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# The Comings and Goings of the Son of Man

## *Is Matthew's Risen Jesus 'Present' or 'Absent'? A Narrative-Critical Response*

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### Abstract

Matthew's eschatological schema presents difficult narrative puzzles, not least of which is the paradox between a 'coming Son of Man' who is assumed to be absent from earth in the present, and a risen Jesus who promises perpetual presence 'until the end of the age' (28.20). A suggestion of G.B. Caird will be explored using a narrative-critical approach that focuses especially on Matthew's interests in divine presence, mountains and the significance of the Jerusalem Temple. It will be argued that the Matthean *παρουσία* may be read not so much as a 'second coming' but as a more continuous statement of presence from the cross and resurrection onwards. This places the 'Son of Man' as a narrative symbol of mediation between heaven and earth, in the clouds, on the final mountain-top, 'until the end of the age'. It is suggested that this can be seen as part of Matthew's theodicy for the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.

### Keywords

Matthew – Christology – eschatology – Son of Man – narrative criticism

### Introduction

Matthew's Gospel abounds in complex apocalyptic language and imagery, and many questions arise.<sup>1</sup> The mysterious figure of the 'Son of Man' presents par-

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, F.C. Grant, *The Gospels: Their Origin and their Growth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957) p. 137; J.A.T. Robinson, *Jesus and his Coming: The Emergence of a Doctrine* (London: SCM, 1957), pp. 96-100.

ticularly difficult problems. When will he come? Will it be within the lifetime of 'this generation' (24.34), or only after the whole world is evangelized (24.14)? Or is it the case that no one knows, not even the Son (24.36)? The eschatological vision of Matthew's Gospel presents many questions, but few answers.

A similar difficulty arises with Matthew's celebrated 'presence' Christology. The title Emmanuel ('God with us') appears towards the beginning of the Gospel (1.23) and so forms an *inclusio* with the very last sentence ('I am with you always, to the end of the age', 28:20), thus providing an interpretative bracket around almost the entire narrative.<sup>2</sup> David Kupp has argued that the presence motif runs even deeper than is often thought, that the theme of Jesus as God's presence is central to the whole of the First Gospel, binding it together.<sup>3</sup> Yet this very same presence motif exists alongside passages that suggest the current *absence* of Jesus. John Ziesler says of this apparent contradiction between the simultaneously present and absent Jesus:

It is just possible that [Matthew] was a man of simple mind who did not notice the contradiction, yet few students of Matthew are left in any doubt that he was a writer of great subtlety and insight, with impressive intellectual powers. In short, it is more likely that he knows exactly what he is doing, and that if we think we find a contradiction between a present and an absent Jesus, it is because we have got something wrong.<sup>4</sup>

This apparent contradiction might find its resolution in a brief but tantalising suggestion made by the late G.B. Caird. He asserted that in Matt. 26.64 we find the conviction expressed 'unambiguously' that 'the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven would be seen not merely at the end of time but continuously or repeatedly from the moment of Jesus' death'.<sup>5</sup> According to Caird, this picture exemplifies Matthew's twin preoccupations with (a) the eternal presence of Jesus with his disciples and (b) the theme of judgement:

For Matthew's emphasis on the final judgement does not arise out of any preoccupation with the end of the world, but rather from a recognition

2 U. Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 31-33.

3 D.D. Kupp, *Matthew's Emmanuel: Divine Presence and God's people in the First Gospel* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 240.

4 J.A. Ziesler, 'Matthew and the Presence of Jesus (2)', *Epworth Review* 11 (1984), pp. 90-97 (92).

5 G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980), p. 268.

that the final judgement is for ever pressing upon the present with both offer and demand. How could it be otherwise in a Gospel which begins with the birth of him whose name is Immanuel, God with us, and ends with his promise, 'I am with you to the end of the world'?<sup>6</sup>

Caird therefore sees Matthew as something of a proto-Bultmannian, putting forward an eschatological schema which is symbolic of the existential crisis brought about by faith. And the image of the 'Son of Man' perpetually coming in the clouds is, for Caird, a narrative reminder of this fact. This image would seem to resolve (pictorially) the problem of the simultaneous presence and absence of the risen Jesus: He is exalted in the clouds, between heaven and earth, and therefore representative to both.

Caird makes this point in a brief paragraph, and it clearly warrants further investigation. The rationale of narrative criticism offers a promising approach for fleshing out Caird's suggestion. In the light of a potential contradiction between a 'Son of Man' who is simultaneously absent and present, narrative criticism offers a potential way of resolving these contradictions, since it works on the assumption that the text is a largely self-defining world which will present its own logic for how it is to be read.<sup>7</sup> The hope is that once the logic of this particular narrative world is uncovered, apparent narrative contradictions will fall away. And unless the text itself indicates that it is designed to be read in a metaphorical or symbolic sense (as in a parable), it should be read literally, *within the internal frame of reference of the text*.

At this point, it is helpful to highlight a distinction which is often made in narrative-critical studies, between the historical author(s) of the First Gospel ('Matthew'), and the 'implied author', the author whom the reader infers as its selecting, presiding and structuring intelligence.<sup>8</sup> There is a complex relationship between these two, as there is between the real reader and the 'implied reader' (the idealized target audience presupposed by 'Matthew'). We will not attempt to unravel these relationships in depth but will rather emphasize that our approach is concerned with the views of the *implied author* as reconstructed internally from the narrative, and not necessarily the historical Matthew. This is an important point: My comments will have relatively little bearing on the intentions of the historical Matthew until we have gained a

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6 Ibid.

7 Kupp, *Matthew's Emmanuel*, pp. 9-11.

8 S. Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1978) pp. 148-51; S.D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 46.

perspective on the whole narrative. In that sense, I aim to present *one particular reading* consistent with the implied author whom I have discerned, as guided by Caird and by key hermeneutical factors.

Some of those factors are inevitably historical. It is not clear that it is ever appropriate (or even possible) to immerse oneself wholly in a narrative, as though it were its own universe. No text is entirely self-contained: It will use terms and concepts of its own time which cannot be understood without external reference to historical research.<sup>9</sup> Kupp, in his own narrative approach to the First Gospel, has pointed out that narrative critics too often tend to absolutize the reading experience as the only authentic meaning of the text, effectively severing the text from its historical context.<sup>10</sup> Rather, he suggests, literary questions should be asked alongside historical ones, informing each other rather than being the ends in their own rights. Kupp thus suggests a kind of combined approach, which we shall adopt here. And being guided by Caird's interest in the Emmanuel/'I am with you always' Christology, we shall therefore adopt Kupp's hermeneutical strategy of taking Christological presence as the key overarching theme of the Matthean narrative. This means that statements about the *location* of Jesus, whether in the present of the narrative or beyond it (i.e. in its future), will be read as serving that theme. In particular, we shall explore how apocalyptic motifs such as *παρουσία* and the 'coming Son of Man', usually taken as descriptive of the future activity and location of Jesus, may also be related to the presence theme.

The working pattern will thus be to read eschatological statements as part of a substantial and coherent unity, with presence as the unifying key. In short, we will attempt to find out where the implied author thinks Jesus is, both in the 'now' of the narrative and in the future. It will be argued that, since the Matthean Jesus is always 'present' with his disciples, then *future* eschatology becomes bound up with the *current* description of Jesus. Therefore, eschatological terms such as *παρουσία* and the 'coming Son of Man', usually associated with the idea of future second coming, also become part of the description of the *current* location of Jesus.

Returning to Caird's suggestion that Matthew's picture of the 'coming Son of Man' is an image of the existential crisis of faith, I will suggest instead that there are concrete historical reasons lying behind Matthew's eschatological vision. The obvious candidate is the crisis brought about by the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, supported by the observation that the eschatological presence of Jesus comes into sharpest focus when it is prompted by

9 J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 119.

10 Kupp, *Matthew's Emmanuel*, pp. 15-16.

discussion of the destruction of the Temple (24.1-3). I will therefore suggest at the end of the paper that my relatively literalistic narrative reading of apocalyptic and Christological motifs may be understood as a kind of 'parable' of divine presence, a theodicy, put forward as the historical Matthew's response to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.

### The Great Commission (28.16-20)

The most appropriate place to begin is at the end, with the commissioning on the mountain. Scholars have had great difficulty assigning this scene to a form-critical genre, or agreeing on the underlying traditions with which it was constructed.<sup>11</sup> The consensus appears to be that, although Matthew may have made use of various fragments, the scene is his own composition. And it is largely agreed that it is not a resurrection appearance as such.<sup>12</sup> Close links have been seen with the famous heavenly vision of Dan. 7.13-14, where the 'one like a son of man' comes to the Ancient of Days and is given universal authority.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the commissioning scene possesses something of the heavenly vision, and it also has strong overtones of an enthronement scene, although the commissioning of the disciples, as well as their simultaneous worship and their doubt, further complicate the picture.<sup>14</sup> Other suggestions have tried to accommodate the forward-looking grandeur of the commissioning scene by linking it with the second coming, calling it a 'proleptic *parousia*'.<sup>15</sup> This is a

- 11 As pointed out, for instance, by J.D. Kingsbury ('The Composition and Christology of Matt 28:16-20', *JBL* 93 [1974], pp. 573-84 [579]), J.P. Meier ('Two disputed questions in Matt 28:16-20', *JBL* 96 [1977], pp. 407-424 [424]), and T.L. Donaldson (*Jesus on the Mountain: A Study in Matthean Theology* [JSNTSS 8; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985], p. 175).
- 12 Meier, 'Two Disputed Questions', p. 421; G. Bornkamm, 'The Risen Lord and the Earthly Jesus: Matthew 28.16-20', in J.M. Robinson (ed.), *The Future of Our Religious Past: Essays in Honour of Rudolf Bultmann* (trans. C.E. Carlston and R.P. Scharlemann; London: SCM, 1971), pp. 203-220 (204). One intriguing suggestion is that perhaps the scene arose from the prophetic utterance of an early Christian prophet (J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975], pp. 115-16).
- 13 O. Michel, 'The Conclusion of Matthew's Gospel: A Contribution to the History of the Easter Message', in G. Stanton (ed.), *The Interpretation of Matthew* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2nd edn, 1995), pp. 39-51 (45-46).
- 14 J. Riches, 'Matthew's Missionary Strategy in Colonial Perspective', in J. Riches and D.C. Sim (eds.), *The Gospel of Matthew in its Roman Imperial Context* (London, New York: T&T Clark International, 2005), pp. 128-42 (137-38).
- 15 J.P. Meier, *Matthew* (Dublin: Veritas, 1980), p. 373.

particularly relevant association for the narrative-critical approach taken in this article, and we will later exploit it to suggest a link between the commissioning scene and the *παρουσία*, but in a more immediate, less 'proleptic' way.

First, it is important to examine the commissioning scene, not as an isolated unit, but in its position as the closure and completion of the entire narrative. Christopher Evans has summarized the significance of this scene aptly:

The appearance in Galilee, with which Matthew's gospel closes, is as impressive a passage as any in the New Testament .... 'Resurrection appearance', in the sense which is generally attached to that phrase in the light of other stories, is a misnomer. It is an exaltation scene, and becomes a resurrection appearance only by its present position after the death and grave scenes. It is a christophany, and manifestation of Jesus as King-Messiah and universal ruler, who has been given the uttermost parts of the earth for his possession. There is nothing temporary about it, and an ascension to an exalted state after it in the Lukan or even the Johannine sense, or any subsequent movement from Galilee to Jerusalem, would be unthinkable.<sup>16</sup>

This is a vital point: The entire Matthean narrative is consummated in the final scene, with Jesus enthroned on a mountain at the boundary between heaven and earth, having all authority over them. This is not just the end of the story; it is its aim and fulfilment 'until the end of the age'. In narrative terms then, Evans is right that it is 'unthinkable' to posit a subsequent ascension to a yet more exalted state, since there can be no more exalted state than this. Indeed, the scene itself gives us no such option: There is no suggestion either of an ascension or a going-away; rather, it is the disciples who are commanded to 'go away' (28.19).

Comparison with the other Gospels is instructive. Luke-Acts refers to Jesus' ascension twice; John uses going-away language and up/down language frequently; while in Mark, the mysteriously abrupt ending at 16.8 led to significant later additions, including an ascension (16.19). But no editor felt the need to do this for Matthew's Gospel: This alone of all of the Gospels keeps Jesus on earth throughout the narrative and makes no attempt to remove him at the end. Indeed, to do so would negate his final promise.

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16 C.F. Evans, *Resurrection and the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1970), p. 83.



## The Presence of the Risen Jesus

But how does the implied author intend his or her readers to understand that Jesus is 'with' his disciples, 'always'? At this point, many commentators resort to mystical suggestions, such as: Jesus is with his disciples in his teachings, in the Eucharist, in the performing of miracles, through suffering love, in the hearing of prayers, and in the needs of the needy.<sup>17</sup> A comparison is often made with the *Shekinah*, seeing a parallel between a rabbinic text<sup>18</sup> and Jesus' saying of 18.20.<sup>19</sup> In any case, commentators invariably make links between Matthean presence statements and the Hebrew Bible, since YHWH says similar things through the prophets.<sup>20</sup> For instance, the phrase "Fear not! I am with you," says the Lord' appears a number of times in Isaiah and Jeremiah.<sup>21</sup> The Matthean presence motif might therefore suggest that Jesus has taken on the role of YHWH in offering divine support.

However, from the narrative-critical point of view, it is appropriate to ask whether the presence motif might not be read more concretely. After all, no departure to heaven occurs in the final scene, nor any formal closure as such. Instead there is an overwhelming sense of permanence and timelessness: The Matthean Jesus may still be standing there on the summit for all we know, ruling over heaven and earth.<sup>22</sup> And this is a vital point: The Matthean Jesus is not YHWH in heaven speaking through the mouth of a prophet. Instead, he is por-

17 See, for example, R. Harries, *Christ is Risen* (London: Mowbray, 1987), pp. 55-67; U. Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), pp. 634-35.

18 'But if two sit together and words of Torah are spoken between them, the *Shekinah* rests between them' (M.Aboth 3.2).

19 Michel, 'The Conclusion of Matthew's Gospel', pp. 43, 49; Bornkamm, 'The Risen Lord and the Earthly Jesus', p. 105; J.A. Ziesler, 'Matthew and the Presence of Jesus (1)', *Epworth Review* 11 (1984), pp. 55-63 (57-58); Kupp, *Matthew's Emmanuel*, pp. 192-96; S.J. Gathercole, *The Pre-existent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids, Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 77-78. It is, however, unclear whether 18.20 can support the weight often placed on it as a statement of mystical divine presence, accessible through corporate prayer. The context is juridical, and while it appears to be representative of some sort of presence, it serves to support ecclesiastical *authority* first and foremost, in a similar way to the 'binding and loosing' language (18.18). Consequently, it may be that 'concurrence' is a more accurate description of what is envisaged in 18.20 than 'presence'.

20 R.H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 596; Meier, *Matthew*, p. 373.

21 Isa. 41.10; 43.5; Jer. 1.8; 46.28.

22 Ziesler, 'Matthew and the Presence of Jesus (1)', p. 55; Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain*, p. 184.



trayed as someone who is present with his disciples bodily on earth, *throughout the entire narrative*. Jesus never leaves them physically, except in the brief interval between his crucifixion and resurrection. In narrative terms then, this is an emphatically different type of scenario from the picture of divine presence given in the Hebrew Bible and in rabbinic tradition. Unlike the Jesus of the other Gospels, Matthew's Jesus is still here, *in narrative terms*.<sup>23</sup>

### The Absence of the Risen Jesus

Having spoken of the Matthean interest in the *presence* of Jesus, the fundamental problem remains that, in our real world (outside of the narrative), Jesus is literally *absent*. Does the implied author give any indications that, in spite of his ending, he knew that Jesus is currently absent in body? This surprisingly trivial question is surprisingly difficult to answer. Perhaps the most obvious passages which suggest that Jesus is absent are those which predict the 'coming of the Son of Man' in the future. If he is to come again in the future, he is most likely not here now. But apart from these passages, there is very little in Matthew's Gospel to confirm our natural assumption that Jesus is currently absent from the earth. In the course of a detailed study of the presence and absence of Jesus, Ziesler points out that the absence material in the First Gospel is remarkably weak.<sup>24</sup> In fact, the strongest absence passage is probably the anointing at Bethany where Jesus says 'you will not always have me' to his disciples (26.11). But even this is ambiguous, since it is unclear whether this saying refers to a *long-term* absence or to the three days of Jesus' burial.<sup>25</sup> As a result, the question of Jesus' current presence or absence revolves largely on the 'coming again' passages, to which we shall now turn.

23 It is often said that the promise of the Matthean Jesus to be with his disciples 'always' means the same kind of thing as the promise of the Spirit in Luke and in John. In contrast, it will be argued here that the implied author portrays the presence of the risen Jesus in more concrete terms. The further question of Matthew's understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit remains open and in need of exploration.

24 Ziesler, 'Matthew and the Presence of Jesus (2)', p. 91.

25 A similar question arises concerning the saying about the absence of the bridegroom (9.15); since it describes how the bridegroom's sons/attendants will mourn and fast when he is taken from them, the most likely inference is that this absence concerns the burial of Jesus after his passion, not a longer-term absence after the resurrection.

### The 'Coming Son of Man'

Following the suggestion of Caird, it is one of the main contentions of this essay that the Matthean language of *παρουσία* and the 'coming Son of Man' need not refer entirely to a future return of Jesus to earth. Indeed, Thomas Kazen has pointed out that the idea of a second coming is more diverse and fluid in early Christianity than is frequently supposed.<sup>26</sup> For instance, both Luke and John speak of Jesus' absence, and this is conventionally associated with the idea of a future return. However, it may equally be interpreted as the time between death and resurrection, or between Passover and Pentecost. And as Kazen puts it, 'Even in 1 Thessalonians, Jesus' coming is a *parousia* rather than a return'.<sup>27</sup>

Kazen is right to highlight a distinction between the term *παρουσία* and 'return'. The term *παρουσία* is conventionally used in theological circles to refer to a second coming in the future, and therefore an absence now. But in general Hellenistic use the term can also have the sense of 'arrival', 'entry', 'appearance', or 'manifestation', subtly but significantly distinct from the idea of a 'return' to earth. And indeed, the most basic and general meaning of *παρουσία* is 'presence', opposite in sense to *ἀπουσία* (absence), as laid out clearly in Phil. 2.12, for instance.<sup>28</sup> It is ironic then that, in theological convention, *παρουσία* refers to a return in the future, and therefore to an effective *absence* now.

I suggest that the implied author's use of the term *παρουσία*, with an interest in *presence*, is more subtle than theological convention. First, *παρουσία* is by no means a common term, occurring only in Matthew's of the four canonical Gospels, and appearing only in Matthew 24, the first half of the Eschatological Discourse (24.3, 27, 37, 39). Furthermore, it first appears at the very beginning of the discourse, in the disciples' question which sets the tone for what is to come, and it must therefore play an important function.

After Jesus has told the disciples that the stones of the Temple will be thrown down (24.2), they ask him (24.3):

εἰπὲ ἡμῖν, πότε ταῦτα ἔσται  
καὶ τί τὸ σημεῖον τῆς σῆς παρουσίας καὶ συμτελείας τοῦ αἰῶμπος;

26 T. Kazen, 'The Coming Son of Man Revisited', *JSHJ* 5 (2007), pp.155-74 (157).

27 Ibid.

28 W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (London, New York: T&T Clark International, 1997), vol. 3, pp. 337-38; N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), pp. 462-63; N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), p. 341.

How many distinct questions are being asked here? Early church commentators often saw three,<sup>29</sup> while many contemporary scholars see two: the first ('when?') about the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, and the second ('what?') about the *παρουσία* and end times in the future.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, others read this as just one question, about a complex of closely connected eschatological events.<sup>31</sup> A narrative-critical approach suggests that the question(s) should first be considered internally, from the point of view of the disciples who are asking. In this case, it turns out that there must be just one essential question, as much concerned with the issue of divine *presence* as with possible historical or eschatological events, a point we shall steadily develop in the following argument.

Consider the phrase *συντέλεια τοῦ αἰῶνος*: Like the term *παρουσία*, this phrase is unique to Matthew among the four Gospels and appears elsewhere in the New Testament only in Heb. 9.26. However, the idea of the 'end of the age' is very frequent in Jewish apocalyptic literature, and we find *συντέλεια* combined with temporal terms such as *ἡμέρα*, *αἰών* and *καιρός* in numerous places in Daniel (e.g. Dan. 12.13).<sup>32</sup> In Matthew it appears in three main locations, all of which concern the presence or absence of Jesus/'the Son of Man' in the times leading up to the End. In terms of a narrative-critical approach, this striking phrase acts as a marker connecting passages which concern related themes but are otherwise spread over a considerable narrative distance from each other. There is even the possibility that such passages might form a kind of conversation, as I suggest here.

We first find the phrase *συντέλεια τοῦ αἰῶνος* in the Parable Discourse, where it appears in Jesus' interpretation of the Parable of the Wheat and Tares, and in the Parable of the Dragnet (13.39, 40, 49). Both of these parables are interpreted by Jesus in terms of eschatological judgement: The 'Son of Man' will send his angels to gather up the wicked but is otherwise effectively absent from the whole procedure up to and including 'the end of the age'. A question mark is thus left hanging in the air about the role and place of Jesus/the 'Son of Man' between his sowing of the good seed and the End, including the events of the End themselves. Intriguingly, the second location of *συντέλεια τοῦ αἰῶνος*, which appears in the disciples' question in 24.3 introducing the Eschatological Discourse, makes the hanging question mark all the more apparent, since it

29 Luz, *Matthew* 21-28, pp. 189-91.

30 See, for example, R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 894.

31 See, for example, Davies and Allison, *Commentary on Matthew*, vol. 3, p. 337.

32 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 429; Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain*, p.161 and p. 273 n. 29.

articulates the tension about the eschatological place and role of Jesus openly. And although the Eschatological Discourse is framed as a direct answer to the disciples' question, it is not until the third instance of the phrase *συντέλεια τοῦ αἰῶνος* that we find the clearest resolution to the narrative tension, where, at the very end of the Great Commission (and of the Gospel), Jesus makes his decisive statement of eternal presence (28.20b).

Terence Donaldson regards the *συντέλεια τοῦ αἰῶνος* thread as highly significant, especially in the Eschatological Discourse and Great Commission: 'the appearance of this term [*συντέλεια τοῦ αἰῶνος*] in two important Matthean passages dealing with the nature of the period between Jesus' passion and the end of the age cannot be coincidental'.<sup>33</sup> Donaldson has developed other narrative links between the Eschatological Discourse and the Great Commission.<sup>34</sup> He points out that both passages concern the interim period leading up to the end of the age and the church's role in it, and both characterize it by a mission to the Gentiles. Both feature a mountain setting (the Mount of Olives in the first instance; an unknown location in the second), and both feature the all-important audience of curious disciples ('but some doubted', 28.17). And furthermore, it is later on the Mount of Olives that Jesus tells his disciples that he will go ahead of them to Galilee after he is raised (26.32). These links are persuasive to Donaldson, and he suggests that Matthew intended these two passages to be read together.<sup>35</sup>

If Donaldson is correct, then I suggest that the question mark hanging over the role and presence of the Son of Man up to the End, 'flagged-up' in the Parable Discourse and then articulated by the disciples' question of 24.3, is meant to be resolved, not only by Jesus' immediate answer in the Eschatological Discourse but also by his promise of eternal presence in the final scene on the mountain.

Our supposition that the eschatological tension concerns *presence* – divine presence represented by Jesus – is supported by the wider context to the disciples' question in 24.3. The previous three chapters of the narrative have been set in the Temple (Matthew 21-23), but at this point (24.1) Jesus has just left the Temple decisively, never to return in the course of the narrative. At his departure, Jesus says to the Jerusalem authorities, 'Behold, your house is left to you desolate' (23.38). The Temple is now declared to be a wilderness – empty and abandoned – and it is '*your* house', no longer God's.<sup>36</sup>

33 Ibid., p. 161.

34 Ibid., pp. 157-58, 166-67.

35 Ibid., p. 158.

36 France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 884.

The importance of Jesus' departure from the Temple, and of the motif of presence, can be understood more clearly if we stand back from the narrative and turn to consider the *historical* author's purposes. Many commentators join in suggesting that Jesus' departure from the Temple here represents a dramatic statement of the departure of the divine presence from the Temple: As Jesus leaves, so the divine presence leaves, and the way lies open for its stones to be thrown down (24.2) as a physical sign of its spiritual desolation (24.15).<sup>37</sup> There is a rich background to this idea in the Old Testament material surrounding the exile and destruction of Solomon's Temple. Significantly, Matthew's Gospel echoes Jeremiah's predictions of doom concerning Jerusalem and its Temple more comprehensively than any of the other Gospels.<sup>38</sup> And this episode of departure is also reminiscent of Ezekiel's protracted description of the departure of the 'glory of YHWH' from Solomon's Temple (Ezekiel 10-11) before its destruction at the hand of the Babylonians. Equally, it is reminiscent of the Deuteronomistic God's threat to Solomon that the Temple would become a 'heap of ruins' if the people forsook God (1 Kgs 9.6-9), a threat obviously fulfilled at the exile. If the scholarly consensus is correct that the historical 'Matthew' was writing post-70 CE and had a keen interest in the destruction of the Temple (e.g. 22.7), then there is a strong case for seeing this whole section of the narrative (Matthew 21-25) as a narrative theodicy related to those written many hundreds of years before at the exile. The divine presence represented by Jesus is rejected by Jerusalem, and his departure from its Temple is the sign that a new destruction will take place as an act of divine judgement. In short, these chapters form a key part of the *historical* 'Matthew's' theological explanation for why the terrible events of 70 CE happened, and it is the presence of Jesus which provides the metaphorical key. We will come back to consider the historical 'Matthew's' use of metaphor and theodicy towards the end of this paper, but for now we return to the narrative, witnessing the movement of divine presence in Jesus as told by the *implied* author.

The disciples' question to Jesus in 24.3 can be seen as relating precisely to this issue of the location and manifestation ('sign') of the divine presence, now that it is no longer to be represented by the Temple itself, both literally in the historical 'Matthew's' time (post-70 CE) and symbolically in the disciples' time. In effect, the disciples are pre-empting the last sentence of the Gospel, asking for a sign that Jesus' final promise to be with them always in 28.20 is true, in the

37 Davies and Allison, *Commentary on Matthew*, vol. 3, pp. 322-23; Kupp, *Matthew's Emmanuel*, p. 94; U. Luz, *Studies in Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 6; France, *Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 883-84.

38 France, *Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 616-17.

light of his dramatic statements of the abandonment and forthcoming desolation of the Temple (23.38; 24.15).

If this is the case, how might we best express their question in 24.3 in English? As France points out,<sup>39</sup> because of the lack of an article before συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος in most manuscripts, it is linked together as a single subject with παρουσία in a way which is difficult to indicate in translation. It may best be understood as a hendiadys, so the final part of the question should perhaps be rendered as something like, 'What is the sign of your end-of-the-age παρουσία?' If so, it carries a very different sense from the more conventional rendering, 'What is the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?' (NRSV), which gives the impression that the sign refers to two distinct events (the παρουσία and 'the end of the age'), and effectively emphasizes them over the 'sign' itself as the event in question. Furthermore, how are we to translate παρουσία? Should it even be understood as an 'event', as a 'coming'? We have already highlighted a number of alternative meanings of the term, including 'presence'. Therefore, in the light of the narrative approach developed here, which emphasizes the location of divine presence, we will explore what sense may be made of the text by understanding παρουσία as 'presence'. In that case, παρουσία is not to be understood as an eschatological *event* (a 'coming') so much as a defining feature of the relationship between the risen Jesus and his disciples, specifically his 'presence' with them. In the spirit of this interpretation, a loose translation of the disciples' question in 24.3 might be, 'When will the forsaken Temple be destroyed, and what will be the sign of your eschatological presence?'

Investigation of the 'coming Son of Man' sayings can be seen to lend further support to this interpretation based on divine presence. A number of prominent scholars such as J.A.T. Robinson, F. Glasson, R.T. France, N.T. Wright (and, of course, G.B. Caird) have proposed a heavily realized eschatology, where the original 'coming Son of Man' tradition did not refer to a coming back to earth in the eschatological future so much as a going up to heaven soon after the resurrection.<sup>40</sup> What lies behind it is the simple observation that in the phrase the 'coming Son of Man', the verb for 'coming' (ἐρχομαι) can equally mean 'going'. Indeed, as France points out, there are sayings where the 'Son of Man' is expected to come both within this generation (e.g. 16.28) and also as part of the ultimate consummation (e.g. 19.28) with the result that the 'coming Son of

39 Ibid., pp. 894-95.

40 As set out in detail in Robinson (*Jesus and his Coming*), for instance.

Man' sayings in Matthew could be understood as referring to both senses of movement: *going* after the resurrection, and *coming back* at the end of time.<sup>41</sup>

The most important passage for this more realized interpretation is Jesus' reply to the High Priest at his trial: 'From now on (ἀπ' ἄρτι) you shall see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven' (26.64). This suggests that Jesus will be vindicated imminently, *from now on*, in the sight of the High Priest and his disciples 'coming on the clouds' to heaven after his passion, and certainly before the final scene on the mountain (28.16-20).

This viewpoint has many strengths, not least that it conveniently accounts for both the very imminent eschatological sayings (e.g. 16.28) and those which suggest that the 'coming' is part of the final events (e.g. 24.30). However, this interpretation has a decisive weakness, as does the more conventional view which sees the 'coming Son of Man' as entirely future: Both viewpoints assume that 'coming' implies travel from one place to another. In other words, whether the 'coming' of the Son of Man is seen as a coming-back-to-earth at the end of time or as a going-up-to-God after the resurrection, it is assumed that a *journey* is being referred to, a journey from one location to another, and at a definite point in time. But what grounds do we have for assuming this? After all, the verb ἔρχομαι in these kinds of sayings is mostly in the present tense.<sup>42</sup> This gives ἔρχομαι a sense of *continuous* (i.e. as yet incomplete) motion.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, neither a destination nor a place of departure is given; the 'Son of Man' is usually just said to be 'coming'.

These questions lead us directly into the main conclusion of this study: The 'coming Son of Man' theme is consistent with a more *continuous* view of presence than is often supposed, as Caird himself indicated in his all too brief sug-

41 R.T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1989), p. 315.

42 Present tense: 16.28; 21.9; 23.39; 24.30; 24.42; 24.44; 26.64; aorist: 10.23; 25.31. Of the two aorist examples, 25.31 clearly has a definite event in the future in mind, when the 'Son of Man' comes to sit on his throne for judgement at the End. Note that this would appear to be a 'coming' to *heaven* not earth. The other instance of an aorist 'coming' saying appears in 10.23. This is a notoriously difficult verse to interpret: Does the 'coming' refer to the End, or to the period after the Passion (cf. 26.64); or does it simply refer to the end of the disciples' short mission in Matthew 10, when Jesus comes to collect them all so that he can carry on with his own ministry? In connection, France (*Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 395-98) makes a strong case against associating this verse too strongly with the events of the End.

43 Especially when it appears in the absence of any narrative context suggesting that a specific point in time is intended (as we might find, for instance, in the many instances of the historical present, e.g. λέγει in 9.6).



gestion.<sup>44</sup> In this case, ‘coming in the clouds’ can be seen as the ‘Son of Man’s’ natural position of heavenly exaltation, his place of enthronement, and always will be until the End.

France’s interpretation is related. We cited his point above that ἔρχομαι could refer to ‘going’ after the resurrection or ‘coming’ at the End, but his belief is that this *movement* language is actually metaphorical of an *ontological state*: “The coming of the Son of Man” is thus not a description of a particular historical event but evocative language to depict his eventual vindication and sovereign authority.<sup>45</sup> The crucial difference between France’s interpretation and that put forward in this article is that while France views this language as metaphorical (‘evocative’) of the heavenly vindication of Jesus, we are suggesting that it functions in narrative terms in a more *concrete*, and a more *continual*, actualisation, as literally and eternally ‘coming on the clouds’. This aspect of the language is overlooked if one interprets it straightaway as metaphorical (although once I come out of the narrative approach at the end of this article I am bound to do so).

There are significant precedents for this idea of divine presence in the clouds: Baal (‘the rider in the clouds’ in Canaanite mythology) is described in very similar ways, as is YHWH in a number of poetic and prophetic texts in the Hebrew Bible, borrowing from the Canaanite image.<sup>46</sup> And this is also exactly what Jesus tells the High Priest he would be doing: ‘From now on, you shall see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming (ἐρχόμενον)<sup>47</sup> on the clouds of heaven’ (26.64). Taken literally, this verse states exactly the interpretation towards which we have been moving, that following this point in the narrative (i.e. post-Passion), the ‘Son of Man’ will be perpetually enthroned, ‘coming’ on the clouds of heaven ‘until the end of the age’. In narrative terms, this need not be seen as a journey, nor as referring to any point in time more specific than ‘from now on’.<sup>48</sup>

44 Caird, *Language and Imagery*, p. 268.

45 France, *Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 396–97.

46 See, for example, Deut. 33.26; Pss. 18.11; 68.5 (ET 4); 104.3; Isa. 19.1; Nah. 1.3.

47 The participle is in the present indicative and is therefore continuous in meaning.

48 This result has an interesting Christological implication. J.P. Meier (*A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus. Volume Two: Mentor, Message, and Miracles* [London: Doubleday, 1994], p. 79) has pointed out that the implied author uses the phrase ‘the coming one’ (ὁ ἐρχόμενος) like a Christological title (3.11; 11.3; 21.9; 23.39). Therefore, ‘coming’ or ‘coming on the clouds’ is part of Jesus’ own messianic nature according to Matthew’s Gospel, a constituent part of Jesus’ present existence.

### The Cosmic Mountain – A Meaning behind the Metaphors?

So far I have treated the narrative in an almost entirely literal way, appropriate to the narrative-critical approach. That is, we have not asked about the underlying meaning of the implied author's images. Let us now explore their possible metaphorical depths, by looking at the prominent mountain imagery and linking it with what I have discussed so far.

It is a general feature of the First Gospel that mountains are favoured locations for divine revelation (e.g. 5.1; 15.29; 17.1; 24.3; 28.16). In the Hebrew Bible, the mountain wreathed in clouds is frequently part of YHWH's theophany,<sup>49</sup> and it features notably in the Matthean Transfiguration (17.5). The Commissioning on the mountain (28.16-20) clearly has a close relationship with the Transfiguration. This is seen, for instance, in the implied author's use of the verb προσλέρχομαι,<sup>50</sup> which is one of his favourite words to describe how characters 'approach' Jesus to receive teaching or healing, or to question him. Twice in the narrative, and only twice at key points, this word is used with *Jesus himself* as the subject, notably in the Transfiguration (17.7) and in the final scene (28.18). In these two instances, Jesus himself 'approaches' the disciples for key Christological revelations of his risen status. And as in the Transfiguration, Dunn has pointed out that the character of Jesus in the final scene is such that we cannot tell whether he is to be viewed as an appearance on earth or an appearance from heaven.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps it is more accurate to say that the implied author is portraying both. In the final scene, Jesus is viewed as the metaphorical bridge between heaven and earth, which means that he is effectively to be found in both places, or rather in between them. This is why the implied author locates him on a mountaintop after the resurrection, or 'coming in the clouds' as the Son of Man: He is literally between heaven and earth.

The richness of this imagery becomes even more apparent when we look at the idea of the 'cosmic mountain' in ancient Near-Eastern mythology. As is well known, the cosmic mountain is the meeting place between heaven and earth, the place where divine decrees are issued (e.g. the Matthean Great Commission); and it is a place where time as we know it does not seem to exist,<sup>52</sup> which we might compare with Jesus' final statement of presence: 'I am with you *always*'. Certainly, there is a sense of timelessness and permanence about the final

49 And also Baal's. Traces of this idea are found in Ps. 48.2 and Isa. 14.13.

50 Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary*, p. 594.

51 Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, p. 124.

52 J.D. Levenson, *Sinai & Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1985), pp. 111, 122, 127, 142.

scene on the mountain, and something of the heavenly too. What Jesus says to his disciples in commissioning them is also intended for the implied reader. Likewise, Jesus' statement of presence with his disciples until the end of the age applies equally to the implied reader.

I am now in a position to flesh out that statement of presence more fully, both for the disciples and for the implied reader. As previous studies have shown, the implied author has made use of familiar scriptural themes like YHWH's promises of support ('Fear not! I am with you') and Daniel's 'coming on the clouds', coupled with the cosmic mountain. But our narrative reading, guided by Caird and the Matthean presence motif, has gone beyond the mere identification of these themes. We have argued that the implied author has reworked them into a more precise and concrete image of the current presence of Jesus. The 'Son of Man' is present with his followers through his presence in the clouds, between heaven and earth. The cosmic mountain in the final scene makes the same point: The risen Jesus is between heaven and earth. The Transfiguration makes this point even more explicitly: It is a vision of heavenly reality on a mountaintop and is therefore a clear narrative herald of the final scene. Indeed, the implied author connects the Transfiguration directly with the 'coming Son of Man' by preceding it with this statement: 'Some of those standing here shall not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming (ἐρχόμενον)<sup>53</sup> in his kingdom' (16.28). After the Transfiguration, Jesus tells his disciples that the vision which they have seen will only make sense after he is raised (17.9).<sup>54</sup> Hence, the implied author presents the Transfiguration as a blueprint of what is to come directly after Jesus is raised: There, on the high mountain, or among the clouds, or both, but in any case between heaven and earth,<sup>55</sup> Jesus is transfigured, enthroned and exalted and will be 'until the end of the age'.

53 As with nearly every other 'coming' reference which we have mentioned so far, the participle is in the present tense and is therefore continuous in sense.

54 Kupp, *Matthew's Emmanuel*, p. 83.

55 As S.J. Gathercole mentions, the mountain of the Transfiguration is a kind of 'suburb of heaven', or a 'halfway house between heaven and earth' (*The Pre-existent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* [Grand Rapids, Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2006], p. 48).

### Conclusions – Coming out of the narrative

Up to this point, I have read the Matthean apocalyptic motifs in a relatively literal way, acting on the assumption that, unless the implied author clearly indicates that a narrative device is to be read metaphorically (e.g. 'let the reader understand', 24.15), then the implied reader should see what sense can be made of a more literal reading first of all. Coming out of the narrative, though, it is possible to see that the historical author ('Matthew') uses apocalyptic imagery in narrative form as a powerful symbolic representation of the presence of Jesus. The final scene in particular is symbolic of the current situation of the Matthean community: Jesus is not directly accessible in bodily form, but then he is not completely out of touch in heaven either. He is on the symbolic mountaintop, or in the clouds: metaphorically exalted but also present as 'God with us' in spite of the calamity of the destruction of the Temple, surely a momentous event to 'Matthew' and his first readers. The risen Jesus occupies the metaphorical boundary between heaven and earth, representing each to the other, and there he is enthroned until the End. At that point, all will be revealed, and the current distinction between heaven and earth will cease to be relevant – it will be as though they will 'pass away' (24.35).

In the meantime, we can read the Matthean 'coming Son of Man' as occupying a mediatorial role between heaven and earth, a role with rich theological overtones. We noted that Matthew's final scene on the mountain possesses very close parallels to Daniel's vision of 'one like a son of man' who comes to the Ancient of Days and is given 'dominion and glory and kingship' (Dan. 7.13-14). Of course, Matt. 28.16-20 nowhere uses the term 'Son of Man'. Nevertheless, many commentators believe that the similarities are far from accidental and that Matthew's final scene is intended to be read as the fulfilment of Daniel's vision.<sup>56</sup> Beckstrom has recently explored the mediatorial role of the 'one like a son of man' in Daniel's vision, and he argues that the 'one like a son of man' can be seen as fulfilling the function of the *heavenly* High Priest entering the *heavenly* Holy of Holies, making atonement for the sins of the people like the Levitical rite on earth, described for the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16).<sup>57</sup> The cloud, a frequent symbol of theophany, is there to obscure God's glory, in case the High Priest should see God and die (Lev.16.13). In this way, Beckstrom argues, the references to 'the Son of Man' which appear on Jesus' lips in the

56 See, for example, Davies and Allison, *Commentary on Matthew*, vol. 3, p. 683; France, *Gospel of Matthew*, p. 1113.

57 E.A. Beckstrom, "The Mystery of Jesus' Teaching about "The Son of Man", *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 42 (2012), pp.70-80 (75-77).

Gospels are allusions to a *priestly* Christological role for Jesus, alongside the more familiar *regal* Christological overtones. Of course, the most extensive priestly Christology in the New Testament is not found in the Gospels but in the Letter to the Hebrews, especially in Hebrews 7-10, where Christ is portrayed as the heavenly High Priest mediating in the heavenly sanctuary, of which the earthly Temple offers but a 'copy' or 'model' (Heb. 9.24). Like Matt. 28.20, Hebrews 7-10 contains no mention of the important 'Son of Man' term. Nevertheless, the parallels and allusions are suggestive of Beckstrom's approach to Dan. 7.13-14 and indicate that we should not dismiss the idea of a priestly Christology out of hand, especially in works such as Matthew's Gospel where the sanctity and cultic role of the earthly Temple was in question.<sup>58</sup>

However, this is not to highlight the *priestly* Christological role over all others in Matthew. It is well known that Matthew's Christological presentation is particularly rich and complex; attempts to suggest that one element is dominant usually fail. And yet it is worth picking out the role of priestly mediator here, since it is so often overlooked. Indeed, when Caird made his original all too brief hint about the perpetual presence of the 'coming Son of Man' in the clouds, it was to highlight the Son of Man's role not in mediation but in *judgement*. And for Caird, this picture of perpetual presence symbolized not the eschatological Day of Judgement but the Bultmannian *krisis* of faith in the existential present. Our approach has been informed by Caird's picture of the perpetual presence of the 'coming Son of Man' but suggests a different reading, focused more on Matthew's probable historical reality in the shadow of 70 CE. Less an ever-present existential *krisis*, it is more likely that Matthew's narrative was constructed to make sense of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. The nameless but pivotal mountain of the final scene (28.16-20) and the 'Son of Man's' perpetual coming on the clouds function as symbolic narrative reminders that all of the functions of the Temple (Mount Zion) have been transferred to Jesus.<sup>59</sup> To those who have lost their cultic and geographical cen-

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58 In connection, we may note that Daniel is widely believed to have been written during the Maccabean crisis, which was precipitated partly by the desecration of the Jerusalem Temple. This offers historical parallels for Matthew's theodicy of the destruction of the Temple. Both have to deal with the absence of the cult of the earthly Temple, and both respond by emphasising the *heavenly* mediation of an *earthly* figure (i.e. 'one like a son of man').

59 There is one final point of relevance for a narrative-critical approach like mine, concerning the implied author's Mount of Commissioning. It is clearly not Mount Zion (which is where the earthly Temple was still standing), and neither is it the Mount of Olives, but it must be in Galilee (26.32). The implied author is careful to tell us that the location of this mountain is not incidental to the narrative, and neither is it to be considered as tran-

tre, Matthew presents a narrative image where Jesus is located at the cosmological interface between heaven and earth and is thereby able to offer both divine presence and heavenly mediation.

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scendent or mythological with respect to the narrative; rather, it has a definite location which the Eleven know about (28.16). There has been much speculation as to the location of this mountain. Some, such as France, believe that no specific mountain is meant so much as the general region of Galilee where the ministry of Jesus first began (*Gospel of Matthew*, p. 1110). Others point to specific locations. Davies and Allison, for instance suggest that the relevant phrase in 28.16 should be translated not 'to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them' (NRSV) but 'to the mountain where Jesus gave them commands', that is, to the mountain of 5.1 (*Commentary on Matthew*, vol. 3, p. 681). This is an attractive possibility. In support, I should note that, while the historical 'Matthew' does not supply us with a geographical location for either the mountain of 5.1 or the Mount of Commissioning, yet the logic of the narrative – *as it is told by the implied author* – is suggestive of the point that the *implied reader* knows of the mountain's location. What is a symbol to the *real reader* is a concrete reality to the implied reader, speaking powerfully of Jesus' continuing mediatorial presence with his people on earth. This is a subtle issue, and the fact that the real readers (i.e. we) are so befuddled concerning the mountain's location indicates something of the multi-layered complexity assumed in the narrative-critical approach.