

“There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. 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”. Lk 21: 23-24

And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. Matt. 24:14

It is of immense value to us that Jesus left some intimations concerning the future of the Jews because, even though they are limited, they none the less give important pointers to what lies ahead for that nation. The verses quoted above summarize these intimations, and endorse a future landscape of restoration as set out by the biblical prophets.

Jesus, Prophet to the Jewish Nation

These verses quoted above record words he spoke during the last week of his earthly life, a week in which Jesus is to be seen exercising a powerful and persistent role as prophet to the Jewish nation. His main word at that time was one of warning and coming disaster. The first statement of this was on the Sunday before his crucifixion (Palm Sunday) when pausing before he entered Jerusalem he cried out over the city, *“If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.”* He later spoke precisely the same message to the Sadducees and the Pharisees albeit in parables, warning them that God would *“take the kingdom from them”* (see parables of the Tenants & Wedding Banquet). Finally he spoke prophetically and more extensively to his disciples as they were viewing the temple in Jerusalem, and it is from this more extensive prophetic discourse (reported in Lk 21 and Matt 24) that the key texts of the pamphlet are taken.

In this discourse to his disciples Jesus ranged over a number of subjects, including the wars and natural disasters that were to come across the world, the persecutions that were to come to Christians, and the signs that would be seen among the heavenly bodies. But he also spoke very graphically about what lay in store for Jerusalem, and it was very much in line with what he had spoken publicly and to the Jewish leaders, namely that there would be *“great distress in the land”*. In a very far reaching statement Jesus spoke to his disciples more explicitly about the nature of the distress that was to come to the people: *“They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations”*. He prophesied in detail the siege of Jerusalem by armies who would deal mercilessly with all its inhabitants. Here was an intimation of military assault followed by an enforced exile. The testimony of history on this word of Jesus is clear. In A.D. 70 not only was the Temple in Jerusalem destroyed but the city itself was laid waste with tens of thousands of Jews either killed by the sword or executed by crucifixion with the survivors being marched off into captivity. In A.D. 135 there was a repetition of the destruction, this time with the old city completely blotted out and a new Roman city raised on the ashes with a Roman name and a Roman temple. No Jew was permitted to live there. Thus began an exile for the nation which has lasted some two millennia. As Jesus so graphically phrased it, from that time onward Jerusalem was *“trampled on by the Gentiles”*.

Jesus, prophesied powerfully about the future of the Jews

A Prophecy of Hope

There is, however, a very short and simple statement in Jesus’ prophecy which brings a note of hope for the nation. He said, the city would *“be trampled on by the Gentiles until”*. The word *“until”* inevitably implies a time limit. There can be no tinkering with that word. There was a set time for the Gentiles to trample Jerusalem and a set time for that trampling to finish. There would be an end to all that is conveyed in the word *“trample”*, namely treading down, oppressing and exercising authority. The implication is clear, that when the trampling of the Gentiles ceased then the Jews would once again walk the streets of their own city and call it their own. Jesus’ words imply a restoration.

Jesus went on to define the time limit: he said that the trampling would finish when *“the times of the Gentiles is fulfilled”*.

What did he mean by that? Various interpretations have been offered, but our best guide is to be found in Paul’s letter to the Romans where Paul uses the same expression, *“fullness of the gentiles”* and in a similar context. In Romans 11.25 Paul writes as follows: *“Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in”* It is clear from the context of Romans 11 that when Paul speaks of the Gentiles as *“coming in”* he has in mind the idea of them being saved. He is saying that the *“hardening of Israel”* will continue until the full number of Gentiles according to God’s measure has been brought to salvation. It is very hard to avoid the conclusion that this is precisely what Jesus had in mind when he said, *“Jerusalem will be trodden*

Jerusalem would be” trampled” until the times of the Gentiles were fulfilled

down by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles is fulfilled”. Jesus was certainly prophesying at that time that there would be a world-wide proclamation of the gospel, and the expression *“times of the Gentiles”* is clearly connected with the words, *“this gospel will be preached in all the world”*. This preaching would inevitably bring with it a harvest and would continue until God judged that the harvest was complete. This time of the preaching of the gospel would constitute *“the times of the Gentiles”* and the completed harvest would constitute the *“fullness of the Gentiles being gathered in”*. Further more he was saying that when that had been accomplished *“the end will come”*. The completed harvest and the restoration of the Jews to their city would usher in an end time process.

Paul in Romans 11:25 and Jesus in Lk. 21:23 were thinking, therefore on exactly similar lines. Whereas Paul wrote about a hardening of Israel (i.e. its rejection of Jesus) which would go on until the work among the Gentiles was completed, Jesus spoke about a judgement which would overtake Israel (as a consequence of the hardening and rejection of him) and which would go on until the work among the Gentiles was completed. But both amount to the same thing. The corroboration of the two such witnesses is of huge importance. Jesus is speaking out of his role as a prophet and Paul is speaking out of a “*revelation of a mystery, a secret of God*” (Rom 11:25) which he prophetically received.

Jesus and the Prophet Isaiah

There is not only a correlation between Jesus and Paul in their prophetic view of the future of Israel. There is a clear correlation between Jesus’ prophetic word and the prophetic words of Isaiah with which he must have been very familiar. Isaiah delineates the very same marks of the future landscape that Jesus spoke of, namely the marks of a Gentile harvest and a restoration of Jerusalem. A key prophecy in this respect is Isaiah 49 and especially verse 6: “*“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”*” Here the “servant of the Lord” is himself speaking through Isaiah and relating what “The Lord” said to him about his future work. In a very extraordinary and very real sense, therefore, we are not really hearing Isaiah but the servant of the Lord himself, and that servant is, of course, Jesus!

It is small wonder, therefore, that Jesus in his flesh went back to these words that expressed his mandate as Messiah, and drew strength from them. His great work would be to become a light to the Gentiles and bring salvation to the ends of the earth. That would happen by means of the fact, as Jesus pronounced, that “*this gospel (of salvation through him) would be preached in all the world*”. His mind and his perception of the future as he spoke to his disciples during the last week of his ministry would be firmly fixed on the years that lay ahead in which such preaching would eventually bring in “*a fullness of the Gentiles*”.

At the same time, however, he was equally aware that part of his mandate belonged to Jacob or Israel. He would be, as Isaiah said, a “*servant to restore the tribes of Israel and bring back those of Israel I have kept*”. Isaiah’s prophecy puts the two in close juxtaposition as did Jesus in his own prophecy as he stood by the Temple. It is very evident that Isaiah’s prophecy referred to Israel and Jacob after the flesh, simply because those two names are contrasted with the Gentiles in the same sentence. There was a work he was to do for the Jews as a people, and that was a work of restoration. Inevitably such a work presupposed a situation in which the Jews would one day need a restoration, a “bringing back”. That situation was one on which Jesus in his prophecy brought a great deal of light: it would be one in which they would be taken as prisoners to all the nations, and into exile. He foresaw prophetically a great dispersing of the Jews from which a restoration would take place, and that is clearly stated in his prophecy.

**Jesus, Paul and Isaiah
are in concert on the
future of the Jews**

Final Words from Jesus

Jesus taught his disciples after his resurrection. In particular he made them aware of the fact that he was going to send “*the gift of the Father*” on them, a “*baptism in the Spirit*”. The response of the disciples to this seems to indicate that they had not really processed what Jesus had said to them previously at the Temple during his long prophetic discourse on the future. For they immediately responded by asking, “*Lord, are you at this time going to restore the Kingdom to Israel?*” (Acts 1:6). Possibly they had been confused by the thought that if he was going to send the Spirit the Messianic age must be on the brink of fully coming since the Spirit was characteristic of that age. For them such a fulfilment must mean the restoration of Israel. But they had forgotten his words about the gospel needing to be preached in all the world and Jerusalem being trampled down until that had happened. The response of Jesus to their query is, however, the important thing. For he did not reject their question as absurd. He actually said “*it is not for you to know the times or dates*” which the Father had set. They had asked a question about timing, and Jesus replied directly to that question of timing. In no way did he correct them about the concept of a restoration of the kingdom to Israel. They may have had their own idea of what such a restoration would mean, for they still thought mainly in terms of political power. They may have got their idea of the nature of the restoration wrong and their timing of it wrong, but they were not wrong in presuming that such an event would take place.

There is, of course, a very important lesson for us to learn here. Though we may be able to sketch out the landscape of the future in broad terms, we have no grounds for suggesting dates and timings for such events as the final stage of the gathering in of “*the fullness of the Gentiles*” or the “*restoring of Jacob*”. It is true on the other hand that we are to watch for the signs of these events (Matt 24: 32-26), and both the world-wide spread of the gospel over the last two centuries and the return of so many Jews to Israel and Jerusalem in the last century seem unmistakable signs, or at the very least events that call for our closest attention. But the details of the eventual outcome not only in timing but in specific events are best left for the Father to unfold. Whilst the prophetic utterances of God have always been fulfilled precisely, that preciseness has rarely, if ever, been anticipated by humanity.

Jesus, then, in Acts 1 is confirming the fact of Jewish restoration, but warning against seeking to know hidden specifics.

A Difficulty?

There are those who find a difficulty in the words that Jesus addressed to the Scribes and Pharisees in the Parable of the Tenants, “*Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit*” Matt 21:43. They are inclined to think that this means Jesus was speaking of a complete rejection of the Jews, and pointing to a transfer of the kingdom to the church. To ascertain the true implication of what he meant by these words they have to be put in the context of the prophetic words of Jesus that we have already considered. Those words, as we have seen, clearly offer hope for Israel as a nation and they find equally clear echoes both in Paul and in Isaiah. The fact is that during its period of hardening and judgement the kingdom was “lost” to Israel as Jesus said, but its final restoration to Israel was not precluded by that loss.