

Excerpts from

## *Highlights in the Teaching of Jesus*

As was the case with the first book of the tetralogy, *Do You Understand What You Are Reading?*, so here, too, a number of brief excerpts from the contents of the second volume will be presented. These are taken from the various chapters of the book, giving an idea of the range of the topics discussed. But they by any means adequately represent the scope and depth of the book's contents. This book is not intended for specialists but for lay Christians.

*Highlights in the Teaching of Jesus*, is the English text of a book published by XP-Media in the Swedish language.

“Give us Today our Necessary Bread”

(Ch. 2. *Our Father Who Art in Heaven*)

This is the first petition properly speaking. The previous clauses were the address (“Our Father”) and the three items relating to God’s Person (“let Thy name be hallowed”, “let Thy Kingdom come” and “let Thy will be done”). All three items were expressed in the third person imperative, which implies that the person praying expressed a wish. The present petition is expressed in the more direct second person imperative, which is normally used of a direct command. In the case of a prayer to God, the imperative expresses merely

a request or a petition, since the pray-er cannot command God.

The petition is about the most basic of earthly needs: the bread necessary for each day. This has always been mankind's greatest concern, and it is reassuring that our Lord thought of this and placed it in the first place of our earthly or bodily needs. No one should ever think that praying for the bread of each day is unspiritual or unbecoming the Christian's higher calling.

By "bread" we should not understand strictly bread. This was an ancient way of speaking of food generally, and that because bread was a basic constituent of the ancient meal. Thus, "bread" here covers the whole meal. We could, in fact, go further and say that "bread" covers even all the other things that are necessary for our earthly existence. Compare, for example, 1 Tim 6:8, where the necessities of this life are called *διατροφὰς καὶ σκεπάσματα* "food and covering". The meaning of the second word covered not only clothing for the body but also bed coverings. We might, then, say that in the mind of the apostle, these would include also a roof over one's head.

The biblical context within which the bread for each day is to be understood is the giving of the mana to the Israelites in the desert. There, God supplies the necessary bread to the Hebrews. It was not enough that God had delivered the Hebrews from Egypt and that they were on their way to the promised land; they also needed the daily sustenance until they entered the land of Canaan.

Jesus himself made much of this bread (the mana), when he presented himself as the Bread come down from heaven (Jn 6:35–58). Here the physical, earthly bread becomes a

symbol of the spiritual, heavenly bread that God gives, so that those who receive it will live for ever.

Traditionally, our clause has been translated with “Give us today our daily bread”. Those who have a feeling for style, will notice at once that “today” and “daily” are a tautology (two words or phrases saying the same thing). It would have been enough if Matthew had written: “Give us our daily bread”, for that already implies each day. Lk 11:3 expresses it more clearly: “Give us our ... bread each day”.

The question here is: What does the Hellenic word ἐπιούσιος (pron.: *epiousios*), which is translated with ‘daily’ really mean? If this word signified ‘daily’, then neither Mathew nor Luke would have spoken of ‘today’ and ‘each day’ respectively, since this would be saying the same thing twice.

Because of this problem, the latest Swedish translation, *Bibeln 2000*, has rendered our clause with “Ge oss idag vårt bröd för dagen som kommer” (= “give us today our bread for the coming day”). In other words, they have translated the word *epiousios* with “dagen som kommer” (“the coming day”). In doing so, they have tried to derive the form *epiousios* from a certain grammatical construction of the Hellenic language. The Swedish translators were not the first to suggest such a translation; already in the XVIIth century they were anticipated by Salmasius and Suicer.

Of course, praying for bread “för dagen som kommer” (= “for the coming day”) stands in conflict with Mt 6:31–34: “Do not take thought for/worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow will take thought for/worry about itself”. The Swedish translators are well aware of it. But with “dagen som kommer”, *Bibeln 2000* is thinking not of the physical

bread needed for each day, but of the spiritual bread that believers will receive in the future Kingdom of God.

Such an interpretation, however, is unlikely, first, because the bread here – as in the case of Israel in the desert – relates to their daily, physical needs, and second the Swedish rendering becomes impossible because this understanding is based on a mistaken derivation of this word.

The reason for the uncertainty that translators have felt with regard to this word is that the word *epiousios* is not found in Hellenic literature before Matthew and Luke. It is possible that one of them created this word.

Because we have no other examples predating our Gospels, the only help we can expect is from later Hellenic literature. This shows the importance of looking into the evidence of the entire history of the Hellenic language, not just a century or two around the New Testament times, as has been the practice of New Testament scholars until now.

As I have discussed in detail the scholarly debate on this term in my book *New Testament Language and Exegesis*, pp. 61–69, here, I shall content myself with simply presenting the result of my research without the technical evidence.

The greatest linguist and scholar of the ancient Church, Origenes, derived the term from the preposition ἐπί (*epi* = ‘on’, ‘for’, etc.) and the substantive οὐσία (*ousia* = ‘substance’, ‘substistence’, ‘property’, etc.). Origenes argued that our term had been formed in the same way as the adjective περιούσιος (*periousios* from the preposition *peri* = ‘about’, etc. and *ousía* = ‘substance’, ‘property’, etc.), which described how God looked upon Israel as his own possession / his own people / people that constituted God’s property. Hence the term is often translated with “chosen [people]”.

Origenes' explanation of the formation and meaning of *epiousios* was exactly right. *Periousios* and *epiousios* are formed in the same way, follow the Hellenic rules of derivation to the full, and the resultant meaning is the one that suits the tenor of the whole clause: *epiousios* means 'necessary [for our subsistence]', not 'daily'. The idea of the 'day' is already expressed by 'today' ("Give us *today* our *epiousios* bread"). Thus, what Matthew wrote was: "Give us today our *necessary* bread".

This meaning of *epiousios* is the meaning recognized also by such great Hellenic Christian authors as Basilios (IV A.D.), Gregorios of Nyssa (IV A.D.), John Chrysostomos (IV-V A.D.), Theophylaktos (VII A.D.), whose mother tongue was a form of Hellenic that was extremely close to the language of the New Testament, but more correct and upgraded, as well as by Byzantine lexica such as *Etymologicum Magnum* and the encyclopedic lexicon *Souda*.

Finally, I might here refer to two texts in the OT, which help us understand the background to the meaning of *epiousios*. Job 23:10 speaks of treasuring "the words of his mouth more than *my daily bread*" (NIV), and Prov 30:8 states: "Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only *my daily bread*" (NIV). In both quotes, the phrase "my daily bread" translates the Hebrew *hoq*, which does not mean 'daily'! This word means '[appropriate/allotted] portion', 'something prescribed', 'due', 'law', 'statute', etc. In contexts such as Job 23:10 and Prov 30:8 the word signifies the 'ordained amount', 'the necessary portion' and the like. Thus, the NIV translation of Job 23:10 and Prov 30:8 as "my daily bread" is mistaken. The translators have simply carried the meaning they sensed in Mt 6:11 and Lk 11:8 over to these OT passages. These texts recall the commandment in

Ex 16:16–17 that each Israelite was to gather of the mana according to his need, and irrespective of whether anyone had gathered too much or too little, the mana in the vessel was the allotted portion. It was the amount that was necessary for every day. Similarly, Jesus told the disciples to pray each day for their necessary bread.

**“And do not Allow us to Enter into Temptation  
but Deliver us from the Evil one”**

*(Ch. 2. Our Father Who Art in Heaven)*

This verse has caused a lot of uncertainty among translators. English translations have normally rendered the first part by “Lead us not into temptation”. This gives the impression that God is in the habit of leading his children into temptation and he is, therefore, requested not to do so. Since this is logically contrary to the character of God and is also contradicted by Jas 1:13: “God ... does not tempt anyone”, the Swedish translators of *Bibeln 2000* have softened the word “temptation” by rendering with “och utsätt oss inte för prövning”<sup>1</sup> (“and do not expose us to testing”).

The Hellenic word here is the substantive *πειρασμός* (*peirasmos*, pron.: *pirasmos*), whose meaning is determined by the related verb *πειράζω* (*peirazo*, pron.: *pirazo*), which, however, does not occur in the “Lord’s Prayer”. The meanings of the verb *peirazo* fluctuate between ‘teasing’, ‘testing’ and ‘tempting’. There is a difference between

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<sup>1</sup> The *Folkbibeln* renders the verb similarly though not the substantive ‘prövning’/‘frestelse’: “Och för oss inte in i frestelse”.

‘testing’ and ‘tempting’. To ‘test’ implies to set someone to the test in order to see how he will react, or in order to show that the person in question is a solid, good person with firm character. Thus, in Gen 22:1 the Hebrew *nsh* is in the LXX translated by a form of *peirazo*: “God tested Abraham”, when he demanded of him to offer Isaac. Here, God’s purpose was not to cause Abraham to fall, but to bring to the open Abraham’s faith and obedience through this test. The fact that God had already provided a ram to take Isaac’s place, shows that God was not tempting Abraham/putting a stumblingblock before him in order to fall, as some think.

On the other hand, to ‘tempt’ means to want to cause someone to fall. This is always evil in itself. This can be illustrated by Satan’s temptation of Jesus (Mt 4:1; Lk 4:2): “Jesus was being tempted (another form of *peirazo*) by the Devil”. Here, the Devil was not trying to vindicate Jesus’ character and approved standing before God, but rather to trip him to fall away from his obedience, dependence and faithfulness to God.

A third meaning of *peirazo*, found in the NT, is when Jesus ‘teased’ Philippos by asking him: “Where shall we buy enough bread for all these to eat?” (Jn 6:6). Here, practically all translations have adopted this rendering: “This he said *to test* him”. But how does this meaning harmonize with the immediately following explanation: “for He himself knew what he was going to do”? If Jesus already knew what he was going to do, why should he test Philippos? What was he trying to find out about Philippos that he did not already know? Obviously, he did not want to bring out Philippos’ faith, or character, as was the case with Abraham. The reason why these translations have rendered the verb *peirazo* here with ‘test’, is owing to the limited evidence they have

investigated with regard to the Hellenic language. The verb *peirazo* is used also with the meaning of ‘tease’. And this sense is perfectly applicable here: Jesus teased Philippos with this question, since he knew what he was going to do.

In our text (Mt 6:13) the meaning is neither ‘tease’ nor ‘test’ but ‘tempt’. The attempt of *Bibeln 2000* to avoid the problem that the prospect of temptation lays before us in Mt 6:13, has failed its purpose. The problem does not lie in the word *peirasmos* (= ‘temptation’) but in the verb translated “*lead us not*”.

In the volume *Do You Understand what You Are Reading?*<sup>2</sup> I have dealt at some length with Jesus’ saying about “hating one’s parents”, etc. Although Luke expressed it quite raw “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and his mother and his wife and his children ... he cannot be my disciple”, what he really meant – as we saw – was “if anyone loves his father and mother and wife and children *more than me*”. In an analogous way, what Matthew means here by “*lead us not into temptation*” is “*And do not allow us to enter into temptation*”, that is, when we are being carried away helplessly and are about to give in to temptation, *hinder Thou us!* As James explains, “Everyone is tempted, when he is lured and enticed by his own desires”. The prayer here is for God to step in and hinder us from getting into temptation; in other words, to keep us from giving in and performing what we are tempted to do!

That this is the meaning is shown by the following parallel thought: “But deliver us from the evil one”. Now this request could not have been addressed to a God who *leads* his people into temptation, but it can be prayed to a God who

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<sup>2</sup> Chapter Five: Principles of Interpretation.

desires to help his people from getting into temptation, when our human weakness is beginning to give in to it. Thus, “do not lead us into temptation” really means “do not allow us to get into temptation”. There is a world of difference between the two.

The Hellenic word for ‘evil one’ is in the genitive and this form can be either masculine or neuter. Translations have normally taken it as neuter and rendered it with “from evil”. But in Biblical parlance ‘evil’ is not a thing or a state or a condition but it is essentially a person: the Evil one. Jesus’ whole ministry is oriented towards a battle with the Powers of evil, the so-called demons, and especially with the supreme evil power, that is, Satan or the Devil. It is from his clutches that the believer here prays to be delivered.

The “Lord’s Prayer” ends here according to the two oldest manuscripts (Sinaiticus and Vaticanus) and a few later ones, while according to the great majority of manuscripts it continues: “For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever, amen”. The critical editions of the Hellenic text and consequently, most modern translations, omit these words, because they suppose them to have been added later. On internal, theological grounds, however, there is nothing in these words that might have rendered them out of place in the “Lord’s Prayer”. They only affirm God’s royal rule, mighty power and glory, as the One who is able to keep them from the wiles of the tempter.

## “Is the Kingdom of God Present or Future in the Teaching of Jesus”

### (Ch. 3. *The Kingdom of God*)

For any believer, a very important question about the KG must be the time of its coming. That is, does Jesus teach that the KG is already present or that it is going to come sometime in the future? If the KG was the heart of Jesus' teaching, then this question must be extremely important and relevant for believers. The question, therefore, is not merely of scholarly interest, but a basic tenet of the Christian Faith. Here an attempt will be made to briefly and simply discuss this very crucial and complex issue.

The question of whether the KG in teaching of Jesus was a present or future reality has been discussed in depth by New Testament scholars since the last part of the nineteenth century. This discussion has actualized three questions: (a) What is the essence of the KG?, (b) How does the KG relate to Jesus' person and work? and (c) When does the KG arrive? Three views have emerged from this discussion, the first of which has been of limited importance and duration.

The first view was that of the German theologian Albrecht Ritschl, who, influenced by Emmanuel Kant's idealistic philosophy, taught that the KG was primarily ethical: it consisted in the organization of redeemed humanity, whose actions were motivated by love. Ritschl's teaching led primarily to two subdivisions among his followers: (a) the non-eschatological, spiritual, individualistic interpretation, whereby the KG lay in the experience of a person's own heart, thus reducing the essence of Christianity to some

general principles, like God is the Father of all human beings and all human beings are brothers (and sisters)<sup>3</sup> and (b) what came to be called the Social Gospel, first in Germany<sup>4</sup> and later in America<sup>5</sup>, which emphasized social love and solidarity. Though Ritschl's interpretation has no longer any theological significance, it actually forms the background and the place of origin of social gospel ideas, emptied of the message of salvation, that we sometimes meet even in our own time.

The second view of the KG came from Ritschl's own son in law, Johannes Weiss. In 1892 he wrote a brief but strong reaction against Ritschl, a little book entitled *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*.<sup>6</sup> In Weiss' opinion, the KG was future, eschatological and apocalyptic. It was opposed by the kingdom of Satan. The KG would erupt suddenly by the power of God, sweeping away the present world order. Weiss' line was continued by Albert Schweitzer, the famous humanist-doctor of Lambaréné, Gabon, and Nobel prize winner in 1952. In Schweitzer's writings the line of Weiss about the KG became known as "consistent-, futuristic-, or thoroughgoing eschatology".<sup>7</sup>

Schweitzer believed that when Jesus sent his disciples on their mission (Mk 6:7–13 = Mt 10:1-15), he did not expect to see them again, because in the mean time (a matter of weeks) the KG would erupt. Jesus staked everything on this belief. When he saw that time went, the disciples returned to him, and God had not set up his kingdom, he felt that he had been betrayed and had lost face. Since he could not live with his

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<sup>3</sup> So, for example, ADOLF VON HARNAK in 1886.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. C. BLOMhardt, c. 1900 and L. RAGAZ in 1911.

<sup>5</sup> S. MATTHEWS in 1897 and F.G. PEABODY in 1900.

<sup>6</sup> The original German title was *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes*.

<sup>7</sup> In German "Konsequente Eschatologie".

failure, he decided, in a heroic manner, to go to Jerusalem, provoke the Jewish authorities to put him to death as a last, desperate attempt to force God to establish his kingdom on earth. Thus, Jesus died the death of a deluded religious fanatic. Schweitzer's interpretation of the KG as future and eschatological became the standard view of German theology until quite recently and is still held by not a few.

A reaction to the German futuristic eschatology, appeared in Britain through the work of C.H. Dodd of Cambridge. This was the third view or interpretation of the KG. Dodd published a little book on *The Parables of the Kingdom* (1935), in which he claimed that in the teaching of Jesus the KG was a present reality. He therefore spoke of "Realized eschatology", that is, the eschaton (= the matters belonging to the end-time, among which the KG is the crowning act) has already been realized through Jesus. For Dodd, the KG was present in and through Jesus' miracles of healing and castings out of demons. Although refined in various ways, the interpretation of Dodd has become the preponderant view in the English-speaking world and has even penetrated Germany.

Dodd's view may sound wonderful to the uninitiated, as he connected the KG with Jesus' person and works of healing and castings out of demons. What may not be equally obvious to the non-theological believer are the problems that beset this interpretation. Since it is impossible here to go into details – which would demand a technical discussion – I shall exemplify with a few texts some of the difficulties, which render Dodd's view untenable.

For his interpretation of the KG as present or realized, Dodd capitalized on Mt 12:28 (= Lk 11:20). In that text we read: "But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the

kingdom of God *has come* upon you” (NIV). To the same effect translate the NAB, the NASB, and the NRSV. The Hellenic word behind the words ‘has come’ is *ephthasen* (ἐφθασεν). This is an *aorist* (one of the past tenses of Hellenic) of the verb *phthano*, which normally means ‘to arrive’, ‘to come’. Thus, Dodd, like the translations mentioned, took this word at face value and interpreted it as “has come”. This word is his main stay for his view that when Jesus uttered these words, the kingdom of God had actually arrived.

But Dodd and his followers had missed a very important fact about the use of this word in the Hellenic language. This NT verb form – as well as the corresponding verb forms of many other verbs in Hellenic – is often used in a special idiomatic way. When used in this way, *ephthasen* does not mean ‘has arrived’/‘has come’ but ‘is about to arrive’ or ‘will arrive’! The meaning is not past but future! This form is used with a future sense, when the speaker wants to emphasize two things: (a) the certainty that someone/something will arrive and (b) the imminence of the arrival, i.e. it will arrive/come in no time!<sup>8</sup> Thus, what Jesus actually says in Mt 12:28 is not that the KG has arrived, but that if I though the Spirit of God drive out the demons, then the KG is about to break in/to come upon you (and overtake you in your obstinacy and unbelief). The words in parenthesis explain the import and force of “upon you”. When interpreted in the

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<sup>8</sup> I have discussed these problems in several of my technical studies on the Kingdom of God. See, “Son of Man, Kingdom of God and Jesus’ Self-Understanding” (*Tyndale Bulletin* 40, 1989, pp. 3–23 and 40.2, 1989 pp. 223–238); “Kingdom of God/Kingdom of Heaven” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, pp. 417–430; *The Development of Greek and the New Testament*, pp. 261–278; “The Kingdom of God in John and the Synoptics” in A. Denaux (ed.), *John and the Synoptics*, pp. 473–480; “The Kingdom of God. Common and Distinct Elements in John and the Synoptics” in R. Fortna – T. Thatcher (eds.), *Jesus in Johannine Tradition: New Directions*, pp. 125–134.

proper light of Hellenic grammar, semantics, and communication, this saying affirms that when Jesus spoke these words, the KG was still future, but it was *certain* and *imminent*. Thereby, Jesus was warning the unbelieving Pharisees, urging them to repentance, whereas if the KG had already come, it would have been too late for a warning, and, besides, they would have known of it anyway!

This example of misunderstanding as to how language functions, has led to wrong translations, to wrong preaching, and to wrong theology. That such misunderstandings concern such an important matter as the Kingdom of God – the most central theme in the teaching of Jesus – is really frightening. At the same time, this example shows how important it is to read and understand the original text correctly.

There are other problems with the Realized eschatology view as well. Jesus came to establish the KG among his faithful. If the KG had already come at the time when Jesus spoke these words, how are we to understand his continued ministry? Why is he still on earth? And why does he have to go to the cross? – if the KG could come apart from it. And is it true, as Dodd maintained, that the KG consists in the miracles of healing and the driving out of demons? Is this the essence of the KG? And how does it come about that at the Last Supper Jesus says: “I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God” (Mk 14:24, similarly Mt 26:29). If the KG had already come, why is Jesus speaking of it at the Last Supper as something still future?

The arguments against the Realized Eschatology view could be multiplied. But the above brief evidence is enough to show that the KG itself had not come during Jesus’ ministry. Jesus is the Agent of the KG. He, as Son of Man, is

the Chosen One of God through whom the KG comes. The Son of Man's calling was to give his life "a ransom for many": the cross! Since the Son of Man was active on earth, since his miracles of healing and drivings out of demons were the Son of Man's attacks on the kingdom of evil, since by them Jesus was overcoming the strong man (= Satan) and robbing him of his spoils, and finally, since the KG is mediated through Jesus, the presence and activity of Jesus implied that the KG was *potentially present* in his teaching and work.

Thus, the correct view seems to be to speak of *Potential Eschatology*, not Realized Eschatology. Potential Eschatology means that the KG is potentially present in Jesus, because he is the One who brings it and he is now here. It is potentially present, because it has not yet come. It awaits the cross and the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit, when people by faith in his atoning work, can enter the KG; they can do his will – as the "Lord's Prayer" indicated: "Thy kingdom come, [that is,] Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt 6:10).

And yet, there is one further qualification to be made. The resurrection of Jesus and the Pentecost opened the door to the KG. People begin to burst in. The new life in Christ has certainly made its appearance and the will of God is often done on earth. But it is not done "as it is in heaven"! "But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him" (Heb 2:8). There is a future perspective about the KG, which awaits the end-time. Then the KG will come in all its power and glory. And this is the hope of the Church.

Thus, we can certainly say that the door to the KG is now opened. People can believe in Christ and enter the KG now, by faith. They can begin to live in the spirit of the KG and in

its power and grace. But the full realization of the KG is still future, looking forward to the final consummation of all things in Christ, when, as St Paul expresses it, “all things will be summed up in Christ” (Eph 1:10). Then, God’s will will be really done!

## “The Son of Man in the Teaching of Jesus”

### (Ch. 4. *The Son of Man*)

#### *a. Introductory Remarks*

The first thing that stands out so conspicuously in Jesus’ use of the expression ‘Son of Man’ is that the comparative ‘like’ has been dropped. Daniel had spoken of ‘One *like* a son of man’ but Jesus speaks simply of ‘*the* Son of Man’. We may, therefore, ask: How did the ‘One *like* a son of man’ become ‘*the* Son of Man’?

The process had started already when Daniel identified the ‘SM’ with the Most High—*‘elyônîn*. It was continued by 1 Enoch, who, likewise, after his initial presentation – ‘One whose countenance had the appearance of a man’ – abandoned the circumlocution and spoke simply of ‘*that* Son of Man’. This was elevated to the titular status of a supernatural Messiah, who was also described as ‘Anointed One’, ‘Elect One’, and ‘Righteous One’. But even so, in 1 Enoch we have only a description of the Son of Man and his actions, not an identification with a concrete person.

It is only in the New Testament that Daniel’s ‘One like a son of man’ becomes ‘*the* Son of Man’. There are two

important points to note here: (a) the Danielic *like* is dropped and (b) the indefinite 'One like' becomes definite '*the* [Son of Man]'. The significance of these changes is the following: in Hellenic, the definite article '*the*' was originally a demonstrative pronoun: '*that*'. When, in time, the demonstrative pronoun assumed the meaning of the definite article, the original meaning of '*that*' lingered on and was often the force behind the article '*the*'. This appears to be the case here. When Jesus speaks of himself as '*the* Son of Man', what he really implies is that he is '*that* Son of Man', that is, the Son of Man, of whom Daniel had spoken. Hereby Jesus was making the supreme claim: he was covertly claiming that he was that heavenly Figure, that Non-human Messiah, that everlasting King and that final Judge that Daniel had depicted as 'One *like* a Son of Man'.

Now we can begin to see what depth is hidden behind this 'innocent', strange and obscure description that became Jesus' most beloved self-designation. And we can perhaps understand why it is of such central importance that we study the life, words, and works of Jesus in the light of his claim to be *that* Son of Man.

But Jesus did not merely limit himself to the meaning and content of the Danielic 'SM'. He raised it to the level of a messianic title, and added such characteristics as sufferings and death, which were unheard of before in connection with this Figure. And having made these modifications, he identified himself as the Son of Man, the One and Only. In all this, Jesus was giving expression to his conviction that the true Messiah of God could not be a literal descendant of David, that is, a purely human messianic king, who with arms and soldiers would drive out the Romans and free his people from slavery. In fact, Jesus never raised the political

issue, rejecting the earthly kingship that was proffered to him (Jn 6:14–15). Jesus saw himself as an other-worldly, non-human, heavenly, transcendent Messiah – cf. his words to Pilate: “my kingdom is not of this world” (Jn 18:36) – who, to be sure, for the present was veiled in human infirmity, he was the recipient of contempt, ridicule, and rejection, but who, one day would rise in all his divine majesty and glory to be the Savior and the eschatological Judge of all men.

With these preliminary, general remarks, we will now go on to investigate the ways in which Jesus uses this concept and what meaning and content he attaches to it, in other words, what the SM title tells us of Jesus.

#### *b. Different Kinds of Son of Man Sayings*

If we analyze the context and the content of the Son of Man sayings we will find that these sayings can be divided into several groups. This, is, of course, an artificial classification, but it is helpful in bringing home to us the immense variety of theological significance that the Son of Man concept covers, and consequently, the richness of the person of Jesus. Research into the Son of Man question has led New Testament scholars to dividing all of the synoptic SM sayings into three categories: 16 sayings dealing with the SM’s *Earthly Life and Work*; 27 sayings dealing with the SM’s *Sufferings and Death*; and 26 sayings dealing with the SM’s *Resurrection and Exaltation*. I repeat again that this classification is not made in the gospels; it is simply a practical and helpful way for us to survey the wide context

and content of meaning in Jesus' use of this title about himself.

## “The Confession of Peter”

### (Ch. 6. *Jesus' Messiahship*)

But Jesus returns to Israel's land, where, however, he finds no peace. He comes to the Sea of Galilee, he goes up on a mountain, where he heals sick persons of all kinds (15:31) and then he feeds the four thousand (15:32–38). Thereafter he leaves them and visits the area of Magadan,<sup>9</sup> where the Pharisees and the Sadducees demand a sign from him, which, however, he refuses to give (Mt 16:1–4). And with that, he travels to the other side of the lake. He continues his journey northward and arrives at Caesarea Philippi in the lower recesses of Mt Hermon. He is at the fringes of non-Israelite territory. Here he puts the all-important question to his disciples: “Who do men say that the Son of Man is?” And on hearing various suggestions (such as John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah), he wants to know their own opinion: “But you, who do you say that I am?”

It would appear that all of the above movements, his broodings, his cogitations, the anxiety he experienced, the apparent purposelessness of his various journeys, are to be explained in the light of this very question. It was a question that was growing in him, and having once again found himself probably on non-Israelite soil, he finally decided to

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<sup>9</sup> This place cannot be identified with any known locality. It could be either on the East or on the West side of the Sea of Galilee.

put it to his disciples: Who do you think I am? He no longer cared for what the Jewish leaders thought or even for the opinion of the ungrateful populace, to which he had so freely bestowed his benefactions. At this point, he was deserted by all. Everyone had turned his back on him. After having walked up and down the whole country doing good to those who were oppressed: feeding, healing, forgiving, teaching, encouraging, and giving them hope, he now found himself alone with only twelve men with him (and one of them was going to prove a traitor).

It was in this context of rejection and dissension by those he had benefited, when his life's work – humanly speaking – was crumbling to the ground, that we must understand his question to the disciples and his words to Peter following the latter's confession. No sooner had Jesus put the question "But you, who do you say that I am?" than Peter's answer comes ringing: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" (Mt 16:16). The answer is given spontaneously and naturally, without effort and without art. It is simple and direct. And Jesus recognizes it as such and rejoices. As at the baptism, the heavens had been opened and the voice from heaven had said: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!" (Mt 3:17), so here, too, the Father who guided every detail in his life, inspired one of his disciples to bear witness to him: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16).

This answer gladdened the heart of Jesus. Here, at last, were a few persons who had shared his toils and had stood with him in his conflicts with his detractors, who had understood – even if imperfectly – who he was and why he was here. As the chief of the disciples, Peter had spoken on behalf of all of them. And yet for Jesus, it was not an insight

that had come from Peter's mind but a revelation from God. Thereby God was once again confirming that Jesus was his beloved Son in whom he was well pleased, and on whom he had conferred the office of the Christ, the anointed King Messiah, who was to carry out his good pleasure for the salvation of the world.

The above circumstances explain Jesus' joyful reaction to Peter's words: "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, because it was not flesh and blood [i.e. your human nature] that revealed this [*sc.* that I am the Christ] to you but my Father who is in heaven".<sup>10</sup> Under God's inspiration Peter had given expression to who Jesus actually was. He was not a rabbi, he was not a prophet, he was not merely a man of God; He was *the* Son of God, the One, who as Son of Man, would redeem humanity and reign as its King for ever and ever.

### “Jesus’ Messiahship” (Ch. 6. *Jesus’ Messiahship*)

But the kind of Messiah that Jesus was was very different from the popular national Davidic messiah that the majority of the Jews looked for, a national hero who would free them from the Roman yoke. Jesus' different view of the nature of the Messiah is set forth in Mt 22:41–45. He asks the Pharisees: Whose son do you think the Messiah is? They

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<sup>10</sup> The rest of Jesus response is not germane to our present theme of Jesus' messiahship, and any treatment of it would only sidetrack our discussion into irrelevant matters. See my book *Peter and the Rock*, pp. 69–113.

answer, David's, obviously. And then he confronts them with a quotation of David's own word in Ps 110:1 "The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit Thou on my right hand till I put Thy enemies under Thy footstool'". And so Jesus demands: "If David calls him Lord, how, then, can he be his son?" This question could not be answered on their own premises; feeling that they had been worsted, they kept quiet about this matter ever since.

As we also saw in the previous chapter, the most popular view of the expected messiah was that he would be a Warrior, like his 'father' David. He would take up arms against Israel's enemies and would drive them out of the land. And there were, in fact, many an individual who raised such messianic claims both before and after Jesus, drew after them thousands of Jews, but who, in their battles against the Romans had been annihilated or scattered (see e.g. Acts 5:36: Theudas; 5:37: Judas from Galilee; 21:38: the Egyptian). Jesus rejected such a view of Israel's messiah. That is why the Gospels never ever hint at any attempt from Jesus' side to oppose the Romans, although he was as aware as any of their brutality. Moreover, this, too, explains, the very infrequent use of the title *Χριστός* (*Christos* = "Messiah") in the Gospels; it was liable to be misunderstood and to be construed of opposition to Rome. As Jesus declared to Pilate, "my kingdom is not of this world" (Jn 18:36).

Instead, Jesus was a Messiah who would effect a spiritual deliverance for his people, a deliverance from their sins and bring them into a new relationship with their God and Creator. The real slavery of the Jewish people was not to the Romans but to their own sin. That is why Jesus never ever hints any antagonism against the Romans, as so many other prophetic and messianic impostors did both before and after

him. Instead, his picture of the Messiah that Israel needed was based on two OT concepts: the concept of the Suffering Servant of Isa 52:13–53:12 and the concept of the heavenly transcendental ‘Son of Man’ of Dan 7:13–14. Of the Son of Man he had spoken frequently in the past. But now the time had come to bring in the other concept as well: ‘the Suffering Servant of the Lord’. Jesus accepted the role of the Suffering Servant as part of his messianic calling, thus joining together or rather conflating this concept with that of the ‘Son of Man’. Isaiah had written:

He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows ... he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed ... the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all (*NIV*).

The conflation of the two concepts of the Suffering Servant and of the ‘Son of Man’ is clearly seen in Jesus’ words (Mk 10:45 = Mt 20:28): “For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many”. This formulation represents the gist of Isa 53, but had been missed thoroughly by the Jewish exegetes. That is why Jesus’ mention of sufferings of the Son of Man puzzled them, eliciting the question “We have heard from the Law that the Christ [= Messiah] remains for ever. How can you, then, say that the Son of Man must be lifted up [*sc.* on a cross, in other words, die]? Who is this Son of Man” (cf. Jn 12:34) – of whom you are speaking and of whom we know nothing? Here we are at the very heart of the messianic message of Jesus.

It was insightfulness into these words of Isaiah that explain the new direction in teaching and emphasis that Jesus

takes. For immediately after Peter's confession, Jesus begins something new. He teaches them about his messianic duty to die on behalf of his people and to rise again in the glory of his Father:

From that time Jesus began to show to his disciples that he must go up to Jerusalem and suffer much from the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and be raised on the third day (Mt 16:21 = Mk 8:31 = Lk 9:22).

This was the prospect that had confronted Jesus during all this time and he had faced it alone. His disciples were unconscious of what went on in his mind, in his soul, and in his spirit. However, with the confession of Peter, a new scenario appears on the horizon, only to be crushed a few minutes later, when Peter, on hearing of suffering and death, becomes the mouthpiece of Satan, trying to dissuade Jesus from the narrow path of God's calling (Mt 16:21–23). The prospect of suffering was not popular with the disciples, but it was the way Jesus had chosen to go. In later chapters of the synoptic Gospels (Mt 17:22–23 = Mk 9:31 = Lk 9:44 and Mt 20:18 = Mk 10:33–34 = Lk 18:31–34) we will find that Jesus twice more prophesies about his coming death and every time the prediction becomes increasingly more detailed.<sup>11</sup> Peter's exhortation to evade suffering, gives Jesus the opportunity to enter into some soul-searching matters about his disciples' relation to him:

Then Jesus said to his disciples: if anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. Whoever wants to save his life (ψυχή, *psyche*, pron.: *psichi* =

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<sup>11</sup> See C. C. CARAGOUNIS, *The Son of Man*, pp. 192–201.

‘soul’, ‘life’) will lose it, and whoever loses his life (*psichi*) for my sake will save it. For what shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his own life (*psichi*)? (Mt 16:24–26).

These words were in effect Jesus’ declaration of his decision to accept his messianic calling, and to make it clear to his followers that they would have to pay a price, if they decided to follow him.

## “The Divine Principle of Weakness”

### (Ch. 7. *Discipleship*)

When surveying the advent of our Lord, we are greatly astonished to find that things do not happen in the ordinary human way, in other words, not as we would have expected them. In the literature of ancient Hellas we read of many appearances of divine beings. For some reason or other, various gods or goddesses find it necessary to reveal themselves to humans. But such appearances are normally opportunities for exhibiting the power and splendour of the deity in question. There are also appearances in a lowly human form for a brief moment, but when this happens, it is on account of some special reason.<sup>12</sup>

The story of Jesus, however, is entirely different. Here, the Creator of the universe, instead of stepping into the realm of human existence in majesty and omnipotence, with his

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. for example, the transformations of Athena in Homeros’ *Odysseia*: to Telemachos (II. 267 ff.), to Odysseus (VII. 19 ff.), and to Odysseus and his friends (XXII. 205 ff.).

glorious splendour, overawing the small, insignificant creatures called men and achieving his purposes by the sheer fiat of his divine power, deigns to execute his eternal counsel through the means of self-giving love. He comes in weakness rather than in power; lowly rather than glorious; self-giving rather than self-exalting; offering rather than demanding. Weakness and self-giving become the great divine principle at work in the NT. The NT idea of discipleship has its foundation in this 'divine weakness' and self-giving love.

This is supremely exemplified through Christ. Although, in his pre-existence, the divine person who appeared as Jesus Christ, was in the form of God, he emptied himself of his divine prerogatives and took on himself the form of a slave (Phil 2:6–7). Thus, he did not come as a royal prince to assume power and dominion over the affairs of men – which would in itself have been a great act of condescension – but more radically, he came as a mere human being, with no pretences, no claims, just as a lowly servant of men. Here is divine power in its most glorious form! The utterly powerful becomes the utterly weak. He humbled himself and became obedient all the way to death – even the death of the cross! (Phil 2:8) “Though he was son, he learned obedience by the things he suffered” says the author of Hebrews (Heb 5:8). And Jesus himself had pointed out to his disciples “Learn from me, for I am meek and lowly” (Mt 11:29).

Jesus was the First and the Greatest 'Disciple'. He affirms his 'discipleship' in Jn 5:19: “The Son cannot do anything on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing”; “the works that the Father has given me to perform, these works that I am doing, bear witness on my behalf that the Father has sent me” (Jn 5:36; also 10:25); “He who sent me ... has not left me alone, because I always do what pleases Him” (Jn 8:29).

Jesus was the perfect 'Disciple' as he was the perfect Servant.

The above observations imply that we must study the meaning of discipleship in the NT in the light of Jesus' event and mission. "As the Father has sent me, so, too, I am sending you" (Jn 20:21), and see our discipleship as an extension of his 'discipleship'. And every time the going becomes tough, we must think of him, who went before us.

Why God decided to reach out to the world in weakness and servanthood rather than in power and glory is a source of great wonder. This becomes the great principle behind the workings of God in the world. God is not interested in showing His omnipotence, in compelling and coercing obedience to Himself by sheer power; He rather wants to draw us to Himself by a self-giving love that surpasses understanding. This is why the appearance of our Lord was in weakness: born as a helpless Child that had to be taken to Egypt to escape Herods' murderous intentions. He lived a very precarious life, constantly vulnerable, persecuted, mistreated, and at the end betrayed, condemned, and crucified. Here is weakness at its deepest point. And yet this 'weakness' is transformed to the greatest force in the history of the world. "He was crucified in weakness, but he lives by the power of God. We, too, are weak in him, but we shall live with him by the power of God" (2 Cor 13:4). The power of this weakness has drawn, enthused, and captivated countless millions of men and women during the past two thousand years, transformed them and led them on to victories with the banner of Christ's 'weakness'. It was God's intention that through this 'weakness' he would conquer the most powerful strongholds and bring them to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor 10:4-5). It is the acceptance of weakness, of self-giving –

rather than the exercise of sheer power – that releases the divine saving energy, before which nothing can stand. It was through his weakness, humility, and self-giving that Jesus came to exercise the most powerful influence on earth. It is in this context that we must view Jesus’ call to discipleship: “Follow me!”

## “Take up your Cross and and Follow Me”

### (Ch. 7. *Discipleship*)

Following the confession of Jesus by Peter in Caesarea Philippi (Mt 16:16 = Mk 8:29 = Lk 9:20), Jesus ordered the disciples to keep the matter secret, and then proceeded to speak of his coming sufferings (Mt 16:21 = Mk 8:31 = Lk 9:22). At such an unpleasant prospect Peter reacted promptly, trying to turn away Jesus’ mind from such thoughts, a move that elicited from Jesus the well-known sharp rebuke to Peter, preserved by Matthew and Mark (Mt 16:22–23 = Mk 8:32–33).

This gave Jesus the occasion to spell out for the disciples his terms, if they wanted to follow him and be with him:

Then Jesus said to his disciples: “If anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life (ψυχή = *psyche*, pron.: *psichi*, ‘soul’, ‘life’<sup>13</sup>) will lose it, but whoever loses his life (ψυχή) for

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<sup>13</sup> In the NT the term ψυχή (cf. ‘psychology’) is used both with the sense of ‘soul’ as well as of ‘life’. In the first two occurrences ‘life’ is the more fitting meaning, since

my sake will find it. For what shall it profit a man, if he gains the whole world but forfeits his own soul (ψυχή)” (Mt 16:24–26).<sup>14</sup>

Jesus had just spoken of going to Jerusalem, where sufferings and death awaited him. Although this would be followed by resurrection, what registered with the disciples was the unpleasantness of suffering. Until now, following Jesus had been an exhilarating experience. In Jesus’ teaching they had heard of things that they had never heard before from any rabbi. They had witnessed healing miracles such as they had never dreamed of before. And they had also seen how Jesus could turn water to wine and multiply bread and fish to feed huge crowds. Jesus had taken care of them and they had lacked nothing<sup>15</sup> So, it was a shock to them now to hear of sufferings and death.

Jesus was confronted with the call of Jerusalem. There lay the fulfillment of God’s will for him. It was for this that he had been sent by the Father, and it was a road that he could not avoid. It was natural, therefore, that the atmosphere around Jesus was sombre and grave. And in that mood, under the shadow of the cross, he uttered these words to his disciples: “If anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me”. In other words, he cannot be in my company unless he shares in my experience.

Jesus demanded of his followers a real identification with himself. The cross that he was to bear to Golgotha was to be

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the reference is to this life, whereas the third occurrence clearly demands the sense of ‘soul’, since it refers to the future life or damnation.

<sup>14</sup> Mark (8:34) and Luke (9:23) differ slightly. A similar saying was given in Mt 10:38 = Lk 14:27. It was not treated above under the theme of family, since its similarity to the present text made it more feasible to subsume it under the present treatment.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Jesus’ question in Lk 22:35: “When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?” to which they replied “Nothing”!

borne also by those who had joined their lives to him and had united their destiny with his own. Jesus had said: “Where I am, there shall my servant also be” (Jn 12:26). The author of the epistle to the Hebrews says: “For the joy set before him, [Jesus] endured the cross, despising the shame” (12:2); “let us, then, go to him ... bearing his reproach” (13:13).

Paul himself gave expression to the idea of discipleship, as he understood it and practised it in his own life:

I have been crucified with Christ. And it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me (Gal 2:20).

Hereby, Paul was stating that his experience of Christ meant that Paul was chained, so to speak, to the cross of Christ. He did not live for himself, he did not do the things that suited him and pleased him or were to his advantage; he did not avoid unpleasant things, if they could bring edification and blessing to the Church of Christ. His life was on the altar of God to be used in order to “spread everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him [Christ] (2 Cor 2:14), to build up the body of Christ, to glorify God. In a word, Paul had placed himself at the disposal of Christ.

What does discipleship mean? It may mean many things. It does not automatically mean privations, sufferings, and martyrdom for sake of Christ. Indeed, most Christians have been called to live ordinary, settled lives, going about their daily business, their family affairs, their usual relations to colleagues, neighbours, fellow-Church members, and others in society. But it does mean that even in these matters, the Christ disciples shall be living witnesses to the grace of God. They shall stand up for God and not be ashamed of Him in their environment or generation.

But sometimes God's call may, indeed, involve more. God may put a particular burden on us, may give us a special commission, may lead us into some new and deeper ministry. Whatever it is, we are expected to discharge our trust faithfully, cheerfully, and exemplarily. We are to be at all times at his disposal for whatever use he has of us. We are disciples of Jesus and always ready to do whatever he asks of us. That is bearing the cross of Christ. When it says that we should "take up our cross and follow him", it means that we shall be reconciled with his will for us – whatever it is – embrace it and follow him.

God's will is different for every Christian believer. We are reminded of this in the last scene in John's Gospel. Seeing John follow, Peter asked Jesus: "Lord, what about him?" The answer came at once: "If I want him to stay till I come, what does this have to do with you? *You follow me!*" (Jn 21:21–22). In discipleship we do not compare our lot with that of others. We follow him! And every one of us will give an account of his own doings (cf. 1 Cor 3:10–15). It does not say it will always be easy. But the disciple must be prepared for whatever is asked of him.

That discipleship is not a special call directed to a few chosen ones is shown by the fact that the above saying ends with the words:

For what shall it profit a man, if he gains the whole world but forfeits his own soul (ψυχή) (Mt 16:26).

Here the question of discipleship is brought into connection with the soul's salvation. Jesus' call is to those who are dead serious about his message and call; not those who say "Lord, Lord, but those who do my Heavenly Father's will" (Mt

7:21). It should, therefore, be clear for every Christian that the question of discipleship is not optional. As we saw, above, all believers in Christ are in the NT called “disciples”!

### “Introductory Remarks”

(Ch. 8. *What Did Jesus Teach about the Last Days?*)

The substantive *Eschatology* and the adjective *eschatological* are two Hellenic words meaning “teaching about the last things or about the end-time”. Eschatology had an important place in the teaching of Jesus. That is why Matthew (and the other evangelists) devoted the last of Jesus’ discourses to explaining for his disciples some of the highlights of what was to happen in the last days.

Eschatology or the biblical teaching about the end-time is one of the two pillars of the arch of Biblical revelation, the other one being what we might call *Protology* or the ‘teaching about the first things’. Protology deals with the beginning of God’s plan taking expression in creation (Genesis), whereas Eschatology deals with the end or completion of God’s plan or intention with his creation, which takes place at the end time (esp. Revelation). Since both of them together constitute God’s purpose and plan with his entire creation of heaven, earth, and mankind, as well as redemption, the Kingdom of God, and judgement, we cannot separate the one from the other. In all this, the death and resurrection of the Son of God has a pivotal significance. Everything hinges on him and his work on the cross.

In this chapter we shall concentrate on some of the highlights of Jesus' teaching on eschatology, particularly, as this is found in Jesus' eschatological discourse (Mt 24–25 = Mk 13 = Lk 21). It is not the intention of this chapter to give a detailed scheme or timetable of what is to transpire at the end-time or how things will happen, and certainly not to identify Biblical statements with modern phenomena or events to determine the times. Such attempts have been made in the past and they all have come to grief. In this book we do not propose to go beyond what Scripture allows to filter through of God's eschatological purpose and doings, always remembering that our Lord said "But about that day and hour no one knows" (Mt 24:36) and "It is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has set by his own authority" (Acts 1:7).

The NT presents very briefly and with big brush strokes a few of the main eschatological events, – enough to let God's people know that there lie before them events of world importance and cosmic significance, much of which will affect mankind negatively and therefore the followers of Christ must take the greatest of cares. The events alluded to are warnings for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. Here, no timetables are necessary, no exact identifications are indulged in.

To make the discussion easier to follow, I shall concentrate on the eschatological discourse as given by Matthew, although some comparisons with the discourses in Mark and Luke will be unavoidable. After all, those Christians who received Matthew's Gospel had in all probability no access to Mark and Luke nor were they meant to make literary comparisons among the three gospels, as is

the custom with modern scholars. Matthew was all they had, and this was the teaching of their Lord about the last things.

When comparing the three accounts, one is struck by both the similarities and the dissimilarities. For example, with regard to dissimilarities, in Matthew *the disciples* show Jesus the temple buildings – as though Jesus had not seen them before – whereas according to Mark *one of the disciples* says to Jesus “see what great stones and what great buildings” and Luke: “when *some [of his disciples]* said about the temple that it was adorned with beautiful stones ...” Matthew and Mark place Jesus’ discourse on the Mount of Olives, whereas Lk does not mention that Mount at all. Again, whereas Mt 24:15 and Mk 13:14 speak of “the abomination of desolation” (Dan 9:27) – referring to an action aimed at the temple – Lk 21:20 speaks of the siege of Jerusalem.

These differences, among many others, indicate that the evangelists had different perspectives and used the information they had variously to fit it into the total picture of Jesus each wanted to present to his audience.

The differences hinted at, above, explain why commentators have understood this discourse so differently. Thus, D. Hill thinks that Mt 24:4–36 deals with the final tribulation, whereas Mt 24:37–51 deals with the theme of vigilance.<sup>16</sup> D. Garland considers that Mt 24:4–35 is in answer to the disciples’ question “When will these things be?”, whereas Mt 24:36–25:46 forms Jesus’ answer to the disciples’ question about “the *parousia*<sup>17</sup> and the end of the age”.<sup>18</sup> My one-time colleague, Richard France, is of the opinion that Mt 24:4–35 treats the destruction of the temple,

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<sup>16</sup> D. HILL, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 319–331.

<sup>17</sup> The term *parousia* is a Hellenic term denoting the second coming of Christ.

<sup>18</sup> D. GARLAND, *Reading Matthew*, 234–245.

while 24:36–25:13 is concerned with parousia of the Son of Man.<sup>19</sup> Davies and Allison believe that Mt 24:4–35 depicts the entire post-Easter period interpreted as messianic woes, and concerns past, present and future. Mt 24:36–25:30 takes up the theme of vigilance, exemplified by several illustrations, such as the days of Noah and the wise and foolish virgins.<sup>20</sup>

These different explanations are not indicative of any arbitrary preferences on the commentators' part, but reveal the intractable character of the text to be readily divided into well-arranged and clear-cut sections. We could, therefore, have wished that the evangelists had expressed themselves more clearly. That such 'complaints' are no impious thoughts is shown also by Peter's complaint that some of the things that Paul had written were "difficult to understand" (2 Pt 3:16).<sup>21</sup>

In his speech Jesus sets out to answer the disciples' two-pronged question: "*When* will these things take place [i.e. the destruction of the temple, cf. vv. 1–2], and *What* is the sign of thy parousia and of the end of the world?" (Mt 24:3). Matthew refers the first question to the destruction of the temple and the second to the Son of Man's return, which will presage the end of the world, whereas Mark and Luke use a double question referring both parts to the destruction of the temple alone.

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<sup>19</sup> R. FRANCE, *Matthew*, 333–352. In his large commentary, *The Gospel of Mathew*, 893 f., Mt 24:4–35 is in answer to the disciples' first question, while Mt 24:36–46 is in answer to their second question. His whole discussion in pp. 889–967.

<sup>20</sup> W.D. DAVIES – D.C. ALLISON, *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, Vol. III, 327–412.

<sup>21</sup> The expression "difficult to understand" represents the Hellenic word *dysnoeta*, which implies that Paul's teaching has not been expressed in an easy, clear manner.

We have seen above (ch. 1) that Matthew groups the various sayings of Jesus according to their theme. This practise was exemplified briefly through the way in which Matthew had grouped the material found in the Sermon of the Mount into several thematic units. He does the same thing here. In chapters 24 and 25 Matthew gathers various sayings of Jesus which belong to the overall theme of eschatology as well as wakefulness. This includes the destruction of the temple, which is nearer in time, the suffering of his followers, which has a wider chronological perspective (from ascension to return), and the portents presaging the return of the Son of Man and the end of the present world order. It is, thus, impossible to divide – as France does – our text into (a) 24:4-35: the destruction of the temple and 24:36–25:13: the parousia of the Son of Man (and the end of the world), thus referring such cosmic, end-time statements as those taken up in vv. 29–31 to the limited events of Jewish history during A.D. 66–70 (or even up to 73). Rather, the two themes (*sc.* the destruction of the temple and the end of the world) are interwoven. And this is also the reason for the apparently awkward collocation of vv. 34–35 with vs. 36, in the first of which Jesus affirms in the strongest possible terms that what he has said will come to pass during “this generation” (in 24:34–35) and then in vs. 36 he disclaims any knowledge of the day or hour of what is going to happen. The two statements refer to two different matters, the destruction of the temple, which is more imminent and the parousia and the end of the world, which are more remote, respectively. He knows that the first will happen during “this generation”, but as Son of Man he does not know the timing of the second.

## “Tribulation; False Messiahs; Portents; Return of Son of Man; The End”

### (Ch. 8. *Jesus’ Teaching about the Last Days*)

This unit begins with “At that time”. This connects back to the end of vs. 14 “and then the end will come”. Unfortunately, the English translation of the above two phrases misses the connection found in the original text. Vs. 14 “and *then* (τότε, ‘tote’) = ‘at that time’, the end will come” is resumed by vs. 21 “For *then* (τότε, ‘tote’) [= at that time] there will be a great tribulation”. Verse 21, thus, takes up where verse 14 left off, and goes on to relate in more detail what will happen when the end is approaching. Verses 21–31 must, therefore, be seen as a concentration in more particular fashion on what is going to happen in the last days. Verses 15–20 are merely a parenthesis treating the more immediate events that concern Jewish history. Therefore, too, verses 23–25 are an expatiation of the brief general mention of false Christs in verse 5. Here, the disciples are warned in detail. They should not believe the reports that Christ has been seen in this or that place. They should not believe the great signs and wonders that the false Christs and the false prophets will perform. If they hear that Christ is in the desert they should not run to it. If they are told that he has already come and occupies the seat of authority in the halls of power, they should not believe it. Christ’s coming will not be like that.

In order to illustrate the manner of Christ’s coming he uses the illustration of the lightning. Just as the lightning comes suddenly and appears from one end of the horizon to

the other, so, too, will be the coming of the SM. When he comes no one will be in doubt. In verse 28 he says: “Where the corps is, there will also the eagles be gathered”. That the term ‘eagles’ is used rather than ‘vultures’ is owing to the fact that the Hellenic *aetos* = ‘eagle’ – as the Roman author Plinius the Elder (*Natural History*, X, 3) shows – included also ‘vultures’. This is a proverbial saying, whose function and meaning here has not been explained satisfactorily.<sup>22</sup> This proverb has no parallel in the corresponding discourse in Mark or Luke, but occurs in another eschatological context in Lk 17:37. There, to the disciples’ question “Where, Lord?” Jesus answers “Where the corps is, there will also the eagles [= vultures] be gathered”. In the Lukan context, this proverb is used to illustrate the coming of the Son of Man to the place where he will pick up those who belong to him (i.e. to the room, where two sleep, picking up the believer, to the mill, where two grind, picking up again the believer, while leaving the other behind, etc. etc.).

However, in the Matthean context, the meaning is somewhat different. Here, the saying is parallel to the previous statement: just as the lightning comes suddenly, lighting up the horizon, so, too, will be the SM’s appearance: sudden and seen by all. In a similar way, the proverbial saying means that just as the eagles [= vultures] disclose their presence by gathering over the carcass, so, too, the SM’s presence will be manifest. Thus, no report that he is in the desert or in the halls of power will be true. When he comes, all will know it!

And now we come to the most crucial content of this unit, i.e. vv. 29–31:

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<sup>22</sup> Anyone interested in how this verse has been explained by commentators, is here referred to DAVIES–ALLISON, *Matthew*, III, 355 f.

Immediately, after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its shine, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken.

This text reflects the thought and partly the wording of Isa 13:10 and Ez 32:7–8.<sup>23</sup> In Isaiah this text occurs in the context of God’s judgement over Babylon (and in extended sense over the world), while the Ezekiel text is a lament over Pharaoh, king of Egypt, on account of the judgement that is in store for him and his land. In the former text it is said clearly that this will take place on the Day of the Lord, who comes to judge the world:

Wail, for the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty ... See the day of the Lord is coming — a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger to make the earth desolate and destroy the sinners within it” (Isa 13:6, 9) (NIV)

Quite appropriately, then, Matthew applies the above description to illustrate the portents of the last days that will herald the coming of the SM, who comes in salvation for his elect but in judgement for the wicked. These portents will consist in the breakdown of the cosmic system (the sun and the moon will cease to give their light<sup>24</sup>) and in cosmic upheavals (“the powers of heaven will be shaken”) (vs. 29 b). Perhaps this text has inspired St Peter’s words in 2 Pt 3:7:

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<sup>23</sup> See the discussion of these texts in my book *Do You Understand What You Are Reading?*, in [www.ebookit.com](http://www.ebookit.com), ch. 3, under 2. “The true world-view of the New Testament”.

<sup>24</sup> See previous reference.

By the same word, the present heavens and earth are destined to be burned being preserved to a day of judgement and destruction of ungodly men.

When these portents have taken place, “*then (tote)* the sign of the SM will appear in heaven” (vs. 30). The “sign of the SM” has sometimes been thought to be the cross, but is most probably the SM himself<sup>25</sup>, who appears in majesty and glory with his heavenly host (vv. 30–31), coming to hold judgement. Seeing the SM is what causes the sinners of all the tribes of the earth to mourn, since they understand that it is now too late for them to repent and to seek forgiveness. Here our text should have a period.<sup>26</sup> The second half of vs. 30 forms a new sentence: “And they will see the SM coming on the clouds of heaven with great power and glory, who will send his angels ...” The first part of vs. 30 states more generally that the inhabitants of the earth will see the (sign of the) SM in heaven, which will cause them to mourn, while the second part, more precisely describes how the SM will be coming: on the clouds of heaven and with great power and glory.

The mission of the angels will be to gather together the elect, i.e. those who have believed in the SM and been faithful to him to the end. The perspective here is again universal:

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<sup>25</sup> The Hellenic construction has the same meaning as, for example, the phrase “the city of London”, means nothing other than “the city, *which is* London”. Similarly. “the sign of the SM” means “the sign, which is the SM”.

<sup>26</sup> It should be pointed out that the original manuscripts did not have commas, periods, and other punctuation marks. These came to more general use in Byzantine times, and have been inserted in our various modern language editions by modern editors. And they are not always correct!

“from one end of heaven to the other” (vs. 31). This is an expression for indicating that the whole earth is meant.<sup>27</sup>

**“The Great Judgment by the Son of Man:  
Rewarding the Good and Requitting the Evil”**  
*(Ch. 8. Jesus’ Teaching about the Last Days)*

25:31 “When the SM comes in his glory with all his angels ...” resumes the thought of the SM’s return in 24:29–31:

Immediately after the tribulation of those days ... And then shall the sign of the SM appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth shall mourn ... and he shall send his angels ... to gather together his elect

as well as from 24:36: “With regard to that hour no one knows” (vv. 29–31).

In 25:31 the SM has come; this time not in lowliness and weakness but in the full splendor of his glory. Not alone, as he was when Pilate, Herod and the High Priest played ball with him passing him to one another, whipped him, humiliated him, and led him as a criminal to crucifixion; nor as he was in Gethsemane, when he could have asked but abstained from asking the Father to place at his disposal more than twelve legions<sup>28</sup> of angels (Mt 26:53) to deliver

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<sup>27</sup> Not merely the land of Israel, as some (e.g. France) try, unsuccessfully, to construe it.

<sup>28</sup> A full legion – a Roman division commanded by a *legatus legionis*, sometimes also by a Consul – was 5.000–6.000 soldiers.

him from the cross. He now appears in his full royal honors with his retinue of innumerable angelic beings and takes his seat on a glorious throne.<sup>29</sup> The angels have gathered together the elect (Mt 24:31) and the weeds (Mt 13:30), who now are called “sheep” and “goats” respectively. The SM puts the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left. The verdict has been given. The separation is definite, irrevocable, everlasting.

At first sight, it might surprise us that the grounds on which the “sheep” and the “goats” seem to be judged are their good works: whether or not they fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and visited those in trouble. Not a word is said about their faith or unbelief. Would this mean that according to Matthew, salvation is attained through good works, thus, differently from the emphasis in Paul’s letters of “by faith alone”? And, is it so that James, in his letter, takes Matthew’s side when he writes that “faith without works is dead” (Jas 2:17)?

That Matthew is not devoid of the idea of faith is shown by the fact that he uses the verb ‘to believe’ altogether eleven times and the substantive ‘faith’ eight times. Moreover, Matthew does lay emphasis on believing in Jesus (8:10; 8:13; 9:28; 15:28; 18:6; 21:22; 21:25). But Matthew knows that true faith is expressed in action. The Christian is not a person who has a theoretical faith in Jesus Christ, but a person whose faith exercises a transforming power over him, changes his whole being and produces the fruit of the Spirit. Just as Jesus went about doing good to people (Acts 10:38), so, too, the Christian imitates his Master in good works. But good works are the outcome of his faith, the fruit he bears as

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<sup>29</sup> “Throne of glory” is a Hebraism for “glorious throne”.

a new creation, they are something that he cannot help doing, they are spontaneous, they are his nature. Good works, seen as a basis for salvation, as the price one pays in order to be saved, is a total misunderstanding of the free and gracious Gospel. The same Paul, who in the strongest terms expressed the view that only faith in Christ's atoning death can bring about the salvation of the sinner, also expressed the idea that we, as Christians, "are his [i.e. God's] workmanship, created through Jesus Christ unto good works" (Eph 2:10).

Faith and works are not opposed to each other, when properly understood. So, here, too, faith in the SM is presupposed. The "sheep" have lived the life they have lived and done the works they have done, because of their faith in him. Similarly, the 'goats' have lived the kind of life they have lived and did not do the works which they did not do, because of their unbelief. They never had any relation to the SM, which is why the SM says to them: "I never knew you!" The life that each has lived, therefore, is what decides their everlasting destiny. Once again we hear the sound of the alarm, as we were warned many times before in this eschatological discourse. Five whole stories or illustrations were given to warn the hearers of the sudden coming end. And now, finally, the great judgement scene closes with the words "And these [the goats] will go to everlasting punishment, but the righteous [the sheep] will go to everlasting life".