3; Mk 13:4).

Many scholars believe that, in answering this question, Jesus combined or “mixed” two themes of prophecy – the fall of Jerusalem and the Second Coming.⁵ Marcellus Kik and RVG Tasker are some of the very few who

2 The Wars of the Jews, book 5, chapter 5, paragraph 6.

3 The year 69 was known as “the year of the four emperors”.

4 Josephus (WJ 5:9:3) said that 1,1 million people died during the siege. While his account of the Zealots “is manifestly prejudiced” (Bruce 1982:90), his general reliability is recognized even by modern admirers of the Zealots (cf Yadin 1979:31-42).

5 Cf Cole 1966:204; Geldenhuys 1955:523ff; Hendriksen 1974:846ff; Lane 1975:474ff. While the term “Second Coming” is used in this paper, it is recognized

believe that, in answering this double question, Jesus in fact distinguished clearly between the destruction of the temple – which would happen within the lifetime of that generation – and his Second Coming, that would occur at a later and totally unknown date. In their view the major division between the two themes occurs between verse 35 and 36 of Matthew 24 (cf Mk 13:31, 32; Lk 21:33, 34).⁶

While Kik does not give any detail of a possible source of his exegesis, Tasker (1966:224f) acknowledges his indebtedness to B C Butler,⁷ who noted three distinguishable sections in Matthew 24. In the first section (5-14) Jesus gave his disciples some general information about the future of the Church (cf Mk13: 5-13; Lk 21:8-19). Then He warned them about a terrible period of suffering that awaited the Jewish people in the near future, involving the destruction of the temple. In order to enable his followers to be prepared for this catastrophe, Jesus mentioned a number of things that would happen at that time.⁸ He finally answered the second part of their question, concerning “the sign of his coming and of the end of the age”. In this last section, exceptionally long in Matthew, Jesus emphasized that there will be no signs to announce the approach of the *parousia*.⁹

2. A CLEAR WARNING WITH A SOLEMN ASSURANCE OF ITS TRUTH

We know that Jesus, the last and greatest prophet of Israel, often made use of the prophetic symbolism of the Old Testament.¹⁰ Apparently Daniel 7 played an important role in this regard, because He used it to identify himself in a unique way. He could have referred to himself as the “Son of David” of popular theology or the “Servant of the Lord” of Isaiah, but He deliberately called himself the “Son of Man”.¹¹ He probably also referred to this chapter when He announced the main theme of his preaching: “The time has come,

that His final “revelation” or “manifestation” are more Biblical terms.

6 Marshall (1978:776f) admits that this perspective deserves “careful attention”, but believes that “the clear temporal sequence” in Mark 13:24, 26 is a crucial objection (in spite of his own observation that, in Luke 21:24b, there is the suggestion of a lapse of time between the fall of Jerusalem and the Second Coming).

7 In Butler’s *The Originality of St Matthew*, 1951.

8 Mt 24:15-33; Mk 13:14-29 and Lk 21:20-31.

9 Mt 24:36-25:46; Mk 13:32-37; Lk 21:34-36.

10 Eg Mt 13:13/ Isa 6:9; Mt 21:2/ Zech 9:9; Mt 26:31; Zech 13:7; Lk 20:9-19/ Isa 5:1-7.

11 Dan 7:13. Kingsbury (1988:95-103) denies that Jesus used this phrase as a Christo-logical title. In light of Jesus’ reference to the “Son of Man” in his affirmative answer to the question of the high priest whether He is “the Messiah, the Son of God” (Mt 26:63, 64), this is difficult to accept.

the Kingdom of God is near" (Mk 1:15; cf Dan 7:22; Bruce 1982:161f). And in one of his last messages to his disciples He described his post-resurrection status in terms of Daniel 7:14: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Mt 28:18).

However, before we study Jesus' apocalyptic language in more detail, we must look at other sections in the same context where He did not use prophetic symbolism. The following words provide a very important key to the interpretation of his apocalyptic language: "I tell you the truth: this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened." And, to emphasize the certainty of his prediction even more, Jesus added: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."¹²

Nothing could be clearer. Jesus was emphatic and unambiguous about the fact that everything He predicted in Matthew 24:15-31; Mark 13:14-26 and Luke 21:20-28 would be fulfilled within the lifetime of the then living generation. Only in Matthew 24:27, 28 there is, it would seem, a contrasting reference to the Second Coming.¹³

This solemn warning, followed by an equally solemn assurance of its truth, must surely be the most important text in the interpretation of these prophecies. It is decisive and pivotal as it clearly separates the two themes – the destruction of the temple and the Second Coming. It is noteworthy that the Synoptic Gospels are in total agreement on this point. If we take these plain words seriously, it seems beyond doubt that Jesus did not "mix" the two themes in these prophecies.

3. BUT, HOW DO BIBLICAL SCHOLARS AVOID THIS "SIMPLE" CONCLUSION?

For a long time the solution to the problems of the "prophetic discourse" was sought in the theory of the so-called "Little Apocalypse". The suggestion was that, in order to encourage the Christians of his day, an unknown writer edited a small Jewish or Jewish-Christian apocalypse and combined it with certain eschatological sayings of Jesus. It is not clear how this hybrid document became part of the canonical gospels. This theory was widely accepted and often modified, but it was never able to solve the problems satisfactorily. The difficulties were further complicated by the fact that Mark's version is sometimes

12 Mt 24:34, 35; Mk 13:30, 31; Lk 21:32, 33.

13 Marshall (1978:669) approves of Klostermann's interpretation of these two metaphors: "His coming will be as obvious as lightning. His presence will be clearly indicated, just as the presence of carrion is clearly indicated by the gathering of vultures overhead."

more obscure than the others.¹⁴ It is therefore not strange that some critics “solve” the problem by claiming that Jesus mistakenly believed that He would come back within the lifetime of some of his disciples (cf. Tasker 1966:225). This was also the conclusion of the famous Albert Schweitzer (1961).

Other scholars try to escape the force of Jesus’ prediction by arguing that, with “this generation” Jesus did not refer to the Jewish people of his own time, but to the Jewish nation. In other words, that Jesus solemnly declared that the Jewish nation would still be around at his Second Coming (cf. Hendriksen 1974:868). There are, however, two major problems with this interpretation.

(1) Everywhere else Jesus used the expression “this generation” (*hē genea tautē*) to describe the people of his own time (Mt 11:16; 12:41, 42; 23:36; cf. 16:4). Why would He use this term in such an important context and, in this one case, give it a different meaning? This point is conceded by a number of scholars who otherwise accept the idea of the “prophetic mixing” of the two themes (Cole 1966:205; Lane 1975:480). In fact, Lane does not only concede it, he is emphatic: “In Mark ‘this generation’ clearly designates the contemporaries of Jesus (chs 8:12, 38; 9:19) and there is no consideration from the context which lends support to any other proposal.”

(2) Jesus emphasized his own ignorance of the time of the Second Coming (Mk 13:32). There can really be no uncertainty about that. How then could He make a definite statement about the Jewish nation at the time of the Second Coming – and repeatedly affirm the absolute truth of his words – if He was ignorant about the time of the Second Coming?

We find, in addition, the following enigmatic saying in all three Synoptics: “I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power” (Mk 9:1; Lk 9:27; cf. Mt 16:28). While this is a notoriously difficult saying, the most natural interpretation of this prediction would probably be that Jesus referred to something very significant that would happen a number of years later, but still within the lifetime of some people present. And, in the context of Israel, one possibility was certainly the destruction of the city and the temple. This is indeed how Norval Geldenhuys interprets Luke 9:27:

In an unparalleled manner God revealed his kingly dominion over the unbelieving Jewish nation in that execution of judgment [the destruction of the temple]. By these means He showed once and for all that the Old Dispensation had passed away and the New Dispensation had indeed

14 Cf. Vincent Taylor 1952: 498ff; Geldenhuys 1950: 537.

begun ... That event revealed the kingdom of God and His dominion in the history of man in an incomparable manner¹⁵ (1950:277).

4. NO SIGNS TO ANNOUNCE THE APPROACH OF THE SECOND COMING

In the last section of the “prophetic discourse” Jesus answered the second part of the disciples’ question – concerning “the sign of his coming and of the end of the world” (Mt 24:3c). If we look at the relevant passages from this perspective,¹⁶ it would seem that Jesus particularly emphasized the fact that there will be no signs to enable people to prepare themselves for the Second Coming. He would return “as a thief in the night”, just as it was “in the days of Noah”. This comes out especially clearly in Luke 17:22-37, which seems to deal exclusively with the Second Coming.¹⁷

There is a striking contrast between the certainty of Jesus’ knowledge of the approaching fall of Jerusalem and his ignorance of the time of his Second Coming. He indicated certain preparatory signs in connection with the former – together constituting the “sprouting fig tree” – but not for the latter. He did that in order to enable his followers to leave the city as soon as they saw the signs of its approaching destruction.¹⁸ And, according to a tradition recorded by Eusebius, they did just that (cf. Bruce 1982:356).

The atmosphere of Matthew 25 is quite different from that of Matthew 24 (up to verse 35). The period before the fall of Jerusalem is described as a time of great trouble (24:19, cf. Mk 13:17-20), but the time of the Second Coming one of relative normality (24:37-42; cf. Lk 17:26-30). The first period is referred to as “those days” (Mt 24:19, 22), but the Second Coming is usually described as “that day” (Mt 24:36, Mk 13:32 and Lk 21:34). It is significant that this combination of *ekeinos* with *hēmera* in the singular, is also used in other places in the NT for the Second Coming.¹⁹ This contrast between the soon coming judgment on Israel and that other Great Day – “the day of the Son of Man” – in the last section of these chapters, supports the view that Jesus

15 It is admittedly hazardous to exclusively emphasize the judgment dimension of the Kingdom of God (without reference to its overflowing grace dimension), but it may be equally hazardous to ignore it.

16 Mt 24:36-25:46; Mk 13:32-37; Lk 21:34-36.

17 “Of His final coming there would be no preliminary signs. It would be as instantaneous and as universal as a flash of lightning” (Tasker 1966:225).

18 Mt 24:15-33; Mk 13:14-29; Lk 21:20-31.

19 Mt 7:22; Lk 6:23; 2 Thes 1:10; 2 Tim 1:12; 4:8. It is also called “the day when He will be revealed” (*apokaluptetai, epifaneia*); cf Lk 17:30; 1 Cor 1:7,8; 1 Pet 1:7; 4:13; 2 Thes 2:8; Tit 2:13.

distinguished clearly between the destruction of Jerusalem and his Second Coming.

Commenting on the parables of Matthew 24 and 25, Klyne Snodgrass (2008:500) draws attention to the following recurring phrase: “My master (or the bridegroom) is staying away a long time” (24:48; 25:5, 19). In connection with the parable of the faithful/ unfaithful servant (24:45-51) he observes: “This parable is more concerned with the time during the interval than it is with the return.” Commenting on the parable of the Ten Virgins, he says: “[This parable] focuses on the foolishness of those who do not anticipate the delay.”

Referring in general to all the parables in this section, Snodgrass concludes: “The emphasis is on readiness and watching, whether the time is long or short.” This is clearly very different from what Jesus said in Matthew 24:32-35. It is, on the other hand, in full agreement with the remarkable fact that He himself – in his state of humiliation – did not know when his final manifestation would take place (2008:500).

This interpretation is further supported by the fact that the Lukan version of the parable of the faithful/ unfaithful servant does not appear in a context related to the fall of Jerusalem (Lk 12:35-48). Snodgrass also reminds us that the parable of the unjust judge (Lk 18:1-8), directly following on the eschatological warnings of Luke 17, is indeed concerned with the difficult problem that God seemingly takes such a long time to fulfill His promises (2008: 460).

5. INTERPRETING JESUS’ APOCALYPTIC LANGUAGE - THE DANIEL CODE.

The biggest problem in this context is, of course, the interpretation of the following text: “At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory” (Mt 24:30b, Mk 13:26 and Lk 21:27). Surely, this can only refer to the Second Coming?

Let us keep in mind the time-honoured principle that difficult passages of Scripture should be interpreted in the light of clearer passages (“the analogy of Scripture”). In addition to the “pivotal text” (Mt 24:34, 35), the passage that enables us to understand the meaning of Matthew 24:30b – as I would argue – is found in Matthew 26:63, 64.

Jesus was brought before the Sanhedrin, the highest court in Israel. Various people accused him of several things, but Jesus remained silent. Eventually Caiaphas, the high priest, put him under oath and said: “I charge you by the living God: tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.”

This was a serious and a legitimate question (Tasker 1966:254) and Jesus could not remain silent any longer. As He later said to Pilate: "For this reason I was born, to testify to the truth" (John 18:37). Of course, He realized that his response would amount to an admission of guilt in the eyes of his enemies. His answer is therefore very important:

"Yes, it is as you say. But I say to all of you: from now on (*ap' arti*) you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One, and coming on the clouds of heaven." (Mt 26:64). The parallel text in Luke 22:69 may also shed some light on what Jesus meant: "From now on (*apo tou nun*) the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God."

Vincent Taylor finds it surprising that Matthew and Luke used two different expressions with the same meaning "with no corresponding phrase in Mark" (1952:568). It is nevertheless significant that Matthew and Luke agree that Jesus was talking about something that was going to happen relatively soon. It removes any possible uncertainty about their meaning regarding that aspect.

But what did Jesus mean? As Matthew wrote especially for the benefit of Israel, his description is of prime importance for our study.²⁰ And he said that Israel's last and greatest prophet, brought before their highest court, answered his accusers in the language of two OT passages, Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13 (cf. also Mark 14:62).

Even so, the question remains, what did Jesus mean with this double reference?

Commenting on Mark 14:62 Taylor said that *opsesthe*

does not necessarily describe a visible portent, but more probably indicates that the priests will see facts and circumstances which will show that Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13 are fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus (1952:568).

In light of all we have seen so far, I would argue that Jesus meant the following: "Soon, one of these days, you will see (realize, understand) that the Man you accuse today of blasphemy was indeed the promised Messianic King, referred to in Psalm 110. You will realize that He was raised to the right hand and the glory of the Father. Or, to refer to another prophecy, you will soon realize that I am indeed that Son of Man whom Daniel saw in a vision on the clouds of heaven."

20 Matthew made it clear that Jesus, as a true Israelite, did not use the name *Jahweh*, but said "the Power" (*tēs dunameōs*). Luke, on the other hand, writing for people with less knowledge of the OT, did not refer to the "coming on the clouds of heaven", in terms of the *Daniel Code*.

This interpretation is supported by what Jesus said to the Pharisees: “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am (the one I claim to be)”, or, as the New English Bible translates: “When you have lifted up the Son of Man you will know that I am what I am.” (John 8:28).

But, how and when did the leaders of Israel realize that Jesus was indeed the Messiah or the Son of Man of Daniel 7?

It would seem that they realized it when they saw and heard what happened in Jerusalem in the days and years that followed the crucifixion (the “uplifting”). There were the reports of his resurrection and, fifty days later, of the coming of the Holy Spirit. That was followed by the conversion of thousands of Jews and the formation of a community of “new covenant believers” in the city. In addition there was the conversion and witness of a number of remarkable people, such as Stephen, the first Christian martyr, Saul, a leading Pharisee and zealous persecutor of those who accepted Jesus as Messiah, and James, a younger brother of Jesus.

These facts could constitute substantial evidence that the man they condemned for blasphemy was the long-awaited Messiah. And of course, the Christian witnesses continually pressed the point that there was only one explanation for all these strange happenings, and that was that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah (cf. Acts 4:27; 10:38).

Apparently some understood fairly soon who Jesus was, and, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, confessed him as the Messiah (cf. Acts 6:7). But many others resisted the Good News up to the time when the Romans came and took the city. Presumably, when the temple was destroyed, it must have been clear to some of them that Jesus was indeed the Son of Man who was given all authority in heaven and on earth. Perhaps some recalled the last words of the martyred Stephen: “Look! I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” (Acts 7:56).

It seems significant that all three Synoptic Gospels agree that Jesus did not say “you will see”, but “they will see” (Mt 24:30b, Mk 13:26, Lk 21:27). Marshall (1978:776) observes that “the ungodly” are the subject of *opsontai*. In other words, in this context, Jesus did not expect his own followers to be among those who would “see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven”.

In other OT Scriptures we also find the idea of God’s judgment in terms of a “coming on clouds”. Isaiah 19:1 is an announcement of judgment on Egypt: “The Lord rides on a swift cloud and is coming to Egypt. The gods of Egypt tremble before him, and the hearts of the Egyptians melt within them.” Also in the Psalms we see a combination of the judgment of the Lord and clouds (Ps 18:11-15; 97:2). In all these cases the clouds obviously symbolize God’s judgment and need not be taken literally.

6. THE SIGN OF THE SON OF MAN IN THE SKY

The following statement in Matthew has no parallel in the other Gospels: “At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn” (24:30a). Josephus related that, during the siege of Jerusalem, people saw a strange star as well as a large comet that were both visible for a long time (*The Wars of the Jews* 6:5:3). Perhaps Jesus had some such striking natural phenomenon in mind. There may even be a connection between “the sign of the Son of Man in the sky” and “his star” mentioned in Matthew 2:2.

More important is the alternative translation of the phrase “all the nations of the earth will mourn”. Within the context of Israel, the words *pasai hai fulai tēs gēs* should perhaps rather be translated as “all the tribes (or clans) of the land”. As Tasker (1966:230) said, in his cautious style,

if, as has been suggested in this commentary, the reference is to the conditions prevailing when Jerusalem was being attacked, the translation should be ‘all the tribes of the land’, i.e. the land of Judaea (Zech 12:12).²¹

And this is literally what happened during the siege of Jerusalem. The suffering of “all the tribes of Israel”, especially when the different factions in the city killed each other, was ghastly beyond imagination.²²

7. THE DARKENING OF SUN, MOON AND STARS

In Mark 13:24, 25 we read the following: “But in those days, following that distress, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken” (cf. Mt 24:29, Lk 21:25, 26). Commenting on these verses, Lane observes:

No other section of the eschatological discourse is more indebted to scriptural image and language. The entire description is drawn from OT material, which has been brought together through common motives (1975:474ff).

According to Kik (1971: 129f) this is Biblical apocalyptic language indicating the final abolition of the Mosaic period of Israel’s religion, and Tasker quotes several authorities that were of a similar opinion (1966:225ff).

21 Tasker quotes the translation of this verse in the New Testament translation of Ronald A Knox, published in 1945.

22 Cf Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, especially books 5 and 6.

There are indeed many references in the OT to the destruction of great cities and nations, which are symbolically described as a darkening of the sun, moon or stars. Isaiah 13 predicts the destruction of Babylon, at that stage still in the distant future. In verse 10 we read: “The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light.” Verse 13 says: “Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will shake from its place at the wrath of the Lord Almighty.” In Isaiah 24:23 we read, regarding a judgment on the city of Tyre: “The moon will be abashed, the sun ashamed; for the Lord Almighty will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem”. And in Ezekiel 32:7, a prophecy against Egypt, we read: “When I snuff you out, I will cover the heavens and darken their stars; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon will not give its light.”

If the OT could use such dramatic apocalyptic language to describe the destruction of pagan cities and temples, how much more fitting is this language to describe the greatest catastrophe in the history of Israel, that is, the final end of the Mosaic period? For Jesus, whose love for and knowledge of the Old Testament was of the highest order, the use of these images was the most natural thing to do. As Schlatter said:

He based the hopes of the disciples simply on the prophetic word, just as He strengthened Himself in the face of His cross by the realization that Scripture connected together suffering and the divine commission.²³

8. THE ANGELS AND THE SOUNDING OF THE TRUMPET

In Matthew 24:31 we read: “And He will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other” (cf. Mk 13:27). The common interpretation of this text identifies the “loud trumpet call” with the “last trumpet” of the general resurrection that will take place at the Second Coming (cf. 1 Cor 15:52; 1 Thes 4:16).

But there is another possible interpretation. Both Kik (1971:149) and Tasker (1966:227) remind us that *aggeloi* may simply be translated as “messengers”. Commenting on Matthew 24:29-31, Tasker asks:

23 As quoted by Cranfield 1979:406.

Is it not also possible to regard these verses as a cryptic description in the symbolism of poetry, of the Roman conquest of Jerusalem and of the spread of the Christian Church which followed it? (1966:225).

In that case the “sounding of the great trumpet” (*shofar*) would have a different meaning.

In Leviticus 25 we read about the “Sabbath Year” and the “Year of Jubilee”. The main reason for these institutions was the liberation of Jews who became slaves as a result of debt they could not repay. The poor also received back land their family lost through debts during the previous 50 years.²⁴ The connection between the “Jubilee” and the trumpet call is explained in Leviticus 25:9,10: “[In the 50th year] you must have the trumpet sounded everywhere ... on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. Consecrate the 50th year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.”

The fact that Jesus understood his ministry in terms of the Jubilee (Lk 4:16-21), may be significant for our understanding of the prophetic discourse. It seems clear that his announcement of the arrival of the Jubilee in Luke, and of the presence of the Kingdom in Matthew, were “two sides of the same coin”. As David Bosch (1991:89) observed:

Luke himself regards this incident as especially significant ... It stands as a ‘preface’ to Jesus’ entire public ministry ... It is a ‘programmatic discourse’ which fulfills the same function in Luke’s gospel as the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s.²⁵

From this perspective, it looks as if the “loud trumpet call” should, on the basis of good Biblical precedent, be understood as the preaching of the Gospel. Of course, where Leviticus says that the Jubilee should be proclaimed “throughout the land [of Israel]” (25:10), Jesus said that his messengers must announce the “Gospel Jubilee” to all nations.²⁶

9. DID THE FALL OF JERUSALEM CONTRIBUTE TO THE EXTENSION OF THE CHURCH?

A question that may be asked at this stage is whether there is any historical evidence for the claim that the fall of Jerusalem contributed significantly to the expansion of the Christian Church in the subsequent years? For a long

²⁴ Apparently this practice was seldom adhered to in the history of Israel (Jer 34; Neh 5). In fact, the neglect of the poor was a major cause of the exile (2 Chronicles 36:21).

²⁵ Bosch refers to three other NT scholars in support of his view.

²⁶ Mt 28:19. Matthew 24:31 may be an “echo” of Isaiah 27:13.

time the accepted view was – at least in the West – that, after the rebellion of Bar Kokhba in 135 AD, the Jewish Christian church became a marginal phenomenon and soon “faded out of history” as a “forgotten community” (Gonzalez 1984:22; cf. Skarsaune 2007b:769).

While this question is too wide to be addressed satisfactorily here, we should note the significant paradigm shift in this regard that took place during the last two or three decades. Scholars from a variety of disciplines, countries and institutions have made an intensive study of the relationship between Jews and Christians in the Roman Empire during the first four centuries. Of special interest was the presence, numbers and influence of Jewish believers in Jesus. This of course also involved the question of their relationship with Gentile Christians on the one hand and with “orthodox” Jewish communities on the other.²⁷

A major finding of this research was the realization that

Jewish believers of many stripes contributed significantly, often decisively, to the shaping of different types of Christianity, *including*, not least, ‘proto-orthodox’ Christianity (Skarsaune 2007b:779).

These studies also highlighted the fact that the Christian community was surprisingly pluriform.

Another important, indeed revolutionary, finding was the realization that there was also “in most places and most of the time, a not inconsiderable segment of the two communities [Jews and Jewish Christians] that overlapped”. Some Jewish believers in Jesus in fact remained within the social borders of the Jewish community and were seen by outsiders as “ordinary” Jews who “just happened to believe in Jesus as the Messiah” (Skarsaune 2007b:779).

One of those who contributed to the development of the new paradigm, is Rodney Stark, a sociologist of religion. He identified a number of factors that facilitated the remarkable expansion of the Church during the first four centuries. One of his major sociological deductions was that the number of Greek speaking Jewish converts to Christianity during the period was much higher than was traditionally assumed. And Stark believes that these conversions were facilitated by two important factors: the decision of the Apostolic Council (Acts 15) and the destruction of the temple.²⁸

27 See for example the impressive 23 chapter study edited by Skarsaune and Hvalvik, 2007.

28 Cf. Stark 1997:60-70, 214. While Skarsaune points out that Stark’s calculations did not take into account the fact that Jewish settlements were not evenly spread in the Roman Diaspora, he agrees broadly with Stark’s estimates. He also notes that

Stark argues that large numbers of Greek speaking Jews were attracted to Christianity because it preserved the monotheism and high moral code of Judaism, without the latter's faith-based social restrictions that hampered their relationship with other cultural groups in Roman society. In other words, the decision of Acts 15 was not only good news for converts from paganism, but also for potential converts from among Greek speaking Jews.

From the book of Acts it is clear that Jews and proselytes were the first "target" of missionaries like Paul. It is also clear that, in some places, many of them accepted Christ (cf. Acts 11:21, 24; 17:12). According to Bruce the Jewish population of many towns of Asia Minor was very large (1982:259). That there was a significant number of Jewish Christians in the Ancient Church is implied by James 1:1, the letter to the Hebrews, and the strong OT background of the book of Revelation. The latter suggests that the seven congregations of Asia Minor contained a substantial number of converted Jews and proselytes.

The biggest problem in the Ancient Jewish Church was the stubborn fact that some regarded the Mosaic ceremonies, especially circumcision, too highly. As Bruce said: "For many of them the church was little more than a new party within the frontiers of Judaism." (1971:302). The decision of Acts 15 indeed implied that in Christ "neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything" (Gal 6:15), but it was only after the destruction of the temple that the influence of the "Mosaic" Christians was significantly reduced.²⁹ With the destruction of the temple God made it very clear that the Old Covenant has been superceded (cf. Heb 12:22-24; Rev 21:22).

While detail historical knowledge of the expansion of the Church between the years 62 and 150 is limited, recent research has revealed, surprisingly, that we still find Christians of Jewish origin in the Roman Empire, long after the time of Constantine (Lahey 2007:631ff). This Jewish-Christian "tradition", with its natural appreciation for the OT, was very important during the struggle against Gnosticism. The fact that Gnosticism, in spite of its wide popular appeal, was rejected, and that books like Hebrews and Revelation were received as canonical, also points to a substantial "Jewish" influence in the Church, even in the third and fourth centuries (cf Stark 1997:65). The research reported in Skarsaune and Hvalvik (2007) abundantly supports the general correctness of Stark's assumptions.

It would seem then that, in order to understand what Jesus meant with his saying in Matthew 24:31 and Mark 13:27, we should seriously consider

the number of Jewish Christians in the East was probably much higher than in the West (2007b:767ff).

29 Cf. Stark 1997:64; Bruce 1982:355. "New Covenant" Jewish Christians were consequently much freer to preach the Gospel. This is probably the significance of the word "redemption" in Luke 21:28. It was a relief from a restricting situation.

the possibility that the destruction of Jerusalem played an important role in the remarkable expansion of the early Church, at least partly because it significantly reduced the influence of the “Judaizing” party in the “proto-orthodox” Jewish-Christian church. As Kik (1971:147) said:

While the Jubilee for the whole earth actually saw its inception with the ministry of Christ, it formally started with the destruction of Jerusalem when the Old Dispensation gave way to the New. It was at this point that the Jubilee trumpet truly sounded.

All over the whole Roman empire – as well as to the East, far outside its borders – the Great Trumpet of the Gospel proclaimed that the Great Jubilee – the Kingdom of God – has arrived in the life and work, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah.

10.CONCLUSION

In order to understand what Jesus meant in Matthew 24:30b, we must look at what He said in Matthew 26:64. It seems undeniable that the one is a close parallel of the other. In both contexts Jesus assured his listeners that, within a reasonably short time, his persecutors will realize that He is indeed the Messianic King of Psalm 110 or the Son of Man whom Daniel saw in a vision on the clouds of heaven. If they did not repent and accept him as Messiah, they would fully realize the truth of what He said when God's judgment fell on Jerusalem and the temple is finally destroyed. The words of Jesus in John 8:28 seem to support this interpretation. This interpretation is further confirmed by his unambiguous warning: “I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened” (Mt 24: 34). And, as we learn from tradition, the early Jerusalem Christians fled in time and were saved from being involved in God's judgment on the city. It seems clear that in this verse (Mt 24:30b) Jesus, using apocalyptic language, warned his disciples about the coming judgment on Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, the symbol and focal point of the now fulfilled and superceded Old Covenant.

While the disciples assumed that his Second Coming would coincide with the destruction of the temple, Jesus assured them that no-one could even remotely calculate when the Son of Man would be revealed to the world. Although there will be no signs to warn people of the approach of that Great Day, his Presence will be unmistakable.

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