



THE PAROUSIA OF JESUS IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS AND ACTS

Parables, meals, healings—all these are emblems of the sovereign rule of God in the public ministry of Jesus. So, according to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus pointed his contemporaries to the realm of God, graciously inviting their participation, but also summoning them to lives of costly commitment and claiming them for God's work in the world. God's rule was not something to be awaited in the future but was even now exerting itself; forces opposed to God were on the run and God's people were experiencing liberation and empowerment for a life of radical service.

One could therefore both proclaim and practice in the present the life of the blessed future promised by God. Yet Israel's experience mirrored another reality as well. Roman domination of the Holy Land and Holy City was not touched in the least by Jesus' mighty deeds. Surely the crucifixion of Jesus—expression of the brutal, coercive power of Rome—put the lie to premature claims for the presence of God's mighty rule. And if the first followers of Jesus embody the possibilities of the new order being fashioned by God, what a fragile order it must be!

For all the signs of God's activity in Jesus' own life and words, in the end, one was still left waiting and hoping. Even the triumph of Easter left the agenda unfinished: Jesus may be installed in power by God's own side in heaven, but life on earth continues much as before. So he will come again to complete his mission, calling evil to account and gathering the faithful into God's eternal realm. This second coming, then, would differ dramatically from the first: he would come in power, in glory, and in triumph. None will escape his coming. The whole world—indeed, the whole universe—will take note.

Mark, Matthew, and Luke witness to this complex array of experiences, hopes, and adaptations of belief, yet each Gospel develops the theme in its own way. The task of this chapter will be to describe the patterns of parousia expectation in each of the Synoptics, beginning with the earliest (Mark) and concluding with Luke and its sequel (Acts).

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

The future beckons. God's mighty rule, with its promise of liberation and peace, is breaking into the world; time has nearly run its course. On this note of intense expectation, Mark's narrative begins. John the Baptizer, whom Jesus will later identify as Elijah, the end-time prophet of restoration (9:12–13), announces the coming of a stronger one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit (1:7–8). Jesus' very first words then mark the present as a time of fulfillment and decisive encounter with God. This is the gospel he proclaims in Galilee (1:14b): "The time (καιρός) is fulfilled, and God's reign has drawn near; repent, and believe in this good news" (1:15).

Jesus is that stronger one in whom the dominion of God begins to reclaim the world from the evil one's domination. Through exorcisms, he liberates those whom Satan has oppressed; the powerful enemy of God is now on the defensive (cf. 3:23–27). And the authority of the Son of humanity extends beyond these clashes with demons. He claims the divine prerogative to offer forgiveness (2:10), and expresses this authority both

in acts of healing (2:1–12) and in fellowship at table (2:15–17). Not even time-honored restrictions on Sabbath conduct can keep him from mighty deeds of healing, for he, the Son of humanity, is “Lord of the Sabbath” (2:28). If we are to believe the confession of Peter and Jesus’ own reply to the high priest’s query, Jesus’ ministry is the work of Israel’s Messiah (8:29; 14:61–62). In the first “coming” of Jesus—to preach good news, summon sinners into God’s household, and liberate the oppressed (1:38; 2:17; 10:45)—eyes of faith can discern the transformative work of the sovereign God.

Eyes of faith, however, are seldom in evidence, even among Jesus’ closest followers: far easier to restore sight to the blind than to give spiritual discernment to the Twelve!¹ That the disciples fail to grasp the “mystery of God’s reign” opened up to them by Jesus (4:11) is neither surprising nor ultimately discrediting. The Messiah was not expected to encounter rejection, humiliation, and death on a cross. Death in God-forsaken disgrace, deserted by his most devoted followers—this was not to be the Messiah’s vocation. The end of the story belies the confident declaration of fulfillment with which the narrative began. Evil is not so easily vanquished after all.

But of course the reader is not caught off guard by these developments. Jesus repeatedly alerts Mark’s audience to his approaching fate, beginning with an implicit prophecy of his demise as early as 2:20 (“the bridegroom will be taken away”). The clues become increasingly obvious and specific after the conversation with disciples near Caesarea Philippi (8:31; 9:31; 10:32–34). Jesus is the Son of humanity precisely as one who

¹ The two healing scenes in which Jesus restores sight to blind men (8:22–26; 10:46–52) frame a section in which Jesus discloses his identity and destiny, but the disciples fail to comprehend either. On the negative portrayal of the disciples in Mark, see S. R. Garrett, *The Temptations of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 69–82; R. M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 66–73; M. A. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark’s World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 176–230; V. K. Robbins, *Jesus the Teacher: A Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

experiences suffering, rejection, and death; the eschatological glory fitting for the Son of humanity (e.g., Dan 7:13–14; *1 Enoch* 46) will have to wait. First comes crucifixion: ironically, this is his royal coronation.²

In pointing to his coming death, Jesus also anticipates his vindication by God through resurrection on the third day (8:31; 9:31; 10:34). The specificity of these predictions is matched by the mystery that enshrouds the event itself. After the Last Supper, extending these passion/resurrection predictions, Jesus speaks not only of his resurrection—after the “sheep” have been “scattered” (14:27, alluding to Zech 13:7)—but also of reunion with the disciples in Galilee (14:28). The young man at the empty tomb reminds the women disciples³ of this promise: “But go, tell [Jesus’] disciples, and Peter, that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you” (16:7). Yet the narrative closes without relating any encounter with the risen Jesus. The last word of the Second Gospel is one of silence and mystery: fleeing the tomb in fear,⁴ the women tell no one what they have witnessed.

The reader has good reason to believe that the promised reunion—and implied restoration of the disciples—did actually occur. After all, Jesus is a supremely reliable speaker in this gospel;⁵ every verifiable prediction to this point in the story has been fulfilled.⁶ And the reader is hearing the account of these

² See F. J. Matera, *Passion Narratives and Gospel Theologies: Interpreting the Synoptics through Their Passion Stories* (TI; New York: Paulist, 1986), 7–85; idem, *The Kingship of Jesus: Composition and Theology in Mark 15* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982); D. Senior, *The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark* (Wilmington, Del.: Glazier, 1984).

³ The women show themselves to be authentic disciples, even if the term is not applied to them in Mark; they follow Jesus to the tomb, while the male disciples have fled.

⁴ As the male disciples before them had fled the garden.

⁵ Because his point of view squares with the “evaluative point of view of God,” which is normative in this narrative. See J. D. Kingsbury, *The Christology of Mark’s Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 47–50.

⁶ Most notably Judas’s betrayal, Peter’s denial, and the “scattering” of the rest of the disciples; cf. D. H. Juel, *A Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 114–15.

events; the women must have ended their silence. Still, the story ends with only the tantalizing *promise* of reunion and restoration, and with one final sign of discipleship failure. The effect of this narrative “closure” is that anticipation of encounter in Galilee with the risen Lord and expectation of the parousia of Jesus converge. We are left awaiting Jesus’ return to meet his restored community; since the Easter appearance goes unreported, the narrative’s close points the reader ahead to the parousia. Not Easter but the still-future parousia is the time of fulfillment toward which faith strains. But what will happen when Jesus returns?

Mark’s Gospel presents various images relating to the parousia, many of them concentrated in the eschatological discourse of chapter 13. This discourse, addressed privately to four disciples on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, responds initially to the disciples’ query, When will this magnificent temple’s destruction, of which you have just spoken, happen? Throughout the speech, however, Jesus broadens the scope of his instruction to include the whole cosmos.

Concern with the timing not just of the temple’s demise but of the End itself runs throughout Mark 13.⁷ On the one hand, Jesus accents the imminence of these events, with such pictures as the Son of humanity (by implication) at the door (v. 29) and the claim that Jesus’ generation will witness the End (v. 30; cf. 9:1). On the other hand, the discourse gives prominence to the motif of delay. The eschaton will not arrive immediately, but only after various events first occur. During the period leading up to the End, God’s people will witness cosmic strife and earthquakes (vv. 7–8), and they will experience persecution (vv. 9, 11, 13), family strife (v. 12), and for those living in Judea, suffering

⁷ On the interpretation of this discourse, and of Markan eschatology generally, see T. J. Geddert, *Watchwords: Mark 13 in Markan Eschatology* (JSNTSup 26; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989); G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days: The Interpretation of the Olivet Discourse* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1993); V. Balabanski, *Eschatology in the Making: Mark, Matthew, and the Didache* (SNTSMS 97; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 55–100.

of unprecedented intensity (vv. 14–20). All the while, the community of disciples is charged with carrying the gospel to all nations in the time that stretches out before the End (v. 10). The parousia will *follow* this period of worldwide mission (v. 10) and unprecedented distress (vv. 24–25). Twice, Jesus also mentions deceivers who will bring confusion into the community with claims to be or to be able to identify the Messiah (vv. 5–6, 21–22). The parable at the discourse’s close reinforces this theme of delay. Servants awaiting their master’s return must perform their assigned tasks faithfully during his absence, because the time of the master’s return is unknown (vv. 33–36). In the same way—despite all the specific information the discourse provides regarding the End and its timetable—Jesus insists that the timing of the End is known only to God (v. 32). The eschatological discourse, therefore, holds the imminence of the parousia and its delayed arrival in tense balance. Jesus will surely come, and soon, but not immediately—and no one knows precisely when.

The parousia of Jesus will occur soon but cannot be predicted. The only posture that squares with such a belief is unwavering alertness and readiness. And this is precisely the approach Jesus commends in Mark 13. As a refrain throughout the last half of the discourse, the appeal to “be alert” or “stay awake” (vv. 23, 33, 35, 37) confronts the reader. This message is not confined to Jesus’ immediate audience of Peter, James, John, and Andrew, but is emphatically addressed “to all” (v. 37). The entire community must remain ever vigilant.

Mark 13 shows considerable interest in the question, When will the parousia happen? As we have already begun to discover, however, other questions are of greater significance. What will happen when Jesus returns? And above all, what are we to do, and how are we to live, in the light of this hope? How do these images of the parousia and related end-time events work on the reader of Mark’s Gospel?

In a passage laced with imagery borrowed from Old Testament prophetic oracles, Mark associates Jesus’ future coming with cosmic portents affecting sun, moon, stars, and other heavenly

forces (13:24–25).⁸ In stark contrast to the hollow claims of messianic pretenders and other eschatological deceivers (“I am he” [13:6]; “Look! There’s the Messiah!” [13:21]), the parousia will be accompanied by remarkable events no one will miss. The scale is grand and cosmic.

Three times in Mark, Jesus taps Daniel’s vision of the Son of humanity (Dan 7:13–14) to portray his own future coming in glory (8:38), or with clouds and great power and glory (13:26; 14:62). As in Daniel 7, Mark assigns the parousia both negative and positive functions. Negatively, the majestic presentation of the Son of humanity renders judgment against evil; positively, it vindicates the Son of humanity (and with him, the chosen people), and it is the occasion for the gathering or constitution in power of the elect community of God’s faithful.

After revealing (or rather, attempting to reveal) to the disciples his messianic destiny of suffering and rejection as the Son of humanity (8:31–33), Jesus warns the crowds as well that the call to follow him is a summons to a life of adversity and self-surrender (8:34–37). Despite the great peril and cost of discipleship, Jesus expects his followers to remain loyal. They are to hold firm in their public witness to him; otherwise, he (as the Son of humanity) will in turn repudiate them “when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (8:38). Mark 9:1 shifts from the language of the coming of the Son of humanity to that of the coming of God’s dominion. Jesus assures his audience that some of them will live to see that the reign of God has come “with power.” The parousia is evidently a crucial element of the future expression of God’s sovereign rule, with which it is so closely linked here. Like 13:30, then, this passage affirms the imminence of the eschatological appearing of Jesus—within a generation—and implies that it will bring vindication for the faithful, even as it calls to account those whose allegiance has wavered. The image of Jesus’ final coming therefore supports this discourse’s appeal for courageous, steadfast commitment to the path of discipleship.

⁸ See Isa 13:10; 34:4; Ezek 32:7–8; Joel 2:10, 31; Amos 8:9.

Even more clearly, the parousia serves to vindicate (Jesus) and indict (his adversaries) in 14:62. Under interrogation by the high priest after his arrest, Jesus again turns to the vision of Daniel 7, this time in combination with the exaltation text of Ps 110:1. Not content to affirm his messianic status in reply to the high priest's query, Jesus embellishes: "[Y]ou will see the Son of humanity seated at the right hand of power, and coming with the clouds of heaven."⁹ Jesus, the one about to be condemned to death, will soon be installed in power by God and, as an expression of that power, will return to turn the tables on his accusers. Once again, Jesus' future coming vindicates those who remain true to God in the face of suffering, and at the same time judges those who condemn him.

The end-time discourse of chapter 13 develops the positive aspect of the parousia. On the occasion of sustained and severe suffering for God's people, Jesus will come to deliver the saints. Dispatching heavenly messengers on the four winds, he gathers the chosen of God from even the most remote locations on earth. For all who persevere in faith and commitment to the ways of God, the final coming of Jesus means not condemnation but salvation. In the context of social crisis and intense suffering for one's faith, therefore, the parousia sustains hope and thereby undergirds persevering religious commitment on the part of a hard-pressed community. It may seem that deliverance will never come, but God is merciful and may be trusted to act on behalf of the faithful. Parousia hope challenges the wavering to stay the course, despite adversity, and it consoles and reassures the community still caught in the grip of oppression and suffering.

To summarize: how does expectation of Jesus' return work on Mark's reader? (1) It reinforces belief that Jesus—the apparently disconfirming evidence of the crucifixion notwithstand-

⁹ See the discussion of this saying by D. Bock, "The Son of Man Seated at God's Right Hand and the Debate over Jesus' 'Blasphemy,'" in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ. Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology* (ed. J. B. Green and M. Turner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 181–91.

ing—is the agent of divine salvation. (2) In association with the fearful prospect of end-time judgment, it holds the community accountable and warns how much is at stake in continuing faithful witness to the gospel. (3) It sustains hope in a community facing intense social pressures, and reassures them that hardship will soon fade and they will experience liberation for eternal life from a gracious God.

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Only in Matthew among the canonical Gospels does the word *parousia* (παρουσία) appear (see 24:3, 27, 37, 39), a detail that suggests the cardinal importance of Jesus' future coming—and of the end-time events generally—in this narrative. Yet it is not Jesus' return but above all else imagery relating to eschatological judgment that dominates the apocalyptic vision of Matthew.

Parousia and Matthew's Narrative: Literary Features

Although the structure of this narrative has been described in various ways, the contribution of Jesus' major discourses to the structure and thematic coherence of Matthew is widely recognized and can scarcely be overstated.¹⁰ Eschatological images and themes are prominent in each of these six discourses, especially in their culminating sections.¹¹ The Sermon on the Mount

¹⁰ For a recent discussion of the problem of Matthew's literary structure, see D. Senior, *Matthew* (IBT; Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 24–32; cf. J. D. Kingsbury, *Matthew As Story* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 40–42; idem, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 1–39; D. R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 1–2.

¹¹ A point made by D. Hagner, "Apocalyptic Motifs in the Gospel of Matthew: Continuity and Discontinuity," *HBT* 7 (1985): 63–68. Although Hagner (with most Matthean commentators) speaks of five discourses, the clear change of location and audience (just the disciples now) in 24:1 suggests that a new (sixth) discourse begins in ch. 24. On the coherence of chs. 23–25, see F. W. Burnett, *The Testament of Jesus*

(5:3–7:27) warns listeners that they must refrain from judging others, if they are to avoid being judged themselves (7:1). Hints of judgment are interspersed throughout the discourse (5:22, 29–30; 7:13), alongside the fearful prospect of exclusion from the company of those blessed by God (5:20; 7:21–23). The second discourse, in which Jesus authorizes and instructs his disciples for their mission (10:5–42), incorporates some of the material contained in Jesus’ eschatological discourse in Mark 13 (see Matt 10:17–22—the rest appears in Matthew 24), and enriches it with further pictures of final judgment (10:15, 28, 33) and eschatological urgency: “... you will not come to the end of the cities of Israel before the Son of humanity comes” (10:23). So Matthew 10 places the church’s mission, and the missionary context of opposition and persecution, in an eschatological frame. The parables of God’s sovereign rule (13:3–50) cast the spotlight on the reality of eschatological judgment. For the present, God is patient with evil in the world, but in the end, separation of the just and the wicked is certain (vv. 36–43, 47–50). The ecclesial discourse (18:2–35) summons the community of disciples to the ideals of humility, mercy, and accountability, reinforcing these moral appeals with stern warnings of future judgment (vv. 8–9, 35). Jesus’ indictment of the “scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites” (23:2–39) concludes on this note as well. For a grim history of violence against God’s righteous ones, Jesus’ contemporaries (“this generation”) will pay the price. The Holy City and Holy Residence of God will from now on know desolation and divine absence (vv. 34–39). Naturally, the end-time discourse of chapters 24–25, with its fervent appeals for vigilance, readiness, and faithful service and its closing picture of final judgment of the nations, clinches a prominent concern of Jesus’ public teaching in this gospel.¹²

Sophia: A Redaction-Critical Study of the Eschatological Discourse in Matthew (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981).

¹² For recent discussion of Matthean eschatology, see Balabanski, *Eschatology in the Making*, 24–54, 135–79; D. C. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew* (SNTSMS 88; Cambridge: Cambridge

It is fitting, therefore, that the risen Messiah's (and the gospel's) final words point ahead to the "close of the age" (28:20). Yet Matthew's story shows keen interest in what happens in the meantime; this is, in fact, the situation of the reader.¹³ This situation presupposes the experience of delay in the completion of the divine agenda with Israel and with the world (e.g., 24:8, 14, 48; 25:1–30). And during this time of waiting, the community will encounter severe tests of its fidelity to its Lord. Even within the community of disciples, law keeping will be relaxed and love will "grow cold" (24:12). Only those who persevere in faith, those who remain faithful during this time of waiting before the Lord's return, will know the eternal blessing of heaven. Between resurrection and parousia, however, the community is not left to its own devices. It has a mission: to carry the teaching of the Messiah to all nations, making disciples everywhere (28:16–20). And in fulfilling this task, the community of disciples will be guided and empowered by the Messiah present among them (28:20, forming with 1:23 a frame around the entire story of Jesus: "God-present" in Emmanuel, 1:23; cf. 18:20; 25:40). One must be ever ready for the Messiah's second coming, but the Messiah who will come is the same one who has brought Israel's entire history to its goal (the point of the genealogy in 1:2–17), and whose death and resurrection have already inaugurated the eschatological era.¹⁴

University Press, 1996); B. Charette, *The Theme of Recompense in Matthew's Gospel* (JSNTSup 79; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992); D. E. Orton, *The Understanding Scribe: Matthew and the Apocalyptic Ideal* (JSNTSup 25; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989); note also the recent dissertations by J. Gibbs, " 'Let the Reader Understand': The Eschatological Discourse of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel" (Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 1995), and K. Weber, "The Events of the End of the Age in Matthew" (Catholic University of America, 1994).

¹³ See Kingsbury, *Matthew As Story*, 147–48.

¹⁴ Especially evident in the apocalyptic signs of Matt 27:51–53. See J. T. Carroll and J. B. Green, *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995), 48–49; R. E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion*

*Parousia and History:
Matthew's Apocalyptic Perspective*

From the very beginning, Matthew announces that the history of God's people has reached its goal: Messiah has come! (1:16–17). For the characters we meet in Matthew's story, it would not miss the mark to borrow a line from Paul: these are the ones "upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor 10:11). Jesus distinguishes "this age" from "the age to come" (12:32), and in allegorical explanations of two parables about God's reign speaks of the "end of the age" (13:39–40, 49). With the recurring image of the harvest—a vivid image of the end of the age—Matthew indicates that the transition to the new age (cf. 19:28) is imminent (see 3:12; 9:37–38; 13:30; cf. 13:39).

John the Baptizer associates Jesus with this eschatological harvest (3:12). Jesus, in turn, identifies John as "Elijah who is to come" (11:14)—that is, as Jesus later instructs the disciples, the Elijah who "is coming and will restore all things" has already come (17:9–13). John's suffering and violent death prefigure the suffering and death of the Son of humanity. And that latter death is the pivot on which history turns. Borrowing imagery from the prophetic scriptures (Ezek 37:7, 12–13; Zech 14:4–5; Joel 2:10), Matthew paints Jesus' death in apocalyptic colors. Darkness covers the land (27:45), and when an earthquake attends the moment of death, the tombs are opened and "many saints" are resurrected (27:51–53). While this stunning set of events, narrated only by Matthew, anticipates and does not constitute the eschatological resurrection, such a rendering of the crucifixion highlights its eschatological significance. Much more prominent in this gospel, however, is the imagery of end-time judgment. Underlying and reinforcing this temporal dualism of the ages is a strident ethical dualism.

Narratives in the Four Gospels (2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 2:1118–34; D. Senior, *The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew* (Wilmington, Del.: Glazier, 1985), 143–49.

Parousia and Judgment

Warnings and depictions of eschatological judgment permeate Jesus' teaching in Matthew. Fundamentally, judgment means separation of the good and the bad, the righteous and the evil that are so thoroughly intertwined in this age—even within the community of disciples. As the parable of the wheat and the weeds makes clear (13:24–30, together with the allegorical exposition in vv. 36–43), Satan is the source of the world's evil, which often masquerades as good. The community must therefore exercise careful discernment, yet it is not charged with the responsibility of rooting out evil in the present; while it is to embody the highest ideals of justice and accountability (18:15–20), its primary charge is to seek out and restore the lost (18:10–14). In fact, even God patiently allows good and evil to coexist for the time being. Only at the eschaton will evil be definitively named and condemned. The Son of humanity, who as the sower of good seed—the children of God's realm—is Satan's counterpart in the world's conflict (13:37–38), also serves as God's agent to administer judgment “at the end of the age.” The Son of humanity will send his angels, and they will remove evil from the midst of the righteous (13:41). A furnace of fire awaits the wicked, while the righteous will enjoy the brilliant splendor of God's realm (vv. 42–43).

The parable about good and bad fish, for a time tossed together in the net but eventually separated on the shore (13:47–50), and the judgment scene of the sheep and the goats with which Jesus' teaching concludes (25:31–46) return to the theme of eschatological judgment as separation.¹⁵ If we take our cue from the picture of judgment in Matthew 25, the glorious parousia of the Son of humanity sets the stage for the judgment of the nations, and there will be some surprises. Whether commended for actions of love and mercy or called to account for neglecting the needy among them, people express surprise at their good (or

¹⁵ In this connection one thinks also of the abrupt expulsion of the wedding guest who lacks appropriate attire (22:11–13).

bad) fortune. In their action, or in their inaction, they had not realized that in these “little ones” they actually encountered the King/Judge himself.¹⁶ The element of surprise in this passage works with the motif of the intermixture of good and bad until their eventual separation at the End to undergird the moral appeals of Jesus in Matthew. A community shaped by such teaching will be marked by humility and will never become self-assured and complacent before the challenges to faithfulness that life in this age presents.

Judgment involves an ultimate separation of good and bad for which only God, through the agency of the Son of humanity, is the arbiter. What are the criteria for judgment? A number of images come into play:

1. Has one performed the will of God (7:21; 12:50)?
2. What kind of fruit does one produce (3:8, 10; 7:16, 20; 12:33)?
3. Has one acknowledged Jesus (10:32–33)?¹⁷
4. Does one manifest the humility of a child, who lacks social status (18:3–4; cf. 19:14)?
5. Has one extended forgiveness to others before expecting to be the recipient of divine mercy (6:14–15; 18:35)?

¹⁶ For recent discussion of the interpretation of this parable, see J. P. Heil, “The Double Meaning of the Narrative of Universal Judgment in Matthew 25.31–46,” *JSNT* 68 (1998): 3–14; U. Luz, “The Final Judgment (Matt 25:31–46): An Exercise in ‘History of Influence’ Exegesis,” in *Treasures New and Old: Contributions to Matthean Studies* (ed. D. R. Bauer and M. A. Powell; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 271–310, esp. 304–8. Luz makes a strong case that the Matthean community belongs to the πάντα τὰ ἔθνη and will be judged by the same criterion (305). Such a reading of the parable accords well with Matthew’s concern with the formation of this community’s moral life.

¹⁷ Contrast the Sanhedrin’s hostile reception of Jesus in 26:57–68. Since they have refused to acknowledge him, his glorious coming (v. 64) can only mean trouble for his accusers.

6. Has one kept the commandments and, specifically, surrendered possessions (19:16–22)—that is, does the pattern of one’s life display radical obedience to God?¹⁸

In order to withstand the eschatological judgment, the community is called to a life that conforms to the will of God, disclosed in the Torah and the prophets and definitively expounded by Jesus. He has taught the will of God, and at his parousia (as Son of humanity) he “will repay everyone for what they have done” (16:27).¹⁹

The penalties for failing to perform the will of God are harsh. Matthew develops the judgment theme with severe images of torment and exclusion. One who fails to hear and heed the teaching of Jesus is like a house that comes to ruin (7:26–27). Persons who should have inherited God’s realm and enjoyed the company of the patriarchs are displaced from the table and find themselves in darkness, where they “weep and gnash their teeth” (8:11–12)—an ominous refrain that returns with variations in 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30. Cities that did not repent after witnessing the Messiah’s acts of power and compassion will fare worse “on the day of judgment” than Sodom (11:20–24). A fiery furnace awaits evildoers at the eschaton (13:41–42, 49–50). In a parable about a slave who receives mercy but insists on justice in dealing with another slave, Jesus warns that when mercy fails, justice will be swift and severe (18:23–35). An unfortunate wedding guest who lacks appropriate attire is bound and thrown into the “outer darkness” (22:11–13). A slave who takes advantage of the master’s protracted absence and abuses other slaves will be cut in pieces and consigned to a place of torment “with the hypocrites” (24:48–51). Members of the wedding party who are unprepared for the bridegroom’s arrival will be excluded from the wedding feast (25:1–13). A cautious and fearful

¹⁸ One might point also to 5:20, which offers as a condition of entry into God’s realm the living out of a righteousness surpassing that of scribes and Pharisees. The antitheses (5:21–48) exemplify the higher righteousness Jesus requires of his disciples.

¹⁹ Including careless and malicious speech (5:22; 12:36–37).

slave who fails to invest a talent entrusted to his management is—no surprise here!—cast into the outer darkness among those who weep and gnash their teeth (25:30). And those who neglect the needy among “the least” are sent to eternal punishment in the form of a perpetual fire (25:41, 46).

Even this partial list makes the point. Matthew’s readers learn that they are accountable for what they say and do, and if they prove unfaithful the consequences will be dire. Membership within the community of disciples is no guarantee. As in apocalyptic texts generally, pictures of end-time judgment in Matthew undergird the moral appeals advanced in the course of the narrative.²⁰ The community addressed by this gospel is to exemplify the highest ideals of righteous living. Underscoring with this haunting judgment imagery how much is at stake, this narrative will not let its audience off the hook. The parousia will be for the community—as for the rest of the world—a time for accounting. And that means anticipation of the parousia has as much to do with the community’s present life as with its future.

The Parousia and the Community’s Present

Responding Appropriately to the Experience of Delay

Although Jesus speaks in Matthew of the near approach of the parousia for his generation (10:23; 16:27–28; 24:34; cf. 23:36), the narrative addresses an audience that has experienced a delay in the fulfillment of the promised eschatological events. The delay motif is especially prominent in the eschatological discourse (chs. 24–25), but it is already implicit in the symbolism of the parable on wheat and weeds (13:24–30). Troubled by the appearance of tares, the slaves who work the field ask their master whether they should proceed at once to uproot these weeds

²⁰ J. J. Collins (*The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* [New York: Crossroad, 1984], 32) contends that apocalyptic literature, by opening up a transcendent perspective on reality, typically serves the twin functions of consolation and exhortation. Matthew sharply accents the latter.

(v. 28). The owner of the field counsels patience, however; the weeds will be allowed to grow with the wheat until the harvest (vv. 29–30). Just so, the wicked will coexist with the righteous until the close of the age. At the parousia, evil will be rooted out of God’s realm; for now, judgment—and the righteous—will have to wait.

The end-time discourse (chs. 24–25) develops the theme explicitly. The disciples ask Jesus a two-part question: (1) when will the temple’s destruction occur, and (2) what signs will prefigure the parousia and the end of the age (24:3)? Jesus’ response begins by applying the brakes. A period of international crisis and warfare, of earthquake and famine, does not signal the End but marks the onset of the eschatological distress that precedes it (vv. 6–8). The End will arrive only after the church’s mission to all nations, which will also be a time of persecution and community strife (vv. 9–14). Still, at the close of this period, the parousia of the Son of humanity will be universal, unmistakable, and immediate—to the consternation of the nations but for the deliverance of the chosen (vv. 15–35).

This juxtaposition of delay and imminence sets the stage for the urgent appeals for vigilance in 24:36–25:30. Since the precise chronology of the end-time events is unknown, readers are admonished to be continually awake and alert, if they would avoid the fate of Noah’s contemporaries (vv. 36–39). For that generation, the day of the flood began with business as usual, and because they were unaware and unprepared it ended in their destruction. The arrival of the Son of humanity will happen so suddenly that workers in the same field and women grinding grain together will be separated (vv. 40–41). Like a thief, the Son of humanity will come unexpectedly (vv. 42–44).

Jesus combines the motifs of delay and unexpected arrival in two parables drawn from household life (24:45–25:13). The first parabolic narrative (24:45–51) contrasts (1) a faithful and discerning (φρόνιμος) slave, who at his master’s return (as usual) is carrying out his assigned duties, and (2) an evil slave, who at the realization of his master’s delay (χρονίζει) parties and beats other slaves. When the κύριος (“master” or “Lord”)

does come, the unfaithful slave will be severely punished. The ensuing parable turns on a contrast between discerning (again, φρόνιμοι) and foolish young women (25:1–13). When a bridegroom delays (χρονίζοντος) on his way to the wedding banquet, the five bridesmaids who come prepared with an ample supply of lamp oil are privileged to enter, while the door is shut on the five who did not consider the possibility of delay and so were unprepared. Verse 13 drives home the point for Matthew’s community of readers: “So be alert, for you do not know the day or the hour.” Their Lord may well delay, and they do not know the chronology of the parousia, but if they remain vigilant they will be ready for his glorious return.

How should the community of readers respond to the experience of delay? The importance of constant vigilance and readiness is clear from the materials we have treated so far, but so too is the summons to faithfulness. During a time of waiting, the household slave or the member of the wedding party is to perform the task allotted to him or her. The parable of the talents further develops this theme: a wealthy master’s lengthy delay tests the faithful service of three slaves (25:14–30). Only those slaves who take the risk of investing their master’s money and produce a profit receive commendation and reward. The one slave who, immobilized by fear, simply buries the talent entrusted to him is branded “evil” and consigned to the outer darkness. The Matthean community will not doubt that they too must produce a return on the wealth—including above all the message of God’s reign and the teaching of Jesus—that has been entrusted to them.

If the culminating parabolic scene in the chapter—the judgment of the nations (25:31–46)—is to be read as a universal judgment scene that includes the disciples among “all the nations,”²¹ then this passage, too, reinforces the connection between eschatological judgment at the parousia and the community’s faithful performance of the will of God. In this case, it is the active expression of love and mercy toward the needy “least ones” that

²¹ So, e.g., Heil, “Double Meaning.”

makes all the difference. During the time that stretches out before the Lord's return, the community must extend hospitality and compassionate care to those in need.²²

**Present Crisis and Threats to Community:
Solidarity and Faithfulness**

Faithfully serving God will not come easily during the time that stretches out between the Messiah's resurrection and his parousia. Jesus warns that dissension within the church and conflict with outsiders will seriously threaten community solidarity and fidelity. The ecclesial discourse (ch. 18) pictures a community in which grievances may go unresolved, requiring the expulsion of some members (vv. 15–17).²³ And the eschatological discourse (chs. 24–25) anticipates a period of such intense and frequent persecution that many within the community will turn against their brothers and sisters in faith. Matthew's church will know acts of betrayal, the confusing claims of false

²² For some scholars, the needy "least ones" with whom the king identifies are the disciples—or, more specifically, the community's missionaries. The message would therefore be that the rest of the world will be judged on the basis of their treatment of the disciples (missionaries). The passage, on this view, consoles a community undergoing adversity in the course of its mission. See, most recently, Hare, *Matthew*, 288–92; G. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 207–32; D. J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (SP 1; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991), 357–60. Nevertheless, the parenetic thrust of the end-time discourse as a whole, with the continuity between its picture of final judgment as separation and earlier examples of such judgment extending to the community of disciples, supports the argument that the disciples are judged here along with the rest of the nations. Unlike the rest of the nations that fail to bear fruit, however, they can prove to be a nation (ἐθνος) that produces fruit (21:43).

²³ Given the roles played by "Gentiles and toll collectors" in Matthew, ironically, those expelled—now as outsiders ("a Gentile and a toll collector," v. 17)—become the target of the community's mercy and mission. Sim (*Apocalyptic Eschatology*) sharply exaggerates the anti-Gentile animus of Matthew. His treatment of Matthean eschatology emphasizes the element of group solidarity and social control (esp. 235–41).

prophets, and the dissolution of communal norms (ἀνομία [*anomia*], “lawlessness,” 24:9–12). Jesus effectively captures the social crisis that will beset Matthew’s church with this disturbing image: “[T]he love of many will grow cold” (24:12).

These haunting images near the close of Jesus’ public teaching reinforce the picture that the mission discourse (ch. 10) had already painted of the disciples’ mission as “sheep [sent] into the midst of wolves” (v. 16). Interrogation and physical abuse before synagogue and town council (vv. 17–20), family division and betrayal (v. 21), widespread animosity and rejection (vv. 22–23)—this is the character of the disciples’ mission on behalf of a messiah who was likewise rejected as an agent of evil (vv. 24–25). If the Matthean church is to remain true to its calling as it awaits deliverance at the triumphant return of its Lord, it has its work cut out for it.

The Church in Mission to Israel and to the Nations

“But the one who endures to the end will be saved” (10:22; the promise reappears in 24:13): the perseverance of which Jesus speaks includes persistence in mission activity in the face of opposition and persecution. In the course of his own ministry among the lost in Israel, Jesus initially directs his followers to heal and proclaim God’s reign among the “lost sheep of the house of Israel,” bypassing Gentile and Samaritan alike (10:5–6; cf. 15:24). This mission among the towns of Israel—in the face of adversity and persecution—would not be completed before the parousia of the Son of humanity (10:23).

Yet in the narrative’s impressive culminating scene, the risen Jesus broadens—indeed, universalizes—the scope of the disciples’ mission. Now they are sent to “all nations” to make disciples, to baptize, and to teach (28:19–20a).²⁴ They do so confident that they are not on their own; the presence of the risen

²⁴ Some understand πάντα τὰ ἔθνη to mean “all Gentiles,” excluding Jews (e.g., the scholars mentioned in n. 22 above). It seems much more likely that, as in the earlier judgment scene (25:32), the expression means “all nations,” including Gentiles and Jews.

Lord sustains them for as long as their mission may last, until the close of the age (28:20b). Even though this last scene in the narrative appears to mute the earlier expectation of an imminent parousia before the close of the mission to Israel (10:23), the last words of the gospel—“until the close of the age”—reinforce the message that despite the passage of time and the obvious reality of a delay in Jesus’ return, Matthew’s community conducts its mission to Israel and to the world in the shadow of the End.

*Effects of Parousia Imagery in Matthew:
One Reader’s Reflection*

The parousia of Jesus is closely tied to the pivotal Matthean theme of eschatological judgment. With these images of the future toward which the community strains, the teaching of Jesus in this gospel clearly aims to motivate readers to lead lives that express obedience, justice, and mercy. One must hear and then put into practice the wise teachings of the Messiah Jesus. Confronted over and over again by glimpses of the contrasting eschatological destinies that await the just and the wicked, readers get the point that much is at stake in the community’s response to the treasure that has been entrusted to it.

A reader today will likely struggle with the imagery the narrative employs, and will come to acknowledge its limitations even while affirming the fundamental values of justice and mercy Matthew seeks to promote. Be merciful, or face eternal torment! Act generously and compassionately toward others, or you will be cut off from the company of heaven! How effectively do threats like this support the appeal to show mercy? If Matthew’s first readers were not troubled with such questions, they do give many a modern reader pause. And yet we may readily affirm Matthew’s insistence on the divine commitment to justice—with all that means for our own commitment to justice. It matters how we live, how we respond to divine grace. The gospel is only heard—really heard—when it springs to life in acts of love and mercy and faithful service. If threats of punishment fall on resistant ears today, Matthew also lures us toward its moral vision with more subtle and positive charms. Above all, there is

the reality of divine graciousness, as modeled in Jesus' own life among toll collectors and sinners, pressing outward beyond the lost sheep in Israel's house and extending even to Gentiles. Having experienced undeserved mercy, one cannot but be impelled to extend mercy also to others. And then comes the surprising discovery: in serving others out of love one is in fact serving the sovereign God before whom nations, history, and time itself bow in reverence (25:31–46).

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Matthew and, to a lesser degree, Mark both enable readers to come to terms with the experience of delay. Despite the delay in God's deliverance of the faithful and in Jesus' promised return, hope directed toward these eschatological events is reaffirmed. They will happen in the near future, and the community must live faithfully and vigilantly in preparation for the End. Luke's Gospel charts a similar course, addressing with even greater clarity the problem of delayed fulfillment. At the same time, Luke throws the spotlight on the presence of salvation in the public ministry of Jesus and—already by anticipation in the gospel and by narration in its sequel, Acts—on the extension of God's saving work to all people.

Jesus Embodies Salvation for the People of God

From its opening lines, the Gospel of Luke celebrates the fulfillment of God's saving purposes. This narrative, according to the preface, concerns "the things that have been fulfilled among us" (1:1), and the story begins by recalling ancient promises of deliverance and blessing for Israel. These promises, given ages before to Abraham (1:55, 73), to David (1:32), and to all the people through the prophets (1:55, 70–72)—promises long deferred and seemingly long forgotten—will now be honored by God. John will ready the nation for the deliverance the Messiah will bring, and Jesus will embody divine salvation for the people, though in ways that surprise, astonish, and even provoke many within Israel.

The air is charged with expectancy as the story opens. Bards heavenly and human sing of the hope that the era of fulfillment has arrived. The angel Gabriel takes the voice away from an aging priest named Zechariah when he greets with incredulity the prophecy that he would have a son destined to take up Elijah's mantle (1:17–20). Gabriel then amazes a more trusting Mary with the news that she will give birth to a king who will sit on David's throne forever (1:31–33). Displaying greater discernment than her husband, Elizabeth acclaims as "Lord" the child Mary carries, and praises her believing reception of the word of promise (1:43, 45). This is Mary's cue, and she responds with a song of praise (1:46–55) that rings with echoes of Hannah's prayer (1 Sam 2:1–10). God's honoring of the young peasant girl signals a sweeping program of reversal that will succor Israel by disenfranchising the powerful and empowering the powerless.²⁵ At the birth and naming of John, even Zechariah finds his voice (1:68–79) and joins the chorus singing praise to God, who has acted to bring salvation to Israel—liberation from enemies by the hand of a deliverer from David's line (1:69, 71, 74), but also, with a nod to the adult John's message, forgiveness of sins (1:77).²⁶ When an angelic herald directs a band of shepherds to

²⁵ The aorist tenses throughout Mary's song point with prophetic confidence to the accomplishment of events that are actually still in prospect. Yet, as exemplified already in an act of benevolence toward Mary, God's work of salvation has actually begun.

²⁶ R. C. Tannehill (e.g., "Israel in Luke–Acts: A Tragic Story," *JBL* 104 [1985]: 69–85) contends that these promises of salvation for Israel—notably, deliverance from enemies—have a tragic character in Luke's narrative, which in the end shatters such hopes. In my view, the meaning of Israel's salvation is redefined as the accent shifts to the theme of repentance and forgiveness and the horizon extends to embrace Gentiles. The apparent shattering of hopes (e.g., 24:21) points to the need for a new perspective on Israel's salvation. On Luke's development of the theme of salvation, see J. B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (NTT; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 22–101; cf. idem, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); idem, " 'Salvation to the End of the Earth' (Acts 13:47): God as Saviour in the Acts of the Apostles," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*

the newborn Savior, who is Messiah and Lord (2:10–11), this announcement recapitulates for the reader the bold claims and promises expressed by inspired speakers in chapter 1.

Israel's salvation is finally on the horizon; the era of fulfillment has dawned. As the story unfolds, however, blessing will not be confined to the Jewish people. Ironically, the prophetic voice that first anticipates the incorporation of Gentiles into Israel's salvation²⁷ belongs to a pious old man who has spent a lifetime awaiting "the consolation of Israel" (2:25), and the scene for this disclosure is the temple at Jerusalem (2:25–35). Simeon, holding the infant Jesus in his arms, has indeed glimpsed the salvation from God (v. 30) that means glory for Israel (v. 32b). Yet revelation will illumine also the Gentiles (v. 32a), and since some within Israel will resist the agent of divine deliverance, this child will cause "the fall . . . of many in Israel" (vv. 34–35). Simeon's oracle about the "fall and rising of many" recalls the Magnificat's picture of the divine program of reversal, which elevates the lowly and demotes the mighty (1:51–53). This pattern of reversal dominates the narrative of Jesus' ministry: rich and poor, powerful and powerless, righteous and sinner exchange places. When they encounter Israel's Savior, some fall and others are raised up. And resistance begins at Jesus' very first stop, when before a hometown crowd he links his own care for the marginalized (4:18–21) to the favor God had extended to Gentiles through the prophets Elijah and Elisha (4:25–27).

The opening words of John the Baptizer pick up the theme of Gentile inclusion within the salvation promised by God. Quoting Isaiah, John draws all humanity ("all flesh") into the arena of God's salvation (3:4–6, citing Isa 40:3–5).²⁸ Even though Jesus addresses his ministry almost entirely to the Jewish people,

(ed. I. H. Marshall and D. Peterson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 83–106.

²⁷ Cf. also the hint given by the genealogy, which traces Jesus' roots all the way back to Adam (3:23–38).

²⁸ Only Luke extends the Baptizer's quotation from Isaiah 40 to include the line "all flesh will see God's salvation."

these signals of Gentile participation in Israel's salvation early in the narrative are reinforced explicitly in Jesus' response to the centurion's faith (7:1–10) and implicitly in the healing of the Gerasene demoniac (8:26–39).²⁹ Jesus' final words in the gospel then show the disciples that Scripture impels them to take the message of repentance and forgiveness to all nations (24:46–47). Returning to the birth narrative, one then realizes that the juxtaposition of Augustus as the emperor of "all the world" (the census in 2:1) and the newborn Jesus as the "Savior" (2:11) intimates that the salvation he brings extends not only to Israel but also to the whole world.

With the births of John and Jesus, salvation from God has burst into Israel's history; this is the era of fulfillment of ancient promises to the people. Nevertheless, the work of forming a people who will participate in that salvation continues through the narrative of Acts and beyond it, until the parousia. The same pattern of present fulfillment coupled with future completion is suggested by two other images, the Holy Spirit and the reign of God. One of the indicators that the heralds of salvation in Luke 1–2 are reliable speakers who give voice to the purposes of God is the frequent ascription of their speech to the inspiration of God's Spirit. The Spirit prompts the words of Elizabeth (1:41), Zechariah (1:67), and Simeon (2:25, 27). Moreover, John (1:15), Mary (1:35), and Jesus (1:35; 3:16, 22; 4:1, 14, 18; 10:21) are all associated with the activity of God's Spirit. In fact, the narrator emphatically portrays the beginning of Jesus' ministry under the powerful impulse of the Holy Spirit (baptism, 3:22; testing in the wilderness, 4:1; first teaching in Galilee, 4:14, 18). If the dramatic presence of the Spirit points to the arrival of the eschatological era—as Luke evidently reads Joel (Acts 2:16–21)—the story Luke tells concerns the final movement in God's symphony with Israel.³⁰

²⁹ Jesus' positive remarks about Samaritans (10:30–37; 17:11–19) also anticipate the inclusion of Samaritans in the mission in Acts (8:4–25).

³⁰ For further discussion of Luke's eschatological perspective, see J. T. Carroll, *Response to the End of History: Eschatology and Situation in*

The motif of God's reign points in the same direction.³¹ To discerning eyes, God's sovereign rule is in evidence in Jesus' activity. The exorcisms he performs demonstrate the vanquishing of evil and the powerful presence of God's realm (11:14–23): "If by the finger of God I cast out demons, then God's rule has come to you" (v. 20). Pharisees curious about the warning signs of the coming reign of God hear a similar message. Why should they be on the lookout for observable signs? The rule of God is already in their midst (ἐν τὸς ὑμῶν, 17:21).³² And when the penitent evildoer crucified with Jesus asks to be remembered in Jesus' (future) realm, he replies with the promise of paradise that very day (23:42–43). God's rule is already operative in Jesus' acts of mercy and power. Yet the agenda remains unfinished. Jesus may have witnessed Satan's fall from heaven (10:18)—emblematic of the evil one's defeat—but the prince of evil returns to orchestrate Jesus' death (22:3).³³ And the obvious fact of Roman oppression justifies the disciples' post-Easter query, "Is this the time when you will restore dominion to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). During the mission of the church "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8), the exalted Jesus "sits at the right hand" of God, while his enemies are being subdued (Luke 20:42–43 and Acts 2:33–35, citing Ps 110:1; cf. Acts 7:55). God's sovereign rule has not yet been established in its fullness; it remains a matter of hope.

A Resistant Generation and the Offer of Repentance

Ancient promises fulfilled, a savior born for Israel and for the world, God's Spirit unleashed with end-time power, demonic forces routed, God's mighty rule pressing into history and re-

Luke–Acts (SBLDS 92; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); J. B. Chance, *Jerusalem, the Temple, and the New Age in Luke–Acts* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1988); cf. J. Nolland, "Salvation-History and Eschatology," in Marshall and Peterson, *Witness to the Gospel*, 63–81.

³¹ On the reign of God in Luke, see Carroll, *Response*, 80–87.

³² On the interpretation of this text, see Carroll, *Response*, 79–80.

³³ On this text, see S. R. Garrett, *The Demise of the Devil: Magic and the Demonic in Luke's Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 46–57.

drawing the maps of human society—all these images so prominent in the narrative advance the claim that Jesus' ministry brings salvation to the people of God. Yet Jesus' contemporaries ("this generation") do not fully embrace the salvation he offers. He summons a resistant generation to repentance, but the window of opportunity is of limited duration.

Jesus claims that the exorcisms he performs demonstrate the approach of God's realm, which liberates persons oppressed by evil powers. This claim is prompted, though, by his critics' charge that his exorcisms betray an allegiance to the prince of evil (11:15). With the haunting image of seven unclean spirits taking the place of one that had been banished, the narrative—Jesus—warns that in a world like ours even the gift of exorcism can fail to set one free (11:24–26). The forces antagonistic to God are potent indeed. Jesus goes on (11:29–32) to indict a sign-seeking generation that demands convincing proof of divine commissioning but is unwilling either to listen (as the queen of the South listened to Solomon) or to repent (as Nineveh repented in response to Jonah's preaching). Such a generation is ripe for judgment; in fact, it will be held accountable not only for its own evil but for that of previous generations that had also martyred God's righteous prophets (11:47–51).

Even the crowds that flock to Jesus to hear his teaching are faulted for their failure to discern the significance of the time in which they live. They are able to predict the weather on the basis of their observation of the sky, but they are clueless when it comes to the moment of eschatological decision that greets them in the activity of Jesus (12:54–56). When Jesus later asserts the presence of God's sovereign rule in the midst of his audience, he is addressing Pharisees (17:20–21), whose resistance to Jesus' ministry throughout the narrative suggests that they are unable to perceive that divine activity.³⁴ Their final appearance in the

³⁴ See Carroll, *Response*, 76–80; idem, "Luke's Portrayal of the Pharisees," *CBQ* 50 (1988): 604–21; J. A. Darr, *On Character Building: The Reader and the Rhetoric of Characterization in Luke–Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992) 85–126.

narrative—demanding that Jesus silence the shouts of acclamation from crowds of his disciples as they enter Jerusalem—confirms this impression (19:39). Once again, Luke does not fault the Pharisees alone. Jesus has just told a parable to dampen the fervent eschatological expectation of the people—“they thought the reign of God would appear at once” (19:11)—that accompanied the approach to Jerusalem, and immediately followed his declaration of salvation “today” at the home of Zacchaeus (v. 9). This parable merges two plots: (1) a master calls servants to account for the service they have rendered in his absence; and (2) a king-designate deals with repudiation by his own citizens (19:12–27). Like this man who would be king, Jesus too will be rejected by his people and will be acclaimed king in a distant land (heaven), not in Jerusalem. He will return (at the parousia) to call his servants to account for the service they have performed while he has been away (exalted at the right hand of God). The parable of the pounds and throne claimant paints a vivid—and tragic—picture of the hostile reception Jesus receives from his contemporaries.

The Passion Narrative enacts this rejection that Jesus has expressed metaphorically in the parable. Despite their attraction to Jesus and their genuine interest in his teaching—an interest that posed a serious obstacle to the religious authorities who were plotting his demise (e.g., 19:47–48; 20:19; 22:2)—the Jewish public in Jerusalem in the end reject him and join their leaders in demanding his death (23:18–25).³⁵ This pattern of resistance and rejection is not the whole story, of course. There are many who embrace Jesus’ offer of salvation—notably, the sick, sinners, and toll collectors. They gladly come to the feast other invited guests decline to attend (cf. 13:24–30; 14:15–24). Nevertheless, in the Lukan narrative, the generation of Jesus stands in need of repentance. The apostles in Acts will have ample reason to invite their listeners to repent (e.g., see Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31).

³⁵ A portrayal of the people reinforced by the speeches of Peter and Paul in Acts (2:36–38; 3:13–15, 17, 19; 5:30–31; 10:39; 13:27–29). See Carroll and Green, *Death of Jesus*, 77–79.

And repentance is a central theme in the Gospel (Luke 3:8; 5:32; 7:36–50; 15:7, 10, 17; 16:27–31; 19:1–10).

The call to repentance continues to ring out, but only for a time. Luke places the parable of the barren fig tree (13:6–9) as the culmination of a series of eschatological instructions that appeal for watchfulness (12:35–48), warn of divided households (vv. 49–53), challenge listeners to read the times the way they read the weather (vv. 54–56), and urgently commend initiatives of reconciliation and repentance so that listeners may avoid destructive judgment (12:57–13:5). In the parable an unfruitful tree on the verge of destruction receives a temporary reprieve when the gardener pleads with the owner of the land for one more year. This allegorical commentary on Israel's present circumstance suggests that while God may be patient, extending the opportunity for repentance and forgiveness through Jesus (and later through the apostles), God's wrathful judgment against the unjust and unfaithful will not be deflected much longer. The expansiveness of Jesus' mercy toward sinners does not nullify John's earlier call to repent in the face of imminent destruction, underscored with the vivid image of an ax poised to strike at the tree's roots (3:7–9, 17). The people receive one more chance to align themselves with the purposes of God—in Jesus' ministry and the mission of the apostles after Easter—but dare not presume upon the mercy of God.

The crucifixion scene dramatically portrays the opportunity and the peril that attend the call to repent. The religious leaders, soldiers, and one crucified criminal treat Jesus with contempt to the bitter end (23:35–37, 39). He saved others but cannot save himself. Nor, in the face of such implacable hostility, can he save them. Or can he? Luke introduces this unrelieved ridicule by recording Jesus' request that God forgive those who were killing him (23:34).³⁶ The apostolic invitation to repentance and a second chance in Acts will extend even to them.

³⁶ On the authenticity of this verse, see Carroll and Green, *Death of Jesus*, 71 n. 40.

Alongside the adamant refusal of some characters to repent, the crucifixion scene also pictures the blessing that awaits the penitent. The Jewish public mourn as Jesus goes to his death (among them the “daughters of Jerusalem,” 23:27–28), express remorse as they return home afterwards (23:48), and do not join the mockers who heap verbal abuse upon Jesus (23:35). In large numbers, they will respond to the apostles’ summons to repentance by joining this new community (e.g., Acts 2:37–42). More immediately and more dramatically, the penitent criminal who defends Jesus’ honor and asks to be remembered in Jesus’ future kingdom—an act of repentance, though the word is not used—receives assurance that he will enter the domain of the righteous that very day (23:43). At the point of death himself, he seizes the opportunity for deliverance; under the pressure of true repentance, the kingdom script is rewritten and paradise welcomes a sinner “today.”

Delay and Persevering Faith: Eschatological Instruction

The prominence of such motifs as salvation, the Holy Spirit, repentance, and God’s reign gives the Lukan narrative a strongly eschatological tenor. The present fulfillment and future completion of end-time hopes are nicely balanced. In fact, Luke presents eschatological instruction with care and considerable finesse. Readers find proper orientation to the end time particularly in the discourses of Jesus, especially in 12:35–48; 17:20–18:8; 21:5–36. The problem posed by delay in the parousia of Jesus is all the more acute within the narrative because of its many signals that the present is the era of fulfillment, the time of salvation, the inauguration of God’s eschatological reign. In Luke’s Gospel Jesus addresses this concern directly and clearly.

Within a larger narrative unit in which Jesus is teaching the disciples (12:22–53), he commends the virtues of vigilance and faithfulness during the time preceding their master’s return (vv. 35–48). Slaves waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet—all night if necessary—will be rewarded if they stay awake and ready to open the door for him (vv. 35–38). However long the wait, they must constantly be ready for immediate

action (v. 35). The next parabolic image on prevention of burglary (vv. 39–40) emphasizes the element of uncertainty that is already implicit in the preceding verses. Verse 40 makes the crucial point: the coming of the Son of humanity will be no more predictable than a burglar's arrival, and one must therefore be ready at all times for Jesus' return.

Peter's question about the intended audience for this parabolic teaching (v. 41: "for us or for all?") then sets up a further parabolic narrative on slaves and their household tasks (vv. 42–48). Jesus poses a question of his own: Who will be entrusted the responsibility of supervising and caring for the household slaves? Jesus contrasts a trustworthy, discerning household manager and an abusive, intoxicated slave. What is the difference between these two slaves? One was performing his assigned duties at the time of his master's return (v. 43), while the other lived as if the delay in his master's return would be indefinite (v. 45). Their rewards are commensurate with the quality of their service. So far the reply to Peter's question has been indirect, as the parable portrays certain slaves charged with household management and the care of other slaves. Verses 47–48 then develop the theme. Of two slaves who fail to carry out their master's wishes, one who acts in ignorance will receive lighter punishment than one who willfully disregards the master. Jesus concludes with the observation that persons to whom more has been entrusted will be expected to produce more. The images throughout this passage suggest that some members of the community will be assigned greater responsibility. More will be expected of them. Yet all are to perform the tasks given them, and all are to be alert and ready at any time. So the answer to Peter's question—"for us or for all?"—is yes.

Luke 12:35–48 joins the motifs of the Lord's delayed return and his arrival at an unexpected hour. This pattern marks the extensive eschatological discourses in 17:22–18:8 and 21:5–36 as well. Luke introduces the first of these discourses with the exchange between Jesus and Pharisees on the signs of God's reign (17:20–21). Those who cannot perceive its operation in the present should not expect to see signs announcing its arrival in the

future. Verse 22, addressed to the disciples, signals a shift in perspective; now Jesus brings into the foreground the future and a protracted period of waiting for the parousia. Twice he refers to the days (plural) of the Son of humanity (vv. 22, 26), in analogy to the days of Noah and Lot (vv. 26, 28). The parousia of Jesus will come on “his day” (v. 24; cf. vv. 30–31), but only after a lengthy period that includes the suffering and rejection of the Son of humanity (v. 25). The path to glory passes through rejection and adversity.

Verses 26–29 set up two analogies:

- (1) As in the days of Noah (v. 26a),
so in the days of the Son of humanity (v. 26b)—
while they were eating, drinking, and marrying . . . destruction for all (v. 27).
- (2) As in the days of Lot (v. 28a),
while they were eating and drinking, buying and selling,
planting and building . . . destruction for all (vv. 28b–29)—
likewise on the day the Son of humanity is revealed (v. 30).

The eschatological crisis will resemble these catastrophes seared in Israel’s memory. Disaster swept away an entire generation (the flood) and an entire city (Sodom). Why? There is no mention of the wickedness of the victims; rather, their absorption in the routine activities of life left them unprepared for the destruction that struck so suddenly. Luke’s audience is left to conclude that the parousia will in the same way threaten the security of those who are preoccupied with life’s routine affairs and so are caught off guard. Once again, the experience of delay and surprise at the unexpected onset of the End are both at play. Corresponding to the emphatic “destroyed them all” that culminates the Noah and Lot elements (vv. 27, 29), a haunting image closes chapter 17: “Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather” (v. 37). For those who are not prepared for the parousia, its sudden occurrence means disaster.

The lesson is clear: one must always be prepared. This discourse also spells out the manner in which the Son of humanity will appear. The parousia is not a matter of a specific location, nor will it be an ambiguous event. It will be as unmistakable and

as universally (and suddenly) evident as a lightning flash that illumines the whole sky. In part, this depiction of the parousia gives a second answer to the Pharisees' query in v. 20. This connection is suggested by the way Luke stitches vv. 22–37 to vv. 20–21 through the repetition of “Look, here!” and “Look, there!” (though in inverse order). One need not seek out empirical signs of the coming of God's reign because it is already operative, though undetected by Jesus' listeners, and because there will be no missing and no mistaking—and therefore no escaping—the parousia with which God's realm comes to earth in its fullness.

Jesus' eschatological discourse to the disciples concludes on a practical note. The parable about a widow who perseveres until an unsympathetic judge grants her justice (18:2–5), together with the narrative frame Luke supplies (18:1, 6–8), brings eschatological instruction home to the community's life of faith and prayer. The narrator predisposes readers to hear in the parable an appeal for persevering prayer (v. 1). The woman models persistence that overcomes every obstacle to justice, including a judge who “has no fear of God and no respect for human beings”—even a widow (v. 4). Verses 6–8 employ a lesser-to-greater argument to convey the parable's message. If a corrupt judge will finally intervene to deliver justice, how much more can Luke's readers trust God to vindicate them—and without delay! Yet both the plot of the parable and the picture of the faithful crying out “day and night” (v. 7) counter any naïve expectation that God will immediately act to deliver the community of readers. Their prayers must continue through every ordeal, and their faith must endure. That such persevering faith will be a genuine achievement is clear from the disturbing rhetorical question with which the discourse ends: “Nevertheless, when the Son of humanity comes, will he find faith on earth?” In the difficult time that stretches out before the parousia, faith will be put to the test.

Prompted by the temple setting, in 21:5–36 Jesus links his future parousia to the traumas of history: the Roman siege against Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E.

Despite the obvious indicators of disaster within this speech—war, earthquake, famine, plague, and Jerusalem’s desolation—this discourse develops the parousia itself in more positive terms. The discourse in 17:21–18:8 issues warnings against being unprepared for the unexpected arrival of the Son of humanity (so building on the imagery of 12:35–48). There the tone is ominous. Chapter 21 does not minimize the strife and suffering the end-time events will bring, but strikes a more reassuring balance between menacing threat and the promise of deliverance. While summoning readers to enduring faithfulness and at the same time inspiring steadfast hope, Jesus’ temple discourse also clearly describes the course of events that will lead from the time of the speech through the Jewish rebellion and on to the deliverance of the faithful at the parousia.³⁷

As in Mark and Matthew, the speech responds to a question of the disciples, but the setting and audience are markedly different in Luke. The discourse is part of Jesus’ public teaching within the temple, rather than private instruction set on the Mount of Olives. Not a select group of disciples (Mark) or the disciples in private (Matthew), but the disciples “in the hearing of all the people” (Luke 20:45) receive this instruction. The eschatological discourse forms part of a larger narrative unit (20:45–21:38) that is framed by references to “all the people” as auditors of Jesus (20:45; 21:38).

When Jesus prophesies the temple’s destruction, the disciples inquire when this event will occur and what signs will precede it (21:7). The reply to this question about the temple runs through v. 24. Jesus characterizes the era of strife and crisis that will precede the siege against Jerusalem and its devastation (vv. 8–19), and then depicts the fall of Jerusalem as an act of judgment in fulfillment of scriptural prophecy (vv. 20–24). During this turbulent period leading up to the temple’s destruction, some will claim that the time (καιρός) is near, but they should not be followed (v. 8). This is not the time of the End but the time

³⁷ For a redaction-critical analysis of Luke 21:5–36, see Carroll, *Response*, 103–19.

that precedes the End. This is a time of persecution and family schism, but also an opportunity for bearing witness in the assurance of divine empowerment and protection (vv. 12–19). Readers of Luke’s second volume encounter example after example of this pattern.

In the last part of the speech Jesus presses beyond the desolation of Jerusalem to picture the eschatological events proper: the coming (again!) of God’s realm, the parousia of the Son of humanity, and his activity as judge of humanity (vv. 25–36). Sometime after the fall of Jerusalem, when the era of Gentile domination has run its course, cosmic portents will signal the return of Jesus (the Son of humanity) in glory and power (vv. 24–28). There will be no mistaking—and no missing—these events. But fearsome as these phenomena may be, this is a time for consolation; the parousia means liberation (“redemption”) for the faithful (v. 28).

From the temporal perspective of Jesus and his disciples within the story, the End appears to be delayed, requiring patient endurance. But in the later situation of Luke’s community of readers, the temple’s destruction is already a painful memory, and the period of witness and crisis prophesied by Jesus in the first half of the discourse now lies in the past. For such an audience, the parousia looms on the horizon, just as a tree in leaf signals the approach of summer (vv. 29–31).³⁸ There will be no escaping the end-time events, which will overtake all humanity (v. 35). The faithful, however, will at long last be delivered; therefore they are to pray to escape eschatological judgment—that is, to stand blameless before their heavenly judge (the Son of humanity, v. 36). Jesus issues one final appeal for unceasing vigilance: “Be alert at all times” (v. 36). The discourse closes with an explicit statement of the aims of this speech, and of Jesus’ eschatological instruction throughout the gospel—to enable listeners to persevere in their faithful service of God and to emerge unscathed from

³⁸ For a sustained argument for this view of Lukan eschatology, see Carroll, *Response*.

final judgment. For them, the parousia will be an answer to prayer (cf. 18:6–8).

In the meantime, readers are called to keep faith and hope alive. Although the present is the era of Jerusalem's desolation, the expression "until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (21:24) takes on new meaning, as the mission to the ends of the earth draws more and more Gentiles into the people of God (in Acts). Luke's God is the God of surprising reversals; history in the hands of such a God is laced with irony. And the deepest irony of all is the heavenly reign of the one who was rejected by the nation and crucified. He has been vindicated by God and installed in the seat of power, where he waits "from now on" (22:69) while his enemies on earth are vanquished (20:42–43). Meanwhile, his "name" and the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit continue to direct and empower his followers until he returns to complete the work of salvation he has already begun.

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

The language and imagery of eschatological hope become much less prominent in the Acts of the Apostles. The ending of the book—Paul preaching without hindrance from his mission headquarters under house arrest in Rome—opens onto an extended period of witness, particularly among Gentiles (28:17–31). There is no mention of the parousia of Jesus after chapter 3, although his role as eschatological judge does form the climax of Paul's appeal to his sophisticated audience in Athens (17:31). For the most part, the narrative betrays little concern with the return of Jesus in the future, highlighting instead the expansive mission of the church in the present. Luke celebrates the triumphant spread of the word despite every obstacle.

Acts begins, however, by diverting the attention of the apostles, and the reader, from the ascending Jesus to the returning Jesus: he will come back in the same way in which they see him now departing (1:9–11). Eschatological images remain important in the foundational mission speeches of chapters 2 and 3. While the challenges and successes of the church's early de-

cedes dominate the narrative, these opening chapters point forward to the future events that will bring Israel's story to closure.

The book of Acts begins, as the Gospel of Luke ends, with an ascension scene (Luke 24:50–53; Acts 1:9–11).³⁹ Both accounts are oriented toward the future, but while the end of Luke anticipates the empowerment of the disciples for their mission to the world, the Acts account points beyond the ascension to the parousia. Jesus' eschatological return will mirror his departure, according to the two men in white (vv. 10–11).⁴⁰ So why should the apostles stand staring into heaven? This rhetorical question posed by the two men—in concert with Jesus' answer to the query introducing this unit (v. 6: will Jesus now restore dominion to Israel?)—redirects attention from the future (parousia) to the present task entrusted to the apostles. The timetable of the End is God's business and not their concern (v. 7). Rather, they are to bear witness for him in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the whole world. During the period that stretches from ascension to parousia, while Jesus resides in heaven, the community of the faithful does not simply wait for his return. Energized by the Spirit he grants (2:33), they take the word of repentance and forgiveness to the ends of the earth. The proleptic mention of the parousia as Jesus ascends to heaven, therefore, instills in the apostles the confident hope that will free them for the mission that lies before them.

Immediately after the Pentecost descent of the Spirit, the mission commences. Peter finds himself speaking to a crowd of Judean and Jerusalem Jews representing many countries of origin. Appropriately, he builds his case for Jesus the Messiah by means of a dense web of Scripture quotations.⁴¹ It is striking that

³⁹ Although the chronology differs: in Luke the ascension occurs on Easter day, while Acts places the event forty days later.

⁴⁰ E.g., each event is associated with a cloud (Luke 21:27; Acts 1:9), as is the transfiguration christophany (Luke 9:34–35).

⁴¹ See Carroll, *Response*, 128–37; idem, "The Uses of Scripture in Acts," *SBLSP 1990* (ed. D. J. Lull; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 520–21; D. Juel, "Social Dimensions of Exegesis: The Use of Psalm 16 in Acts 2," *CBQ* 43 (1981): 543–56.

the first prophetic text cited, Joel 3:1–5 LXX (Acts 2:17–21), marks the Pentecost intervention of the Spirit as an explicitly eschatological phenomenon. God will pour out the Spirit “in the last days,” a Lukan enrichment of the Joel passage. The Spirit will make visionaries of young and old alike, and will turn men and women into prophets. These scriptural prophecies are realized as the narrative progresses. With imagery reminiscent of Luke 21:25–27 (cf. 17:24, 29–30), however, vv. 19–20 anticipate the cosmic upheaval just before the parousia; this remains a matter of hope for the future even at the end of the narrative. This first step in the discourse closes by affirming the offer of salvation for all who call upon the name of the Lord (v. 21, citing Joel 3:5).

The balance of the sermon (2:22–36) proves that the Lord in whose name salvation resides is none other than the crucified and resurrected Jesus. He was put to death by the very persons Peter is addressing (vv. 23, 36), but God vindicated him by raising him from the dead (v. 24), thereby fulfilling the scriptural promise that the “holy one” whom David called Lord would not be abandoned to death but would be raised up to the right hand of God (vv. 25–35, quoting Pss 16:8–11; 110:1). From this position of honor and power in heaven, the risen Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit, whose effects prompted Peter to speak in the first place. In the exchange between Peter and his listeners that follows the speech, the offer of salvation for all (through repentance and forgiveness) is rehearsed one more time. The mission to the ends of the earth has begun, and the access to salvation that featured so prominently in Luke’s narrative of Jesus’ ministry continues in the preaching of the apostles. Acts ends on this same note: despite the mixed reception with which a Jewish audience in Rome greets Paul’s message, he predicts with his last words in the story that Gentiles will hear (i.e., heed) “this salvation from God” (28:28). And as the curtain falls he is still preaching the message of Jesus and God’s reign to all who will listen (vv. 30–31). This is the situation of Luke’s community of readers. In the final chapter of Israel’s history that has been inaugurated by Jesus’ ministry, and by his resurrection, ascension, and pouring out of God’s Spirit, the mission to all nations—in the shadow of the coming parousia—is in their hands.

Peter's second mission sermon continues to play the eschatological tune (3:12–26). The discourse is triggered by the healing of a lame man at the temple gate. The echoes of Isa 35:6 (“the lame shall leap”) already suggest that the healing fulfills eschatological prophecy.⁴² Peter, explaining the significance of the event to the amazed crowd that has gathered, further develops the eschatological import of what is happening. He begins to deflect credit for the healing miracle from himself (and John) to the “God of our ancestors” who has honored Jesus (3:12–13). But before explicitly attributing the healing to Jesus (“through faith in this name,” v. 16), Peter pins responsibility for the death of God’s “holy and righteous one” on his auditors (vv. 13–15). The effective rhetorical shaping of this part of the speech employs a chiasmic form:

- a God has glorified the servant Jesus,
- b whom you handed over and rejected before Pilate (who had decided to release him).
- b¹ You rejected the righteous one in exchange for a murderer; you killed the author of life,
- a¹ whom God raised from the dead (and we are witnesses).

This narration sets up the point of the speech: the appeal to the listeners to repent. They opposed God’s righteous one out of ignorance (v. 17; cf. Luke 23:34), but now have the opportunity to receive forgiveness (v. 19).

This appeal for repentance is embedded in a passage thick with eschatological imagery (vv. 17–26). Peter characterizes the Messiah’s death as divinely purposed in fulfillment of scriptural

⁴² On the interpretation of this healing, see D. Hamm, “Acts 3:1–10: The Healing of the Temple Beggar as Lukan Theology,” *Bib* 67 (1986): 305–19; idem, “Acts 3:12–26: Peter’s Speech and the Healing of the Man Born Lame,” *PRSt* 11 (1984): 199–217. On the speeches of Acts as a whole, see M. L. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994); cf. H. F. Bayer, “The Preaching of Peter in Acts,” in Marshall and Peterson, *Witness to the Gospel*, 257–74.

prophecy (v. 18). He then announces as the goal and benefit of repentance the experience of “times of refreshing”—namely, the sending (again) of the Messiah Jesus (v. 20). Although he resides in heaven for the present, he will return when the time of the “restoring of all things,” as declared by God through the prophets, has arrived.⁴³ This universal restoration encompasses the reconstruction of David’s “house” through the Messiah’s resurrection and the forming of a renewed people of God that incorporates Gentiles (15:14–18),⁴⁴ but presses beyond the mission Luke narrates to embrace the whole world. Thus as Paul later affirms before the cultured Athenians, God is the creator of all that is; all nations fall under God’s sovereignty, “all people everywhere” must heed the summons to repent, and they will be held accountable by the righteous cosmic judge whom God has raised from the dead (17:24–31; cf. 14:15–16).

After mentioning God’s universal restoration project, which is now underway but will be completed only in the eschatological future, Peter shows what is at stake for his listeners: their participation in God’s covenant people (vv. 22–26). Just as Moses promised, God has raised up a prophet like Moses—raised up, that is, from the dead—whom the people must hear and heed if they are to remain within the people of God (vv. 22–23, citing Deut 18:15–20 and borrowing a phrase from Lev 23:29). Returning one more time to the theme of prophetic promises fulfilled (v. 24), Peter concludes the speech on a positive note. The aim of the divine activity he has been describing is to extend to “all families of the earth” the covenantal blessings promised so long ago to Abraham (vv. 25–26). To have a share in that divine blessing, the audience must turn away from evil—that is, repent. So the sermon underscores its rhetorical goal one final time.

After the rich eschatological materials in Acts 1–3, the story unfolds, for the most part, with the parousia nowhere in view.

⁴³ On the translation and interpretation of this difficult text, see Carroll, *Response*, 142–48; L. T. Johnson, *Acts* (SP 5; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992), 68–74.

⁴⁴ As James puts it, drawing upon Amos 9:11–12.

Yet if we take our cue from the eschatological teaching Jesus provided in the gospel, this is not a surprise. The apostles, and later, with their endorsement, Philip and Paul and others, are taking the invitation to God's salvation to the farthest reaches of the earth. This is the church's business in the period—of uncertain duration—before the parousia brings history to closure. Although the parousia is not a prominent motif in Acts, enough has been said at the commencement of the apostles' mission to the nations to remind the community of readers where they are in this grand story. The parousia will come, and may come in the very near future. But what matters in the meantime is that they faithfully and persistently carry out the mission that God has entrusted to them.