

The Coming of the Son of Man and the Mission to Israel (Matt 10:23)

TORSTEN LÖFSTEDT

Linnéuniversitetet

torsten.lofstedt@lnu.se

In the mission discourse, in a verse unique to Matthew, Jesus tells the twelve, “When they persecute you in this town, flee to the next, for truly I tell you, you will not have finished going through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes” (10:23).¹ This verse seems to contradict the eschatological discourse in the same Gospel, where Jesus says: “And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come” (24:14). If the coming of the Son of Man in 10:23 refers to the end of the age, Matthew is saying that the Gospel will be preached to the entire world before the apostles have gone through all the towns of Israel.² But is this really what he is trying to say? How did Matthew understand the coming of the Son of Man in relation to the end? Was the coming of the Son of Man an event that from his point of view was still in the future or had it already happened? This article will answer these questions and will also address other tensions between the mission discourse and later parts of the Gospel. The article does not seek to reconstruct the words of the historical Jesus or the occasions when they were originally uttered. The goal is to understand what Matthew was trying to convey.

¹ Unless otherwise specified, Bible quotes are taken from the NRSVUE.

² Vaticanus (B) and Beza (D) lack τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ in verse 10:23. John Nolland. *The Gospel of Matthew*. NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 421. The copyists may have noted the discrepancy between 10:23 and 24:14 and adjusted the text accordingly.

In agreement with most New Testament scholars, I consider Matthew's Gospel to be a reworking of Mark's Gospel. Matthew expands on Mark's Gospel by adding material he has found in other sources.³ I believe that one of the sources that Matthew used was Luke's Gospel. This is a minority position, but it deserves serious attention.⁴ While most scholars simply ignore this theory, some have raised serious objections. A common objection to this theory notes that many passages in Luke's Gospel do not have counterparts in Matthew—if Matthew had access to Luke's Gospel, why did he not include all of this material as well? One explanation is that it is Mark's Gospel that Matthew is rewriting, not Luke's. Matthew included material from Luke's Gospel that suited his agenda and ignored other material. There appears also to have been a limit to how long a Gospel could be and still be affordable and manageable. This would also explain why Matthew did not include more material from Luke's Gospel.⁵ Another argument against the Matthean

³ I refer to the author as Matthew for ease of reference. I do not take stance regarding who wrote this Gospel.

⁴ This Matthean posteriority hypothesis was first developed by Christian Gottlob Wilke in 1838 (*Der Urevangelist oder exegetisch kritische Untersuchung über das Verwandschaftsverhältnis der drei ersten Evangelien*. Dresden) and was picked up again by Ernst von Dobschütz in 1928 ("Matthäus als Rabbi und Katechet." *ZNW* 27, 338–48). Philip West reintroduced the theory in 1967 ("A Primitive Version of Luke in the Composition of Matthew." *NTS* 14, 75–95), and it was revived again by Ronald Huggins in 1992 ("Matthean Posteriority: A Preliminary Proposal." *NovT* 34,1–22). In recent years more scholars have used this theory including Martin Hengel (*The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Collection and Origin of the Canonical Gospels*. London: SCM, 2000), Robert K. MacEwen (*Matthean Posteriority: An Exploration of Matthew's Use of Mark and Luke as a Solution to the Synoptic Problem*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), and Alan J.P. Garrow (e.g., "Streeter's 'Other' Synoptic Solution: The Matthew Conflator Hypothesis." *NTS* 62 (2016), 207–26). I applied this theory to Gospel narratives involving Jesus' opponents (Löfstedt, *The Devil, Demons, Judas, and "the Jews": Opponents of Christ in the Gospels*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2021).

⁵ See Löfstedt, *Devil*, 27–31 and 199–201 for more responses to objections to the theory.

posteriority hypothesis is that Matthew appears to expect the end of the world to come in connection with the fall of the temple (24:29), while in Luke (21:24) the two events are separated by an indefinite period of time. That would suggest that Luke's Gospel was written later, when it was clear that the fall of the temple did not lead immediately to the end of the world. The present article contributes to a refutation of that argument.

Matthew modified the material he incorporated into his Gospel in various ways. He changes the contexts for Jesus' *logia* and he puts his own order on the material by gathering Jesus' teaching into five discourses.⁶ These discourses are expansions of collections of *logia* found in his sources: the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) expands on Luke's Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20–49); the mission discourse (Matthew 10) builds on the collection of *logia* relating to the mission of the seventy-two in Luke 10:1–24; the parable discourse (Matthew 13) expands on a collection of parables in Mark (4:3–34); the community life discourse (Matthew 18) is an expansion of Mark 9:35–48; and the eschatological discourse (Matthew 24–25) is an expansion of the eschatological discourse in Mark (13:5–37). Four of the discourses are based on a common theme, while in the parable discourse, as the name suggests, *logia* are collected based on a common genre.

The two seemingly contradictory verses that are the focus of this article are found in discourses that Matthew has constructed: the mission discourse and the eschatological discourse. Like the other evangelists, Matthew must balance the goal of including as many examples of Jesus' teaching as he can while maintaining the narrative flow and not making the Gospel too long. Although he may not have been a particularly skilled author, Matthew took some consideration of narrative consistency when he wrote his discourses. I assume that Matthew was sufficiently competent to have noticed the apparent tension between verses 10:23 and 24:14

⁶ Richard C. Beaton, "How Matthew Writes." in *The Written Gospel*, edited by Markus Bockmuehl and Donald A. Hagner, 116–34 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 121.

but did not consider them to be contradictory. Following R.T. France, I argue that the seeming contradiction between 10:23 and 24:14 may be readily resolved by separating the coming of the Son of Man referred to in the mission discourse (10:23) from the end (24:14). I will briefly explain the exegetical grounds for separating these two events and then answer important objections that have been raised against this interpretation.

THE COMING OF THE SON OF MAN IN 10:23 REFERS TO THE RESURRECTION

Commenting on the expression “the coming of the Son of Man” in 10:23, France writes:

despite centuries of later Christian interpretive tradition, when the gospels speak of ‘the Son of Man coming’ the presumption must be that they are speaking not of an eschatological *parousia* but of a heavenly enthronement, the vindication and empowering of the Son of Man after his earthly rejection and suffering.⁷

Key to understanding the meaning of the expression “the coming of the Son of Man” in Matthew is the interchange between Jesus and the chief priest right before he is crucified. While the identity of “the Son of Man” and the significance of that expression may have been unclear to his listeners earlier (16:13–14), in 26:64 Jesus answers the chief priest, “from now on you will see the Son of Man /seated at the right hand of Power/ and coming on the clouds of heaven” clearly alluding to Dan 7:13–14. These verses in Daniel speak of the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, approaching the Ancient of days, and being given royal authority over the nations of the earth. The chief priest recognizes the allusion, understands that Jesus is saying that he will be that heavenly Son of Man,

⁷ France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 396. Similarly, Albright and Mann take the coming of the Son of Man in 10:23 to refer to “the exaltation of the Messiah in passion-resurrection.” W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann. *Matthew*. Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 125.

and accuses him of blasphemy (26:65). Matthew's other uses of the expression "the Son of Man" should be re-read in the light of these verses; that includes his use of the term in 10:23.⁸

When Jesus answers the chief priest, he uses the temporal expression *ἀπ' ἄρτι*, "from now on" (26:64). Here Matthew has modified the text; Mark (14:62) reads *καὶ* ("and"). While Jesus' words in Mark 14:62 could be taken to refer to the second coming on judgment day sometime in an unspecified future, the wording in Matthew does not allow for that interpretation.⁹ Here Jesus is referring to something closer in time. We do not have to take the phrase *ἀπ' ἄρτι* ("from now on") completely literally, however. After all, Jesus did not disappear right after saying, "you will not see me from now on [*ἀπ' ἄρτι*] unless you say, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (Matt 23:39, my translation).¹⁰ But in 26:64 Jesus is speaking about something that would happen soon. In the context of this Gospel, Jesus is not promising the chief priest a resurrection appearance, as Matthew only speaks of the risen Jesus appearing people to who already believed in him (28:8–10, 16–20). Unlike the disciples at the transfiguration, the chief priest and his colleagues (the verb *δύεσθε* is 2 pl) would not literally see Jesus coming on the clouds in

⁸ The term is also used in 1 Enoch of a man of heavenly origin who would come on judgment day. Compare especially Matt 25:31 and 1 En 69:27–29. The different parts of 1 Enoch are notoriously difficult to date. In his monograph *The Son of Man in the Parables of Enoch and in Matthew* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), Leslie W. Walck concludes that the author of the Gospel of Matthew "almost certainly knew" of the Parables of Enoch (p. 251). If Matthew is not dependent on the texts found in the Parables of Enoch, he is pulling from the tradition that inspired these texts. See also Ps 110:1.

⁹ R.T. France, *Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1028. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, WBC 33B (Dallas: Word, 1995), 800) agrees that it can hardly refer to the distant future. All three contexts are related to his coming (Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*. Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 430.

¹⁰ Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 800. France argues that clause in 23:39 introduced by *ἔως ἂν* and using a verb in the subjunctive is a conditional clause rather than a prediction – they won't see him again unless they greet him as the one coming in the name of Lord (*Gospel of Matthew* 882–885).

the immediate future. Jesus has revealed to them, however, that he is the heavenly Son of Man, and here in Matthew's account events that follow that same day bear witness to the fact that he has been enthroned.¹¹ The tearing of the curtain in the temple from top to bottom, the earthquake, and the raising of righteous dead that proceed to enter Jerusalem (27:51–53) are the consequences of Jesus' exaltation at the right hand of Power.¹² In light of Jesus' earlier lament over Jerusalem and his foretelling of the destruction of the temple (23:37–24:2), these events show that Jesus has been vindicated and God's judgment of Jerusalem has begun.¹³

When Jesus comes to his disciples in the final verses of the Gospel, it is as the risen and exalted Son of Man. Matthew describes how when the disciples first see Jesus they are at a loss as to what to do—some worshipped him, while others hesitated (28:17).¹⁴ He continues, “Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me’” (28:18). France argues that, taken in conjunction with Jesus' frequent references to the Son of Man earlier in the Gospel and their connection to Daniel 7:13–14, Jesus' words in Matt 28:18 imply that Daniel's prophecy has been fulfilled: Jesus has come before the Ancient of days and has been given royal authority over the nations.¹⁵ With this newly acquired authority, Jesus commissions his disciples to go and make disciples of the nations (28:19). The combination of resurrection and exaltation, the idea that Jesus was given all authority on heaven and earth when God raised him from the dead, is well-attested in other early Christian texts. See especially Eph 1:20–21, Phil 2:8–11, Heb 1:3–4, 1 Pet 3:21–22; see also Rom 1:4. This may explain why Matthew does not specify even more clearly that Christ was enthroned as the heavenly

¹¹ Reckoning the day as beginning at dusk. So also: Nolland, *Gospel of Matthew*, 1132.

¹² Cf. *Ibid.*, 1132.

¹³ Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 566–568.

¹⁴ On the translation of Matthew 28:17 see: Torsten Löfstedt, “Don't hesitate, worship! (Matt 28:17)”, *SEÅ* 78 (2013), 161–172; and France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 1110–1112.

¹⁵ France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 1112–1113.

Son of Man when was raised from the dead. As Luz writes, “here the risen Jesus is not saying anything new to the readers.”¹⁶

When Jesus in Matt 10:23 speaks of the coming of the Son of Man, he is speaking of his resurrection and exaltation, not of his final return on judgment day. Jesus’ words in this verse must be interpreted in the context of the mission discourse, which, as was mentioned, is Matthew’s construction. Although the mission discourse also includes material relating to discipleship and missions in general (e.g., 10:24–42), the first verses in the discourse describe this first sending as a mission directed exclusively to Israel: Jesus forbade his disciples from going by way of the Gentiles or visiting any Samaritan towns (10:5). Unlike the worldwide mission with which the Gospel ends, the exclusive mission to Israel was of short duration; as France notes, this explains why the disciples were told in the mission discourse to take nothing with them (10:9–10).¹⁷ The exclusive mission to Israel came to an end with the resurrection. The twelve disciples had not visited all the towns of Israel before Jesus had been raised from the dead and given authority over the nations.¹⁸ The apparent contradiction between the ban on going to the Gentiles (10:5) and the final commission to go and make disciples of the nations (28:19) is thus resolved. As a result of Jesus’ new authority, the exclusive mission to Israel has been superseded by a mission to the whole world.¹⁹

Similar interpretations were once common in the church. In his fourth century commentary on the *Diatessaron*, Ephraim the Syrian suggests that when Jesus says, “You will not be able to complete all the

¹⁶ Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 623–624.

¹⁷ R.T. France, *Matthew Evangelist and Teacher* (London: Paternoster, 1989), 217.

¹⁸ So also: Leopold Sabourin, “You will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of Man comes’ (Mat 10:23b).” *BTB* 7 (1977), 5–11. France takes Israel to refer to Galilee here (*Gospel of Matthew*, 395).

¹⁹ John P. Meier, “Salvation-History in Matthew: In Search of a Starting Point” *CBQ* 37 (1975), 203–215; See also Schuyler Brown, “The Two-fold Representation of the Mission in Matthew’s Gospel” *ST* 31 (1977), 21–32, 23. Compare John 12:32.

cities before I come to you,”²⁰ he referred to himself appearing to the disciples after he had risen from the dead.²¹ Ephraim does not connect the coming of the Son of Man with Daniel’s prophecy, however, perhaps because the expression “the Son of Man” is not used in this part of Tatian’s text. In his commentary on Matthew published in 398, Jerome does not explicitly address what the coming of the Son of Man in 10:23 refers to, but he maintains that the command to flee in 10:23 referred to the time of the apostles, who were engaged in the exclusive mission to Israel that predated the resurrection.²² Jerome thus appears to interpret the coming of the Son of Man in Matt 10:23 as referring to the resurrection rather than the second coming. In medieval exegesis Matt 10:23 was often interpreted as referring to the resurrection.²³ In his commentary on Matthew, Hrabanus Maurus (c 780–856) gives the following interpretation of Matt 10:23: Jesus “foretells that not all cities of Israel would be led to faith by their proclamation before the resurrection of the Lord had been accomplished and power had been given to preach the Gospel throughout the world.”²⁴ Along the same lines, Thomas Aquinas (writing

²⁰ Translation by Carmel McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem’s Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron: An English Translation of Chester Beatty Syriac MS709 with Introduction and Notes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), (8:9c), 150. This quote is based on Matt 10:23. In Ephrem’s text the phrase “the Son of Man” has been replaced with the first person.

²¹ Sabourin, “Mat 10.23b,” 6; Tord Fornberg, *Matteusevangeliet 1:1–13:52* (Uppsala: EFS-förlaget, 1989), 192. Amy-Jill Levine (*The Social and Ethnic Dimensions of Matthean Salvation History* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1988), 51) associates the coming of the Son of Man with the resurrection, and like Ephraim she connects it to appearances of the risen Christ rather than to his exaltation.

²² Jerome, (Saint). *Commentary on Matthew*. Translated by Thomas P. Scheck. The Fathers of the Church, A New Translation, vol. 117 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 116, 121

²³ Künzi, *Naherwartungslogion*, 168; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20: A Commentary*. Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 93.

²⁴ “Praedicit enim, quod non ante praedicationibus suis ad fidem perducerent omnes civitates Israhel, quam resurrectio Domini fuerit perpetrata et in toto orbe terrarum praedicandi Euangelium potestas concessa.” Hrabanus Maurus, *Commentarius in Matthaeum* (Volume 1) (Brepols, 2001), 307.

in 1269–1270) interprets the phrase “till the Son of Man comes” as meaning “until he rises from the dead, and then sends you to the gentiles.”²⁵

This interpretation of the coming of the Son of Man in Matt 10:23 has much to commend it. Yet it is not widely accepted today. I will now examine arguments against the interpretation and answer them. These include the claims that the coming of the Son of Man has the same meaning everywhere in Matthew; that Matthew would not have included instructions that were specific to the mission to Israel if he believed that mission had come to an end; and that the disciples were not persecuted during Jesus’ earthly ministry so the mission discourse cannot refer to Jesus’ disciples in the period before the resurrection.

THE COMING OF THE SON OF MAN: AN EXPRESSION WITH MANY MEANINGS

The view that the coming of the Son of Man in Matt 10:23 refers to the resurrection has been rejected because it is claimed that the expression “the coming of the Son of Man” has a single consistent reference throughout Matthew’s Gospel and in other passages it clearly refers to his coming on the last day. Davies and Allison argue that whenever Matthew speaks of the coming of the Son of Man he refers to the last judgment and nothing else.²⁶ They write that “Matthew identified the coming of the

²⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew 1–12*. Translated from the Latin (written 1269–1270) by Jeremy Holmes, edited by The Aquinas Institute (2013), 857.

²⁶ W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *Matthew 8–18*. ICC (London: T&T Clark, 1991), 190: “the coming of the Son of man will mean the final judgement.” Meier (*Marginal Jew* vol. 2, 340) writes regarding 10:23, “‘until the Son of Man comes’ can refer only to the parousia. [...] To suggest any other interpretation ... is to go against the united witness of the whole Synoptic tradition.” Similarly: Weaver, *Missionary Discourse*, 100, 156 n 11.

Son of man with the coming of the kingdom of God in its fullness.”²⁷ They continue, “when the Son of man comes, the angels will be sent forth, every man will be requited according to his deeds, and Jesus will sit on his throne (cf. 13:41; 16:27–28; 24:27–44; 25:31).”²⁸ Thus, they argue that Jesus is saying that the Son of Man will return and the last judgment will take place before the mission to Israel is completed.

I disagree. The coming of the Son of Man, just like the coming of the kingdom, has a complex set of references. Some passages that speak of his coming refer to the end of the age, but not all do. Significantly Matthew modifies the disciples’ question that introduces the eschatological discourse by introducing the term *παρουσία* and distinguishing it from the destruction of the temple (24:3).²⁹ As used in Matthew (24:3, 27, 37, 39), *παρουσία* refers to the return of the Son of Man at “the end of the age” (24:3). The expression “the coming of the Son of Man” can be, but does not have to be, synonymous with the Parousia. The reference to the Son of Man coming in glory in 25:31 refers to the final judgment as the verses that follow show. Matt 16:27 speaks of the Son of Man coming with his angels to repay every man for what he has done. That verse clearly refers to the last day. But in the following verse (16:28) Jesus says, “There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” In the context of Matthew’s Gospel, as also in the parallel texts in Mark (9:1) and Luke (9:27), these words are fulfilled (at least partially) already when three disciples are privileged to witness the transfiguration, which is described in the verses that follow.³⁰ The three witness Jesus in his royal authority: his face shining like the sun, his clothes bright as light, and Moses and Elijah standing beside him (presumably as his advisors), and they hear the voice

²⁷ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 8–18*, 190.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 894–895.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 641. Cf. Alexander J.M. Wedderburn, “Matthew 10,23B and the Eschatology of Jesus.” *Das Ende der Tage und die Gegenwart des Heils*, 165–81 (Leiden, Brill, 1999), 178–179, regarding the parallel passage in Mark.

from heaven identifying Jesus as his beloved son (Matt 17:2–5). They were given proof that Jesus really was that Son of Man who would come before God to be enthroned.³¹ The different meanings of the coming of the Son of Man are interrelated.³²

WHY DOES MATTHEW TELL OF AN EXCLUSIVE MISSION TO ISRAEL?

When he tells of Jesus sending the twelve, Matthew expanded on Mark's text by saying he forbad them from going by way of the Gentiles or visiting any Samaritan town and by saying they should rather go the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (10:5–6). These restrictions have no counterparts in the accounts of the sending of the twelve in Mark (6:7–13) and Luke (9:1–6), and they contradict Luke's mention of Jesus sending messengers ahead of him to a Samaritan town (9:52). These restrictions are in tension with the final verses of Matthew's Gospel where Jesus tells his disciples to make disciples of all nations. Why does Matthew modify the Gospel story to tell of restrictions that applied to the exclusive mission to Israel if, as I argue, that mission had come to an end long before he wrote his Gospel? Of what relevance were these restrictions to Matthew's intended readers?

Did Matthew Encourage a Separate Mission to Israel?

Some interpreters resolve the tension between 10:23 and 24:14 by saying that Matthew meant that a separate (though not necessarily exclusive) mission to Israel should continue parallel with the mission to the Gentiles

³¹ Jerome interprets the transfiguration as a preview of the second coming (*Commentary on Matthew*, 197).

³² See Sabourin, "Mat 10.23b," 10: "for the evangelists the coming of the Son of man evoked a rather vague expectation to be realized only gradually..." Compare 1 Cor 15:24–25 and Luke 19:12. See also: France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 397.

until Christ's return on judgment day.³³ The apparently contradictory commands of Matt 10:5 and 28:19 are both in force, but they apply to different groups of missionaries. The two missions are kept separate, as in the arrangement described in Galatians 2.³⁴ Far from having come to an end, the mission to Israel is the focus of Matthew's message. Schuyler Brown argues that Matthew wrote to persuade his readers to keep focusing on the mission to Israel, leaving others to focus on the Gentile mission.³⁵ He is encouraging his readers not to give up on the mission to Israel which enjoyed fewer successes than the Gentile mission.³⁶ David Sim similarly argues that Matthew is writing to restart the mission to Israel, to give Jews one last opportunity to come to faith before the Son of Man returns.³⁷ In support of this view scholars note that Matthew (unlike Mark 6:30 and Luke 10:17) speaks of the disciples being sent out but not of them returning.³⁸ That is to read too much into the text. Matthew's interest is in Jesus' words and deeds, not the work of his apostles. Matthew tends to portray the disciples, apart from Judas and to

³³ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 8–18*, 192; Craig A. Evans, *Matthew*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 224; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 194; Tobias Hägerland, *Messias och hans folk: Matteusevangeliet* (Stockholm: Libris, 2020), 155; Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 71; Nolland, *Gospel of Matthew*, 428–29.

³⁴ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 8–18*, 192.

³⁵ Brown, "Mission to Israel," 89–90: "The Central Section [of Matthew's Gospel] excludes not the gentile mission as such but only the participation in this mission by the Matthean community..." Also: Brown, "Two-fold Representation".

³⁶ See also Davies and Allison, *Matthew 8–18*, 192; Evans, *Matthew*, 224; Gundry, *Matthew*, 194–195; Hägerland, *Messias*, 155; Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 71.

³⁷ David C. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 172.

³⁸ Brown, "Mission to Israel," 75, 79; Davies and Allison, *Matthew 8–18*, 190; Keenan, *Matthew*, 80; Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 71; Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 170; Weaver, *Missionary Discourse*, 153.

a lesser extent Peter, as a homogenous group.³⁹ The apostles surely went where Jesus had sent them, but Matthew is not interested in their story.⁴⁰

Some have appealed to Paul's letter to the Galatians to support the view that the clean separation of the mission to Israel and the Gentile mission was well-established at the time Matthew's Gospel was written.⁴¹ According to Gal 2:9, Peter, James, and John focused on the mission to the Jews while Paul himself focused on the mission to the Gentiles (see also Rom 11:13, Gal 1:15–16, etc.). But Paul regularly ministered to Jews as well (1 Cor 9:20–21; Acts 9:15, 17:2), and Peter at times met with Gentiles (Gal 2:12; Acts 10:1–48, 15:7). We do not find an exclusive mission to Israel in these texts. One may respond that a Jewish mission that was run separately from the Gentile mission was an ideal that Matthew encouraged even though relations between Jews and Gentiles in the Hellenistic world were complicated and the two missions could not always be kept apart. The notion that Matthew encourages a separate mission to Israel may be challenged on other grounds, however.

Those who maintain that Matthew wrote to encourage a separate mission to Israel must explain how it is the Gospel would be preached to the world before all the towns of Israel had been reached. One way to resolve this tension is by reading Matt 10:23 and 24:14 in light of Rom 11:25–26; once the full number of Gentiles has been saved, God will see to it that all of Israel is saved.⁴² Along these lines it has been suggested

³⁹ Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 13.

⁴⁰ One of the few times we hear of the disciples doing any of the things Jesus had charged them to do, we learn that they had failed in their mission. They were unable to cast out a particular demon (17:16). That encounter gives Matthew another opportunity to convey more of Jesus' teaching.

⁴¹ Schuyler Brown, "The Matthean Community and the Gentile Mission" *NovT* 22 (1980), 193–221, 208; Davies and Allison, *Matthew 8–18*, 192.

⁴² F. F. Bruce (*The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983), 109; Davies and Allison, *Matthew 8–18*, 190; Evans, *Matthew*, 224; Richard L. Mayhue, "Jesus: A Preterist or a Futurist?" *MSJ* 14 (2003), 9–22, 17. Hilary of Poitiers (AD 368), *Commentary on Matthew*. Translated by D.H. Williams (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 119.

that “all the towns of Israel” (10:23) refers to all places in the world where there were Jewish settlements. At the time Matthew wrote his Gospel followers of Jesus were still trying to reach distant Jewish settlements outside of the Jewish heartlands.⁴³ But this reading ignores the context. When the twelve apostles were commissioned to go to Israel they were also told to “not go by way of the Gentiles” (10:5). This restriction should rule out that reading. “All the towns of Israel” refers either to the Jewish towns of Galilee (the old Northern kingdom of Israel, as distinct from Judea⁴⁴) or to the Jewish towns of both Galilee and Judea (the Davidic kingdom). It cannot refer to Jewish settlements in the diaspora. Whether the reference is to towns in Galilee or to Galilee and Judea, the difficulty in explaining why it would take so long to visit these towns remains.

The notion that Matthew meant that a separate mission to Israel should continue even after the resurrection is furthermore not plausible considering that the eleven disciples (28:16) to whom Jesus gave the great commission were, together with Judas Iscariot, the same disciples that had earlier been forbidden from going by way of the Gentiles.⁴⁵ Brown and Sim try to avoid this contradiction by saying the command given in 10:23 is not to be understood as given to the twelve historical apostles (10:5) but to Matthew’s intended readers.⁴⁶ This reading is not persuasive. When faced with the apparent contradiction between 10:5 and 28:19, it is easier to imagine the command given by the risen Christ in the closing of the Gospel is that which applies to the reader, while the

⁴³ See references in: Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, 87 and Wedderburn, “Matthew 10,23b,” 177.

⁴⁴ France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 395.

⁴⁵ Meier, “Salvation-History,” 204–205. Contra Brown, “Mission to Israel,” 89–90, etc.

⁴⁶ Brown, “Mission to Israel,” 74–76; Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 170. Brown writes, “the Matthean identification between ‘the Twelve’ and ‘the disciples’ makes ‘the twelve disciples’ into a transparency for the members of Matthew’s own community” (p. 74).

one mentioned in the middle of the story that contradicts 28:19 only applied to the period before Jesus' death and resurrection.

The explanation that Matthew added the ban on going by way of the Gentiles or visiting any Samaritan towns because he encouraged a separate mission to Israel fails to convince. Why then did he include these restrictions?

The People of Israel Were Given the First Opportunity

From Matthew's point of view, the Son of Man had already come before the heavenly Father; Jesus has already been given authority over the nations. Thus, the exclusive mission to Israel had ceased long before Matthew wrote his Gospel, having been superseded by the worldwide mission. The commands related to the exclusive mission were no longer binding. They are relevant for Matthew's readers for other reasons.

Matthew constructed the mission discourse in part to show that Jesus originally taught his disciples to focus their ministry exclusively on the people of Israel just as he himself had done (9:35; 11:1). Matthew similarly adapted the encounter with the Syrophoenician woman from Mark (7:24–30) adding the verse, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 15:24). Matthew specifies that the first mission was directed exclusively to the people of Israel to persuade his readers that God had not broken his covenant with Israel. Jesus had been true to his own people and fulfilled his Messianic calling.⁴⁷

While Jesus had been true to his people, Israel's leaders had not welcomed him or his disciples. Assuming that this Gospel was written

⁴⁷ Francis W. Beare, ““The Mission of the Disciples and the Mission Charge: Matthew 10 and Parallels.” *JBL* 89 (1970), 1–13, p. 9; Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*. WBC 33A (Dallas: Word, 1995), 271. Ephrem of Edessa explains the restriction on going to the Gentiles: “For he kept the promise which was with Abraham, especially that he might confute the cunning of the Jews, lest they say that they crucified [the Lord] because he associated with Gentiles. He therefore restrained his disciples, lest they preach to the Gentiles.” (8:1b; McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary*, 145). Similarly: Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, 116.

after the fall of the Temple, I argue that one point that this passage is making is that the exclusive mission to Israel laid the ground for God's judgment of Jerusalem which was realized when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed (23:29—24:2).⁴⁸ The same point is made in Matthew's version of parable of the banquet (22:1–14), which is much more vindictive than the one found in Luke (14:15–24). In Matthew's account, a king sent out servants to invite people to his son's wedding. When they did not honor the invitation but killed his servants, the king in anger killed the murderers and burned their city down (22:6–7). In the view of most interpreters, Matthew's modifications to the parable show that it was written after the destruction of Jerusalem in the Jewish War.⁴⁹

These judgmental tendencies are characteristic of Matthew's Gospel.⁵⁰ In verse 10:15, Jesus says regarding the towns that refused to welcome his disciples whom he had sent on this mission, that they would be judged more severely than the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on judgment day. From Matthew's point of view those towns got their first experience of judgment day already in the Jewish War.⁵¹ We find another example of the judgmental tendencies in Matthew later in the mission discourse where Jesus says: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword" (10:34). In Luke's

⁴⁸ Brown writes, "The Matthean Jesus reveals the purpose of the Mission to Israel (10:5–6) to have been not conversion but judgment" ("Matthean Apocalypse," 5).

⁴⁹ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19–28*, 201; France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 825; Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 54.

⁵⁰ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*. Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 41–42. Note that while Jesus is portrayed as advocate in Mark (8:38), he is portrayed as judge in Matthew (16:28). See: Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 116.

⁵¹ France (*Gospel of Matthew*, 395) argues that the expression "the towns of Israel" (10:23) refers to Jewish towns in Galilee, the old northern kingdom, as Jesus and his disciples may have spent more time in Galilee than in Judea. See also Gundry, *Matthew*, 185. I disagree. "The towns of Israel" (10:23) probably included towns in both Galilee and Judea, the old Davidic kingdom. Jerusalem and Judea were especially hard hit by the Jewish War.

account, Jesus says that he had come not to bring peace but rather division (12:51). I suggest that Matthew has modified the saying to imply that the Jewish War was a consequence of how some belonging to Jesus' own people had failed to welcome him but had rather persecuted his disciples. Since the context for this quote in Matthew is the exclusive mission to Israel, *ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν* could be translated 'to the land' rather than 'to the earth'. Contrary to people's messianic expectations,⁵² Jesus did not bring peace to Israel but rather prepared the land for God's judgment.

PERSECUTION OF THE APOSTLES DURING JESUS' EARTHLY MINISTRY

The view that the coming of the Son of Man refers to his exaltation at the resurrection has been rejected also because it implies that the disciples would be severely persecuted before the resurrection.⁵³ Jesus warned the apostles that they would be persecuted during their mission to Israel and driven from town to town before the coming of the Son of Man. They would also be driven out of synagogues and whipped and brought to trial before kings (10:16–23). While Matthew tells of Pharisees finding fault with Jesus' disciples during Jesus' earthly ministry (12:2; 15:2), he does not say that the disciples were severely persecuted before Jesus was crucified. We may contrast the Gospel record with the references to Jewish persecution of the church in the period after the resurrection in Acts 5:17–18; 6:9–7:60; 8:1–3; 12:1–4; 14:19–20; 17:1–13, etc. These passages fit the description given in Matthew 10 of the suffering that awaited the disciples rather well. Some argue that the coming of the Son of Man therefore cannot refer to the resurrection but refers to something

⁵² Isa 9:7 speaks specifically of the kingdom of David enjoying endless peace.

⁵³ Brown, "Two-fold Representation," 23; Meier, *Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, 340.

that would occur after the period of suffering experienced by the early church as described in Acts.⁵⁴

It is, however, Matthew's text we are studying, not Acts, nor the experiences of the historical disciples. Matthew may well imply that the disciples were persecuted during Jesus' lifetime. Although Matthew (unlike Mark and Luke) has placed the commission to go to the towns of Israel in connection with Jesus choosing the twelve apostles, he has not developed a story of what the apostles did on that mission. Matthew's interest is in what Jesus said and did, and he tends to obscure the contributions of the individual disciples.⁵⁵ Matthew tells of Jesus commissioning the apostles, but he does not say what happened on their mission. We are free to imagine that they were persecuted even before the crucifixion. Two passages found later in this Gospel support this view.

Matt 23:29–36

Matt 10:23 should be read in the light of Matt 23:34–36. In the latter passage Jesus says to the scribes and Pharisees, who are representative of all Jewish religious leaders,⁵⁶

For this reason I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation.

⁵⁴ Donald A. Hagner (*Matthew 1–13*, 280) takes the persecution that Jesus warns of to refer to the persecution of the early church in Israel after the crucifixion.

⁵⁵ Matthew tends to portray the disciples, apart from Judas and to a lesser extent Peter, as a homogenous group (Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 13).

⁵⁶ Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 676.

Matthew has adopted these verses from his source (compare Luke 11:47–51).⁵⁷ Whereas in Luke the speaker is the wisdom of God (Luke 11:49), in Matthew’s account Jesus himself is speaking (Matt 23:34).⁵⁸ Matthew has also replaced the verb *ἀποστελῶ* [“I will send”] (Luke 11:49), which was in the future tense, with the present tense verb phrase *ἐγὼ ἀποστέλλω* [“I send”] (Matt 23:34), using the first-person singular pronoun emphatically. This is the same verb phrase that Jesus used in the mission discourse when he told the apostles, “I am sending you like sheep into the midst of wolves” (Matt 10:16). Matthew has also modified this pericope by adding the reference to flogging in synagogues and by adding the phrase “from town to town” to make it more similar to what Jesus had previously said in the mission discourse (compare 23:34 with 10:17 and 10:23).⁵⁹ Nothing in 23:29–36 demands that we see this persecution as beginning only after the resurrection.⁶⁰ On the contrary, the disciples were subject to persecution from the first time they were sent out, and they could expect to suffer persecution even after the exclusive mission to Israel had come to an end. While Luke implies that the Holy Spirit sent the disciples out on their mission (perhaps in connection with the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost as described in Acts), and that they were persecuted then as Jesus had prophesied they would be, it appears that Matthew has changed the text to imply that Jesus’ disciples were persecuted by Jewish leaders already during his earthly ministry.

It is likely that Jesus’ followers were subject to more extreme forms of persecution after the crucifixion. This does not pose a problem for my

⁵⁷ Commentators who follow the two-source hypothesis also tend to assume that Matthew has modified this text more than Luke (see for example: Nolland, *Luke* 9:21–18:34, 667; Davies and Allison, *Matthew* 19–28, 315, 316).

⁵⁸ France (*Gospel of Matthew*, 880) rightly notes that Matthew’s first readers cannot have been expected to know that in Luke’s Gospel the one speaking was God’s wisdom.

⁵⁹ Davies and Allison, *Matthew* 19–28, 316. Matthew has also removed the reference to wisdom personified “The Wisdom of God said” (Luke 11:49) and replaced “prophets and apostles” (Luke 11:49): with “prophets, wise men, and scribes” to show that Jesus’ disciples had the same roles as the Old Testament emissaries of God.

⁶⁰ Contra France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 878.

interpretation. While the exclusive mission to Israel ended with the resurrection and the giving of the new commission, nothing suggests that the Pharisees' persecution of the disciples ended at the same time as the exclusive mission. Matthew gives us no reason to imagine that the persecution stopped when Jesus was crucified.⁶¹ Jesus' disciples were probably not crucified (23:34), at least not before Jesus was, and Matthew's readers were probably aware of this. They may have seen the reference to crucifixion as strictly speaking applying only to Jesus, but they understood that their suffering was intertwined with Jesus' suffering; compare 16:24.⁶² In the same way, the actions of the scribes and Pharisees in their time are inseparable from those who persecuted the prophets that God had sent in the past.

Matthew's readers may have found comfort in Jesus' words to his apostles that they would encounter persecution during their mission to Israel. The twelve had gone out to the cities and towns of Israel where Jesus has sent them, but many towns rejected their message. After the resurrection, followers of Jesus continued to try to persuade people in these towns that Jesus was the Messiah, but many were again met with rejection and persecution.⁶³ Matthew is reassuring his readers that the persecution they have encountered in carrying out Christ's mission is expected. Just as their mission is a continuation of the work begun by the apostles, so the persecution they experience is a continuation of that experienced by apostles. It is part of the divine plan.

Matt 11:12

We may find additional support in Matt 11:12 for my claim that Matthew would have us believe that Jesus' disciples were persecuted while

⁶¹ Luz (*Matthew 21–28*, 153–154) notes that Matthew's characterization of Pharisees in chapter 23 is not historically accurate. Similarly: Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19–28*, 316.

⁶² See Brown, "Mission to Israel," 78; France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 878.

⁶³ See Eckhard J. Schnabel, "The Persecution of Christians in the First Century." *JETS* 61 (2018), 525–547.

Jesus was still with them: “ἀπὸ δὲ τῶν ἡμερῶν Ἰωάννου τοῦ βαπτιστοῦ ἔως ἡρτι ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν βιάζεται καὶ βιασταὶ ἀρπάζουσιν αὐτήν.” This verse is hard to interpret; one question is how the verb *βιάζεται* should be read, as passive or middle. Is the kingdom forcing its way forward (middle) or is it suffering violence (passive)? And what are these forceful or violent men (*βιασταὶ*) doing — are they seizing or plundering the kingdom? Since the words *βιασταὶ* and *ἀρπάζω* generally have negative connotations, they probably do so here as well.⁶⁴ That in turn suggests that the preceding verb should be interpreted as a passive. The NIV captures the gist rather well: “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it.” In other words, from the time of John the Baptist through Jesus’ own ministry (in which his disciples played an active role), the proclamation of the kingdom of God had been met with violence.⁶⁵ Even though Matthew tells of how Herod (Antipas) imprisoned John only later in his narrative (14:3), he has just mentioned that John the Baptist had sent messengers to Jesus from prison (11:2). John’s imprisonment and execution are examples of how violent people were “laying violent hands” (11:12) on the kingdom.⁶⁶

Two verses later, in Matt 11:14, John the Baptist is identified with Elijah. In 17:12–13 he is again identified with Elijah and this time his

⁶⁴ Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 306; Davies and Allison, *Matthew 8–18*, 256; Nolland, *Gospel of Matthew*, 458.

⁶⁵ Tobias Hägerland suggested this argument in favor of my interpretation. France argues that the gist is that “the kingdom of heaven has been and remains subject to violent opposition” (*Gospel of Matthew*, 430). See also: Davies and Allison, *Matthew 8–18*, 256; Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, 141. Luke (16:16) has a formulation that resembles this quote in Matthew, but the differences in both wording and context between Luke’s quote and Matthew’s are so substantial that they are best analyzed separately from each other (see Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 307).

⁶⁶ Matthew W. Bates, “Cryptic Codes and a Violent King: A New Proposal for Matthew 11:12 and Luke 16:16–18.” *CBQ* 75 (2013) 74–93, especially pages 80–83. Bates sees Herod Antipas as the prototype of these violent people. Bates (pages 79, 80) uses the expression “laying violent hands.”

martyrdom is alluded to: “I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands” (17:12). While it was Herod [Antipas] who arrested John and had him beheaded (14:3–11), the implied subject in 17:12 are the scribes (17:10) and by extension Jewish leaders of all kinds who did not recognize that John had been authorized by God himself (cf. 21:23–27).⁶⁷ In Matthew’s text Jewish religious and political authorities, including Pharisees, Sadducees, and members of the Herodian dynasty, are consistently opposed to Jesus, at times even working together against him (3:7, 16:1–12).⁶⁸ That may not be historically accurate, but that is how Matthew portrays events. He gives the readers reason to believe that these leaders also persecuted Jesus’ disciples even before the crucifixion. The violence of which Jesus speaks in 11:12 did not only affect John the Baptist and Jesus but Jesus’ followers as well, even while Jesus was with them.⁶⁹

Persecution of the Apostles: Summary

While some have argued that Matt 10:23 cannot refer to an exclusive mission to Israel that took place before the crucifixion because there is no evidence that the disciples were persecuted before the crucifixion, I have shown that Matthew lets the reader imagine that the disciples were in fact persecuted from the beginning. Matthew is not necessarily concerned with historical accuracy.⁷⁰ He writes in part to encourage his readers and to make sense of their traumatic experiences. The enthronement of the

⁶⁷ Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, 400.

⁶⁸ Mark Allan Powell, “The Plot and Subplots of Matthew’s Gospel,” *NTS* 38 (1992), 200.

⁶⁹ Matthew does not include a counterpart to Luke 22:35–38, a passage that implied that in the future the disciples would meet with opposition unlike what had been the case when Jesus was with them.

⁷⁰ Meier notes that Matthew’s Gospel resembles John’s in “the free reworking of material, without too much concern for historical tradition, in order to make the material more fruitful for the life of the Church” (“Salvation-History,” 213).

Son of Man was never dependent on Jesus or his disciples being welcomed by all the towns of Israel.

FINAL NOTE: DID MATTHEW THINK THAT GOD HAD GIVEN UP ON THE JEWS?

This article answered some objections to France's interpretation of Matt 10:23 according to which the coming of the Son of Man and the end are separate events. Jesus' arrival before the Ancient of Days in 10:23 sets in motion the second part of his and his disciples' ministry, namely the ministry to the whole world. It is when that ministry is completed that the end will come (24:14).⁷¹ It is possible that some interpreters reject this interpretation because it claims that the exclusive mission to Israel came to an end at Christ's death and resurrection, and earlier exegetes who had come to the same conclusion implied that God had replaced Israel with the Gentile nations.⁷² But the end of a separate mission to Israel does not mean the replacement of the people of Israel.⁷³ Matthew expects his readers to be involved in missions to Jews. They compete with Pharisees for the allegiance of Jewish people (5:20; 23:3; 23:23, etc.). But now this Jewish mission is part of a larger worldwide mission, for as Matthew tells it, after the resurrection, the blanket ban on going to the Gentiles no longer applied (28:19).⁷⁴

⁷¹ Sim (*Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 171) argues that 10:23 and 24:14 must both refer to the same end-time as the same identical promise precedes them: "he who endures to the end will be saved" (10:22 and 24:13, RSV). See also Weaver, *Missionary Discourse*, 15, 156 n 10, 202 n 139. I am not persuaded. In both 10:22 and 24:13 Jesus can be interpreted as speaking of endurance to death or to judgment day, whatever comes first.

⁷² On Jerome's complex relation to Jews and Judaism see William L. Krewson, *Jerome and the Jews: Innovative Supersessionism* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2017).

⁷³ Contra William G. Thompson, "An Historical Perspective in the Gospel of Matthew." *JBL* 93 (1974), 243–262, 255.

⁷⁴ Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 280. Similarly: Davies and Allison: "The mission to Israel, which began in the pre-Easter period, has never concluded. [...] It continues — which is why the command to go to 'all nations' (28.19) includes Israel." (*Matthew 8–18*, 190).