

THE INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 10:23B

by
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INTRODUCTION

ὅταν δὲ διώκωσιν ὑμᾶς ἐν τῇ πόλει ταύτῃ, φεύγετε εἰς τὴν ἑτέραν· ἀμὴν γὰρ λέγω ὑμῖν, οὐ μὴ τελέσητε τὰς πόλεις τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ ἕως ἃν ἔλθῃ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου (Matt 10:23).²

When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes (Matt 10:23).³

Our Lord's enigmatic statement given to his twelve disciples in Matthew 10:23 has become one of the most well-known *crucis interpretum* in the Gospels, especially in the area of Jesus's eschatology. For the skeptic, it indicates that Jesus of Nazareth was capable of error. In his essay, *Why I am Not a Christian*, Bertrand Russell, pointed to this verse (along with Matt 16:28) as evidence that the Christ presented in the Gospels was "not so wise as some other people have been...certainly not superlatively wise," because Christ believed that his Second Coming would occur before the death of the current generation.⁴ In biblical studies, the verse is probably more well-known because Albert Schweitzer used it as the basis for his "thoroughgoing eschatology." When Jesus sends out the Twelve in Matthew 10, he, according to Schweitzer, "does not expect to see them back in the present age," for his eschatological kingdom would come before the Twelve "completed a hasty journey through the cities of Israel to announce it."⁵ When Jesus

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²All Greek Scripture quotations are from the NA²⁵/UBS⁵ text.

³All English Scripture references, unless otherwise noted, are to the New International Version (NIV) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

⁴*Why I Am Not a Christian, and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 16–17. It should be noted that Russell was speaking of the "Christ" presented in Scripture which he distinguished from the historical "Christ" whose existence he doubted (*ibid.*, 16).

⁵*The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, trans. W. Montgomery, 3rd ed. (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1954), 357.

realized his mistake, Schweitzer argued, he concluded that the Messianic Woes (or what Schweitzer called “the Affliction”) which were necessary to bring in the kingdom would have to be fulfilled through his own suffering.⁶

This study will assume that Jesus’s prophecy was, or will be, fulfilled as he intended it, since as the God-man, Jesus of Nazareth was incapable of error.⁷ Furthermore, we will agree with Moore that there is no evidence to support the argument that this passage was a creation of later Christians which was only made to look like Jesus’s own words.⁸ At least five major interpretations of Matthew 10:23 have been proposed which assume that Jesus is making an accurate prophecy. These five interpretations will be the focus of the opening literature review. In addition to this limited focus, this study will address the biblical text as we have it and will not engage in the discussion regarding underlying sources. The interpreters surveyed in the literature review hold to a wide-range of views regarding the authenticity or original source of Matthew 10:23. After the current state of the question has been reviewed, a conclusion will be reached based on an exegesis of the passage in its historical, grammatical, and theological context.

STATE OF THE QUESTION⁹

A survey of the literature reveals a wide variety of interpretations of

⁶*Idem*, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 165–73.

⁷Therefore this study will not engage directly with those like David Hill who believe Jesus expected his Parousia “within 40–50 years” (*The Gospel of Matthew*, New Century Bible [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981], 191). Cf. J. C. Fenton, *The Gospel of St. Matthew*, Pelican Gospel Commentaries (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1963), 161; W. G. Kümmel, *Promise and Fulfillment: The Eschatological Message of Jesus*, trans. Dorothea M. Barton (London: SCM Press, 1957), 63–64.

⁸So e.g., Arthur L. Moore, *The Parousia in the New Testament*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 13 (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 187–89. Contra e.g., A. W. Argyle, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 81; Barry S. Crawford, “Near Expectation in the Sayings of Jesus,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 101 (June 1982): 225–44; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 194–95; Sherman E. Johnson and George A. Buttrick, “The Gospel According to St. Matthew,” in *The Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick, vol. 7 (New York: Abingdon, 1951), 369. Similar is Barclay who argues that Jesus originally was speaking of the coming of the kingdom, and “Matthew read into [it]...a promise of the second coming” (*The Gospel of Matthew*, 3rd ed., New Daily Study Bible [Edinburgh: Saint Andrews Press, 2001], 1:382). Cf. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 98–99.

⁹Here the summaries of the options by D. A. Carson (“Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Tremper Longman and David E. Garland, rev. ed, vol. 9 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010], 291–93), Royce Clark (“Eschatology and Matthew 10:23,” *Restoration Quarterly* 7 [1963]: 73–81), and David L. Turner (*Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008], 277) have been helpful.

Matthew 10:23b. To simplify matters, these interpretations can be grouped into five broad categories based on when the proposed “coming” of Jesus occurs.

A “Coming” at the End of the Twelve’s Initial Journey

Matthew 10:23 occurs in a discourse which begins with Jesus sending the Twelve on a tour of Galilee to preach the nearness of the kingdom of heaven (Matt 10:5–7). Some argue that Jesus is simply saying in 10:23b that he would catch up to the Twelve before they completed their subsequent preaching circuit.¹⁰ This interpretation goes back at least to Chrysostom (4th century) who believed that the verse clearly referred to an event before the cross (*Homilies on Matthew* 34). As will be the case in several of the other surveyed options, proponents of this view desire to place the “coming” within the immediate historical context of the Twelve. Some of the proponents also point out that the title “Son of Man” can appear in contexts which are non-eschatological. For example, Jacques Dupont—by comparing Matthew with Mark and Luke—argues that “Son of Man” can basically be equivalent to the pronoun “I” or “me” (Matt 16:13; cf. Mark 8:27; Luke 9:18; and Matt 16:21; cf. Mark 8:31; Luke 9:22), and that Matthew has decided to keep it in Matthew 10:23 because “he may have simply wanted to mark his respect for the Master.”¹¹

A “Coming” Later During Jesus’s Earthly Ministry

Still trying to place the “coming” within a near historical context, others have proposed events later in Jesus’s earthly ministry. For example, in the nineteenth century, George N. H. Peters suggested that it was either a reference to the Transfiguration or the Triumphal Entry.¹² More recently, Royce Clark argued that Matthew 10:23b referred to Christ’s suffering and death.¹³ He argues that the “Son of Man,” as

¹⁰So e.g., H. Leo Boles, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew*, New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1989), 230; Charles H. Talbert, *Matthew*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 134–35.

¹¹“*il se peut qu’il ait simplement voulu marquer son respect pour le Maître*” (“Vous n’aurez Pas Achevé Les Villes d’Israël Avant Que Le Fils de l’homme Ne Vienne,” *Novum Testamentum* 2 [October 1958]: 228–44). Dupont also argued that 10:23 should be read following 10:5–6, which was its original position in Matthew’s non-Markan source (*ibid.*, 238). David Wenham has made a similar source-critical argument that 10:23 comes from Q and is awkward in its current position following Markan material (*The Rediscovery of Jesus’ Eschatological Discourse*, Gospel Perspectives 4 [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984], 239–43). For a concise response see Carson, “Matthew,” 291.

¹²*Theocratic Kingdom of Our Lord Jesus*, 3rd ed., 3 vols. (repr.; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1972), 2:564.

¹³“An Analysis of ‘Consistent Eschatology’: Matthew 10:23 and Eschatology (II),” *Restoration Quarterly* 8 (1965): 53–69.

used by Jesus, had reference to both the Danielic Messiah/king and Isaiah's Suffering Servant. Based on the context of Matthew, he maintains that the emphasis was on the later.

A "Coming" at or after the Resurrection

Seeking an event within the lifetime of the Twelve—but acknowledging that the context of Daniel 7 (the source of the "Son of Man" title) points to a powerful manifestation of the Messiah's rule—many proposals for the interpretation of Matthew 10:23b have been made involving Christ's resurrection and ascension. Léopold Sabourin argues that the verse refers to "a personal coming of the risen Jesus," that is, the resurrection itself was the predicted event.¹⁴ R. V. G. Tasker understands the verse to be specifically referring to Jesus's Great Commission in Matthew 28:18–20.¹⁵ Ned Stonehouse modifies this view and maintains that Matthew 10:23 and 16:28 ("some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom") both refer to the inbreaking of Jesus's kingdom, with its accompanying divine enablement, which began at Pentecost.¹⁶

In the late fourth century, Theodore of Heraclea understood the coming of 10:23b to be Jesus's coming "as spiritual guidance and help for those who are persecuted from time to time for the sake of God."¹⁷ Similar is Calvin who believes that it was the coming of the Spirit to empower the apostles that fulfilled Jesus's words.¹⁸ Andreas Köstenberger, Alexander Stewart, and Apollo Makara have recently suggested that the reference is to Jesus's "ascension and enthronement at God's right hand."¹⁹ Combining several views, William Hendriksen thinks "it would be strange" if 10:23 had no "reference to Christ's exaltation which attains its climax in the second coming," but he believes that it also referred to Christ's exaltation at his resurrection. In other words, appealing to the phenomenon of "prophetic foreshortening" common

¹⁴"Coming of the Son of Man (Matt 10:23b)," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 7 (January 1977): 5–11. Sabourin cites Ephraem of Syria (4th century) and Bede the Venerable (8th century) as early advocates of this view. For modern commentators who take this view see e.g., William F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 125; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 258.

¹⁵*The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 108.

¹⁶*The Witness of Matthew and Mark to Christ* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Guardian, 1944), 239–43.

¹⁷Manlio Simonetti and Thomas C. Oden, eds., *Matthew 1–13*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 203.

¹⁸*Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, in *Calvin's Commentaries*, trans. William Pringle, vol. 32 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 458.

¹⁹*Jesus and the Future: Understanding What He Taught about the End Times* (Wooster, OH: Weaver Book Company, 2017), 93.

in the OT, Hendriksen argues that 10:23 refers to both Christ's resurrection and Second Coming.²⁰

A "Coming" in Judgment during the Jewish War (AD 66–70)

For reasons which will become evident below, proponents of these next two views are willing to place the "coming" of 10:23 after the lifetime of the Twelve, or at least after most of them have died. Some argue that 10:23 refers to Christ coming in judgment upon Israel, a judgment which began with the Jewish War and culminated with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in AD 70.²¹ This view usually sees Jesus making a similar prediction in Matthew 24:34 ("this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened") and emphasizes the inauguration of Jesus's kingdom as a "coming." Carson is representative: "The coming of the Son of Man refers to the same event as the coming of the kingdom," but the kingdom "comes in stages" and one of those stages occurs when "the judgment repeatedly foretold falls on the Jews."²² Similar are both Broadus and Chamblin, who argue that Jesus is referring to both the Parousia and AD 70.²³

Since the AD 70 interpretation is the most commonly held alternative to the view defended in this study, the arguments in favor of it warrant special consideration. First, this argument usually assumes that the promised kingdom of God comes in stages and that the events

²⁰*Matthew*, Baker New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 466–68. R. T. France now holds to a view similar to Hendriksen which sees multiple referents for Jesus's language (*The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010], 397–98). Cf. Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 480.

²¹See esp. Carson, "Matthew," 293. See also A. Feuillet, "Les Origines et La Signification de Mt 10:23b," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 23 (April 1961): 182–98; Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1–11:1*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), 521–22; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew*, Word Biblical Commentary, 2 vols. (Dallas: Word, 1995), 1:279; R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1943), 405–6; John A. T. Robinson, *Jesus and His Coming: The Emergence of a Doctrine* (New York: Abingdon, 1957), 91–92; Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), 1:304–5; N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 2 (London: S.P.C.K., 1996), 365. France was sympathetic to this view at one time (*Jesus and the Old Testament: His Application of Old Testament Passages to Himself and His Mission* [Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1998], 140), but has since changed his mind (*Gospel of Matthew*, 398).

²²"Matthew," 293. It should be noted that Carson cautions against applying the interpretation of 10:23 unchanged to 16:28 and 24:31. He believes that there are "important differences disallowing the view that all these texts refer to the fall of Jerusalem" (*ibid.*).

²³John A. Broadus, *Commentary on Matthew* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886), 228; J. Knox Chamblin, *Matthew*, Mentor Commentary (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2010), 579–82. Cf. Herman N. Ridderbos, *Matthew*, Bible Student's Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 203–4.

surrounding AD 70 constitute one of those stages.²⁴ Therefore, this position depends in part on a specific understanding of the kingdom announced by Christ, namely, a kingdom which is gradually introduced into history. In response, this position fails to distinguish between the presence of the Anointed King and the establishment of his kingdom. Passages commonly referenced as evidence that the kingdom is present can also be reasonably explained as references to the presence of the Messiah and his Apostolic messengers.²⁵ If “the messianic reign” itself is “dawning [during Jesus’ ministry] in both blessing and wrath,” as Carson argues,²⁶ it is difficult to explain the apparent withdrawal of this dawning reign following Christ’s Ascension. For example, without the King and his Apostles present in our midst, we are not seeing the same powerful signs and wonders which marked their ministries and authenticated their message (e.g., Matt 10:7–8).

Second, Carson argues that this interpretation makes the best contextual sense of Matthew 10:17–22 because it places the “coming” of the Son of Man “in the post-Pentecost period during a time when many of Jesus’ disciples are still bound up with the synagogue” (see esp. v. 17—“you will be handed over to the local council and be flogged in the synagogues”).²⁷ However, Jesus’s prediction in verse 17 of events which occurred soon after Pentecost would also support a “coming” following AD 70, that is, an eschatological coming. For, if Jesus in Matthew 10:17–20 is describing circumstances which would begin soon after his Ascension and continue until his Second Coming, one would expect him to also include the persecution his followers faced at the hands of Jewish leaders before AD 70. Describing this pre-AD 70 persecution does not mean that 10:17–20 could not *also* be referring to a time beyond that initial persecution. Furthermore, Revelation 2:9 and 3:9 (both refer to the “synagogue of Satan”) indicate that Christians still faced significant opposition from the synagogue after AD 70.²⁸

²⁴Carson, “Matthew,” 293.

²⁵E.g. Matt 4:17; 12:28. On Matt 12:28 specifically, Michael Vlach rightly notes, “Jesus declares that His miracles point to the kingdom. The kingdom had not actually arrived at this point. Jesus had not been crucified, resurrected or ascended yet. The Day of the Lord had not occurred. But there was a presence of the kingdom in Jesus’s person and works that the people were experiencing. Each miracle Jesus did was a sample, glimpse, or foretaste of kingdom conditions, when the restoration of all things would occur” (“God’s Kingdom and the Miraculous,” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 25 [Fall 2014], 35).

²⁶“Matthew,” 293.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸This argument depends on a late first-century date for Revelation. For a recent defense of a date of writing during Domitian’s reign see esp. Mark L. Hitchcock, “A Defense of the Domitianic Date of the Book of Revelation” (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2006).

An Eschatological “Coming”

Scholars representing a wide-range of traditions have argued that Jesus is referring to his eschatological Second Coming in Matthew 10:23. This interpretation goes back at least to Hilary of Potiers (4th century).²⁹ Modern adherents can be divided into at least two sub-categories. First, many argue that Jesus simply means that there will be an ongoing Jewish mission until the Second Coming.³⁰ Second, some dispensationalists have argued that Jesus is referring specifically to a Jewish mission which will only take place during the seven-year Tribulation or Daniel’s 70th Week.³¹ Many of these emphasize not only a resumed mission to Israel, after a suspension during the Church Age, but also emphasize that this mission will be carried out by Jewish missionaries like the original Twelve in Matthew 10.³² Based on the exegetical analysis below, this study will argue for a version of the first option.

EXEGESIS OF MATTHEW 10:23

In order to attempt to understand Jesus’s saying in Matthew 10:23b, this section will examine the verse in its grammatical-historical context. The proposed conclusion will then be examined in light of the theological context of Scripture.

²⁹Simonetti and Oden, *Matthew 1–13*, 202.

³⁰So e.g., Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 176; Pierre Bonnard, *L’Evangile Selon Saint Matthieu*, 2nd ed. (Neuchâtel, Switzerland: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1970), 149; William David Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, International Critical Commentary (London: T&T Clark, 1998), 192; David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 112; Ed Glasscock, *Matthew*, Moody Gospel Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997), 231; Joachim Gnllka, *Jesus of Nazareth: Message and History*, trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 148; Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 147–48; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 324–25; George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 200; J. McDermott, “Mt 10:23 in Context,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 28 (1984): 230–40; Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 391; Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 394.

³¹E.g., E. Schuyler English, *Studies in the Gospel According to Matthew* (New York: Revell, 1935), 77; Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1961), 209–10; H. A. Ironside, *Expository Notes on the Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Loizeaux, 1948), 125; Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 141; John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 76.

³²E.g., “In this coming last week of seven years the church testimony is finished and Jewish believers will take up the unfinished testimony to the nation and proclaim once more ‘The Kingdom of the heavens is at hand’” (Gaebelein, *Matthew*, 210).

Historical-Literary Context

Matthew appears to have structured his Gospel around five key discourses which all begin by “placing Jesus in a specific context” and conclude with the unique phrase “when [or “after”] Jesus had finished” (καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς) (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1).³³ The first (5:1–7:28) and last (24:1–26:1) both take place on mountains or hills and serve as bookends to Jesus’s earthly ministry. The second (10:5–11:1) and fourth (18:1–19:1) both give instructions related to the mission of Jesus’s disciples. The former focuses on the spread of the gospel of Christ and his kingdom, the latter on life in the new Messianic community to be created. The third and central discourse predicts the mixed responses to the gospel of the kingdom during the interim between Christ’s First and Second Comings.

The verse in question is situated in the second discourse, which is delivered to the Twelve before they are sent out to proclaim, “The kingdom of heaven has come near” (10:7), accompanied by signs and wonders to validate them as God’s messengers (vv. 1, 8).³⁴ It is difficult to determine where the discourse fits chronologically in the life of Christ because Matthew arranges his material thematically and the five featured discourses include material which probably was given on multiple occasions. However, it is likely that the second discourse was given after the opposition from the Jewish leadership reached a pivotal point with the healing of a demon-possessed, blind, and mute man (Matt 12:22–45).³⁵ In other words, despite the ethnic restriction placed on the Twelve’s preaching in 10:6, Jesus had already begun preparing the Twelve for his departure and its accompanying Gentile mission. In light of the special role that the Twelve will play in carrying out Christ’s mission, it is significant in chapter 10 that Matthew not only tells his readers for the first time that Jesus has twelve primary disciples, but Matthew also calls them “apostles” (ἀποστόλων) in 10:2, which is the only time that this word appears in his Gospel.

³³Carson, “Matthew,” 76. Cf. Osborne, *Matthew*, 41–47; Turner, *Matthew*, 9.

³⁴The accompanying signs are one indication that, contra Schuyler Brown, not *everything* “addressed to the twelve disciples [in the discourse] is intended for all Jesus’ future disciples” (“Mission to Israel in Matthew’s Central Section (Mt 9:35–11:1),” *Zeitschrift Für Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft Und Die Kunde Der Älteren Kirche* 69 [1978]: 74–75). However, as will be seen below, to a certain degree Matthew does seem to intend the discourse as “a transparency for the members of [his] own community” (ibid., 74).

³⁵So e.g., Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1959), 335, n. 25. Cf. the placement of this pericope in Kurt Aland, ed., *Synopsis of the Four Gospels: Greek-English Edition of the Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1976); Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry, eds., *A Harmony of the Gospels* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978). This is significant for McClain because it would mean that Jesus gave this discourse after he had begun to openly tell of his death and Second Coming. This would seem to lend support to the idea that Jesus in Matt 10 is not only addressing a Jewish mission carried out by Jewish missionaries but is also laying the foundation for the Gentile mission.

The discourse begins with instructions that are specific to the Twelve's historical situation and, according to Jesus's own instruction later in Matthew, do not apply to disciples always and everywhere. For example, Jesus tells them, "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel" (10:5-6; cf. 28:19). However, at some point, at least by verse 17 and more likely by verse 16, Jesus is giving instructions that are not limited to the immediate historical context of the Twelve's initial tour through Galilee but are instead predictions of things that will occur after Christ's Ascension.³⁶ For example, there is no evidence that the Twelve experienced persecution (as described in v. 17) during Christ's earthly ministry, much less trials before Gentile courts (v. 18).³⁷ Calvin rightly observes, "the contests of which Christ forewarns the apostles must not be limited to the first journey, in which they met nothing of this description."³⁸

This observation is supported by other details in the passage. First, J. A. Alexander suggests that the ἰδοὺ which begins v. 16 (untranslated in the NIV) may be a transition marker "calling attention...to something new and unexpected."³⁹ Second, a division at verse 16 and an eschatological understanding of verse 23b is also supported by the parallel way verses 5-15 and verses 16-23 are developed. Both sections begin with Jesus sending his followers (vv. 5 and 16), warn of subsequent rejection (vv. 14 and 17-22), and conclude with eschatological events ("the day of judgment" in v. 15 and the coming of the Son of Man in v. 23). Therefore, both sections (vv. 5-15 and vv. 16-23) seem to survey history from Jesus's earthly ministry up until the eschaton, with the later section focusing more on Jesus's future followers. Third, verse 22 promises that he who "stands firm" (ὑπομείνας), that is, perseveres in the faith, until "the end (τέλος) will be saved." As in the Olivet Discourse, the other passage in Matthew where τέλος occurs with ὑπομένω, τέλος is best taken as a reference to the end of the age or the Parousia.⁴⁰

Stanley Toussaint argues that in 10:16ff Jesus is looking past the

³⁶Charles H. Giblin places the break at v. 16 where the "warnings and assurances...go well beyond the temporal and spatial framework" of Jesus's public life ("Theological Perspective and Matthew 10:23b," *Theological Studies* 29 [December 1968]: 642-43). Cf. J. N. Darby, *Notes and Comments on Scripture*, 7 vols. (Sunbury, PA: Believers Bookshelf, 1971), 291; Adolf Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Matthäus* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1948), 336.

³⁷John 16:2 ("They will put you out of the synagogue") also seems to suggest that at the Last Supper persecution from Jewish leaders still lay in the future for the Twelve.

³⁸*Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 452.

³⁹*The Gospel According to Matthew*, Thornapple Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 288.

⁴⁰Chamblin, *Matthew*, 1:580.

Church Age to the eschaton, but there is nothing in the “description of the disciples’ persecution and the peril of the work,” which “is a clear reference to the seventieth week of Daniel” as he claims.⁴¹ Instead, the persecution described in verses 16–23 matches the experiences of Christians in the book of Acts and throughout church history. Therefore, as Giblin concludes, “Those addressed in this discourse are best taken as representative persons—as the Twelve, to be sure, but in and through them as all the disciples whom Jesus sends, who may thus be regarded as successors of the Twelve in the mission from one city to the next.”⁴² And this mission, of which the Twelve’s initial tour is a representation, “must continue until the end of the age.”⁴³

Understanding the discourse as a composite which addresses both the Twelve and future disciples of Jesus makes it unnecessary to argue that Jesus’s words in 10:23 must be fulfilled during the lifetime of the Twelve, which is the key argument advanced in favor of the first three interpretations presented above. This conclusion should not be surprising since it is widely acknowledged that Jesus’s final words in Matthew’s Gospel, “I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (28:20), do not apply to the apostles only, but also to all of Christ’s followers whom they represent.

Grammatical and Lexical Analysis⁴⁴

Jesus’s solemn opening phrase in this sentence (ἀμὴν γὰρ λέγω ὑμῖν) is another indication that he is speaking of something more significant than his catching up to the disciples shortly.⁴⁵ However, as

⁴¹*Behold the King*, 141. Toussaint argues that Jesus was basing his teaching on the following sequence predicted in the OT: (1) the Messiah’s death and resurrection, (2) a “time of trouble” (i.e., the “Messianic Woes”), (3) the return of the Messiah to end the tribulation and judge the world, and (4) the establishment of the Messiah’s kingdom (ibid., 140). Therefore, Toussaint concludes that Jesus, knowing that step (1) was coming soon, was looking ahead to the next step—the Tribulation. However, this overlooks the fact that Jesus, without altering the sequence laid out in the OT, repeatedly in Matt teaches his disciples regarding a long interim between steps (1) and (2) (e.g., 13:38–39, 47–50; 24:48; 25:5, 19; cf. Luke 18:8). And there is no reason why 10:16ff could not be speaking of both this interim and the final Tribulation. Toussaint points to the promise regarding the Spirit in 10:20, assuming it to be an allusion to Joel 2:28, as “another indication that Jesus had Daniel’s seventieth week in view” (ibid., 141), but 10:20 does not necessarily refer to miraculous signs as does Joel 2:28. The parallel in Luke 12:11–12 does not suggest an eschatological context. Even if this ministry of the Spirit described in Matt 10 was limited to the Apostles, which is possible, it appears to be exhibited in the book of Acts (e.g., 4:8, 13, 29, 31; 13:9), and thus is not limited to the eschaton.

⁴²“Theological Perspective,” 644.

⁴³Keener, *Gospel of Matthew*, 325. See also Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 200.

⁴⁴Significant textual variants are confined to the first sentence of the verse and “affect the main interpretative questions little” (Carson, “Matthew,” 290–91).

⁴⁵Broadus, *Commentary on Matthew*, 228. Ulrich Luz goes further and suggests

Giblin suggests, the interpretation of Matthew 10:23b really turns on the answer to four questions related to the remainder of the sentence.⁴⁶ First, to whom is the verse addressed? Second, what is the verbal force of “you will not finish...before” (οὐ μὴ τελέσητε...ἕως ἄν)? Third, what is the meaning of “the Son of Man comes” (ἔλθῃ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου)? Fourth, what is the scope or meaning of “the towns of Israel” (τὰς πόλεις τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ)? The first question has already been addressed. The remaining three will be examined below.

Ἔως ἄν ἔλθῃ ὁ Υἱὸς τοῦ Ἀνθρώπου

The phrase “the Son of Man” is an allusion to Daniel’s vision of “one like a son of man” (שׁוֹנֶה כְּבֶרֶךְ, 7:13), that is, to the coming Messiah who will be given an everlasting, earthly kingdom.⁴⁷ It was Jesus’s favorite self-designation (to the point that it sometimes seems synonymous with a first-person pronoun) because he was aware that he was the fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy.⁴⁸ Therefore, there is no reason to suggest that Jesus is using “the Son of Man” in Matthew 10:23 in a collective sense to refer to the Messianic community or citizens of his kingdom.⁴⁹ And while it is true that Jesus shocked his disciples with

that the phrase in Matthew usually signals an eschatological statement (*Matthew 1–7* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992], 241.).

⁴⁶Giblin, “Theological Perspective,” 641.

⁴⁷For a defense of the Messianic view in opposition to a corporate view or angelic view of “the Son of Man” in Daniel 7, see James M. Hamilton, *With the Clouds of Heaven: The Book of Daniel in Biblical Theology*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 32 (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2014), 93–94; Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1994), 209; Peter A. Steveson, *Daniel* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 2008), 130–33; Andrew Steinmann, *Daniel*, Concordia Commentary (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008), 357–59; Leon Wood, *A Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 192; Edward J. Young, *The Prophecy of Daniel: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 155.

⁴⁸The Aramaic phrase translated “son of man” in Dan 7:13 is “no more than a circumlocution for the briefer ‘man.’” (Robert A. Anderson, *Signs and Wonders: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, International Theological Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984], 84). It “merely means an individual...of the human race” (Louis F. Hartman and Alexander A. Di Lella, eds., *The Book of Daniel*, Anchor Bible 23 [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978], 206). And this is the sense of the Hebrew equivalent (בֶּן-אָדָם) which appears throughout the book of Ezekiel in reference to that prophet, and in passages such as Num 23:19; Job 25:6; Ps 8:4 where it parallels common words for man (אָדָם and אִישׁ). The prefixed preposition translated “like” in Dan 7:13 makes the phrase slightly less straightforward. However, based on its use in the passage, the preposition means that what Daniel saw looked like a man (i.e., similar in form to a man), as the beasts in the vision also appeared like various animals, with the context indicating that there is something unusual or even unique about this particular man (Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries [Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978], 142; Miller, *Daniel*, 207; Steinmann, *Daniel*, 356).

⁴⁹Contra e.g., Vincent Taylor, “The Life and Ministry of Jesus,” in *The*

predictions that the Messianic “Son of Man” would also suffer, this prediction of suffering does not mean that the phrase cannot still be a reference to Daniel’s triumphant coming king. This connection to Daniel is especially apparent when “Son of Man” is coupled with some form of ἔρχομαι, as it is in 10:23.⁵⁰ Gibbs is correct that “Matthew uses ἔρχομαι in his Gospel in reference to Jesus” for a variety of “different events or periods in his life and ministry.”⁵¹ However, the same cannot be said when ἔρχομαι is coupled with the “Son of Man.” Ἐρχομαι is a common word, occurring 114 times in Matthew and its meaning must be determined by context.⁵² Allowing for exceptions in Matthew 11:19 (“the Son of Man came eating and drinking”) and 20:28 (“the Son of Man did not come to be served”), where the aorist indicative ἦλθεν is being used to describe an already completed event (i.e., Jesus’s First Coming), Jesus always uses a combination of “Son of Man” and ἔρχομαι to describe “a final coming after His death to inaugurate the kingdom.”⁵³

Interpreter’s Bible, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, vol. 7 (New York: Abingdon, 1951), 125. As Clark notes, “a collectivistic interpretation of the ‘Son of Man’ designation must first be found somewhere else in the over seventy appearances of the expression in the gospels before it can be considered here” (“Eschatology and Matthew 10:23,” 80). To this could be added that a collective interpretation must also first be found in Daniel 7.

⁵⁰Although he does not see 10:23b as a reference to the eschaton, France acknowledges that Jesus never uses an allusion to Daniel 7 to speak of his suffering, but instead always uses that passage to point to something after his resurrection (*Jesus and the Old Testament*, 129).

⁵¹Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1–11:1*, 521.

⁵²Therefore, it does not follow (contra Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1–11:1*, 522) that ἔρχομαι in 10:23 must be a reference to judgment on the Jewish nation since ἔρχομαι is used in this way in 23:35. In the later, Matthew makes it clear that the subject of the verb ἔρχομαι is αἰμα.

⁵³Willoughby C. Allen, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1907), 107. Cf. Giblin, “Theological Perspective,” 650. Davies and Allison note that, according to Matthew, coming of the “Son of Man” includes the sending forth of angels, judgment of man’s works, and Jesus’s enthronement (Matt 13:41; 16:27; 24:27–44; 25:31) (*Matthew*, 2:190). Therefore, the “coming” is a complex of events, like a military campaign or the Exodus, but it is a complex that is still outstanding. This will be developed further below.

Matt 16:28 predicts that “some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” This might at first glance seem at odds with the position argued here. However, this verse also is best taken as a reference to the eschatological coming of the Son of Man to establish his kingdom. Peter, James, and John are allowed to “see” this coming, i.e., experience “a temporary preview of what will come with permanence when Jesus returns to earth” (Turner, *Matthew*, 413). This preview occurs at the Transfiguration which is immediately introduced in 17:1 (Καὶ μεθ’ ἡμέρας ἑξ). Examining the context of Matt 16 and 17, this proleptic vision of the kingdom was given by the Father to validate the Son’s words (17:5—“Listen to him!”) regarding his impending death (16:21 and 17:12).

Hagner admits as much regarding the dominant meaning of ἔρχομαι when coupled with the “son of man,” but he argues that “we can hardly accept that meaning [in 10:23b] since Matthew tells us in several places of a mission to the Gentiles that must take place before the end of the age (cf. 21:43; 24:14).”⁵⁴ In other words, according to Hagner, “the mission to Israel cannot be interrupted before its conclusion by the parousia” because there must be time devoted to the Gentile mission before the End.⁵⁵ However, Hagner’s logic is based on a premise not supported by the text, that is, that the mission to Jewish and Gentile unbelievers could not occur together. Like Hagner, Tasker argues that a reference here to the Parousia requires that either (1) Jesus was mistaken about the imminence of his coming, or that (2) the early church believed in an immediate Parousia and attributed this saying falsely to Jesus.⁵⁶ However, Hagner and Tasker’s conclusions only follow if “going through the towns of Israel” can be limited to the Twelve’s initial circuit through Galilee. If, as the next section will argue, “the towns of Israel” does not limit Jesus’s words to the immediate tour through Galilee, there is no reason that an indefinite period could not elapse before the Parousia in which the gospel goes out to *both* Jew and Gentile.⁵⁷

In other words, there will be a continuing mission to Israel *alongside* the mission to the Gentiles until the Parousia. In spite of Israel’s hard-heartedness, God will remain faithful to his covenant promises to her. The mission-disciples must remain faithful to their calling to preach to everyone regardless of persecution, family alienation, and ostracism.⁵⁸

Therefore, ἔλθῃ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου can be understood in its normal Matthean sense as a reference to the Parousia.

The aorist subjunctive ἔλθῃ could be (1) inceptive or ingressive (“begin to come”), (2) specific (a single “coming”), or (3) complexive (multiple “comings”).⁵⁹ As Giblin admits, a “selection of one of these

⁵⁴Matthew, 1:279–80.

⁵⁵Ibid., 280.

⁵⁶Matthew, 108.

⁵⁷“The missions to Israel and to the nations are parallel not only with regard to the experiences the disciples will encounter but also in temporal terms—that is, the timeframe of the mission to Israel is the same as that of the eschatological mission among the πάντα τὰ ἔθνη in 24.9–14” (Matthias Konradt, *Israel, Church, and the Gentiles in the Gospel of Matthew*, trans. Kathleen Ess, Baylor-Mohr Siebeck Studies in Early Christianity [Baylor, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014], 82).

⁵⁸Wilkins, *Matthew*, 394 (emphasis added).

⁵⁹Giblin, “Theological Perspective,” 647. Giblin favors the third option. Cf. Friedrich Blass, Albert Debrunner, and Robert Walter Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 166, 171.

senses on the basis of v. 23b alone is probably impossible.”⁶⁰ However based on Matthew’s usage, ἔλθῃ should be understood as a reference to a single coming of the Son of Man. The subjunctive mood, following the temporal adverb ἕως and temporal conjunction ἄν indicates “a future contingency from the perspective of the main verb” (cf. “you will not get out until you have paid [ἕως ἄν ἀποδῶς] the last penny”—Matt 5:26).⁶¹

It has been suggested that Jesus is simply saying that the “Son of Man” will return before the mission is completed.⁶² In other words, according to this argument, there is no logical connection between his coming and the mission’s completion, and the mission may remain uncompleted following the coming. More likely the ἕως followed by an aorist subjunctive denotes that the coming of the Son will be necessary for the completion of the “towns of Israel.”⁶³ That is, Jesus’s coming does not merely happen after the mission, or simply mark the end of the mission, but actually plays a role in accomplishing the mission. In Matthew 5:26, the payment of the last penny (ἕως ἄν ἀποδῶς τὸν ἔσχατον κοδράντην) is the necessary condition to end the debtor’s prison sentence. In Matthew 10:23, the coming of the Son of Man is the necessary condition to end or complete the mission described in 10:5ff. To cite another example from an eschatological context, this construction is similar to the one noted by Allison in Matthew 23:39 (ἕως ἄν εἴπητε) which states that Jerusalem’s future redemption will be contingent on her inhabitant’s praise for their Messiah.⁶⁴

Οὐ μὴ Τελέσητε τὰς Πόλεις τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ

Some have argued that “towns of Israel,” while possibly including the land of Israel, or even Syria, cannot be extended to include a worldwide mission.⁶⁵ However, there are several reasons to conclude

⁶⁰Giblin, “Theological Perspective,” 647.

⁶¹Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 479.

⁶²Chamblin, *Matthew*, 1:581.

⁶³So e.g., Talbert, *Matthew*, 134. Cf. BDAG, “ἕως,” 422–23. Talbert is using this argument to defend the interpretation that Jesus is referring to his joining the disciples in their immediate Galilean mission, but the argument also supports the interpretation that the ongoing mission to Jewish unbelievers requires the Second Coming of Christ to complete it.

⁶⁴“Mat. 23:39 = Luke 13:35b as a Conditional Prophecy,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 18 (1983): 77.

⁶⁵E.g., Harrington, *Matthew*, 148; Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Thornapple Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 153. Lagrange argues that “the natural meaning” of the phrase cannot include the Diaspora (P. Marie-Joseph Lagrange, *Évangile selon saint Matthieu*, 2nd ed., Etudes Bibliques [Paris: Librairie Victor Lecoffre, 1923], 205).

that Matthew understood Jesus to be referring to the cities of the Diaspora. First, Jesus predicted that his followers, while carrying out this mission, would be tried before multiple Gentile rulers (v. 18).⁶⁶ Second, in the first century, “Israel no longer existed as a geopolitical entity” and the “term ‘Israel’ continued to be primarily used either as an ethnic designation for people of Jewish descent or as a religious designation of the elect who were in a covenantal relationship with their God.”⁶⁷ Matthew seems to especially favor Ἰσραὴλ as an ethnic designation. This ethnic designation appears in the first occurrence of Ἰσραὴλ in Matthew where Jesus is introduced by God as One who “will shepherd my people Israel” (2:6). When Matthew wants to make it clear that he is referring to the land of Israel as opposed to the people descended from Jacob, he uses the phrase γῆν Ἰσραὴλ (Matt 2:20, 21).

Third, in Matthew 10:5, Jesus’s disciples are being sent to the τὰ πρόβατα τὰ ἀπολωλότα οἴκου Ἰσραὴλ (lit. “the lost sheep of the house of Israel”; οἴκου is left untranslated in the NIV). Jesus is using οἶκος to refer to “a whole clan or tribe of people descended from a common ancestor.”⁶⁸ This command to preach the gospel to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” contrasts with the command to not “enter any town of the Samaritans,” where “any town of the Samaritans” obviously refers to towns with Samaritan people. Therefore, in verses 5 and 6, “towns” and “house” have been introduced as parallel ways of referring to people groups and not merely specific points on a map. It would be expected that “towns of Israel” (v. 23), being in the same context, would be used in the same way. This reading is supported by Matthew 15:24 where Jesus is in the “region of Tyre and Sidon” (Matt 15:21), but still limits his ministry to the “lost sheep of Israel” (τὰ πρόβατα τὰ ἀπολωλότα οἴκου Ἰσραὴλ). Jesus is not only concerned about the “lost sheep of Israel” in Galilee, but about “lost sheep” in “all cities with Jewish populations.”⁶⁹ So the phrase τὰς πόλεις τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ can be paraphrased as “all the cities in which there are Jewish inhabitants, whether in or out of Palestine.”⁷⁰ Fourth, a theological argument can be made that the gospel of the kingdom needs to go out to Jewish people wherever they find themselves in exile, because their repentance is necessary for the coming of Christ’s kingdom (Deut 30:2–3).⁷¹ In the New

⁶⁶So e.g., McDermott, “Mt 10:23 in Context,” 233; Osborne, *Matthew*, 391.

⁶⁷*Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Israel,” by L. Novakovic, 403. Despite this acknowledgment, Novakovic still believes that Matt 10:23 has “clear geopolitical nuances” (ibid.).

⁶⁸BDAG, “οἶκος,” 699.

⁶⁹Konradt, *Israel, Church, and the Gentiles*, 83.

⁷⁰A. J. Maas, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Herder, 1916), 125.

⁷¹This point will be developed below in the section on theological context.

Exodus, the Final Exodus, the Jewish people will return from exile not just from one location like Egypt or Babylon, but “from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other” (Matt 24:31; cf. Deut 30:4–5).⁷²

The phrase τελέσητε τὰς πόλεις is elliptical. The NIV has supplied “going through” and most English versions are similar (e.g., NASB, ESV, CSB, NRSV, NET). John Nolland suggests that the implied object which is finished could either be “the mission task (‘finished proclaiming the good news to the town’)” or “the experience of persecution (‘finished finding temporary refuge in the towns’).”⁷³ If the latter option is correct, the “idea is that persecution will continue until the end, at which point Israel will repent (Matt 23:39).”⁷⁴ Even if this view is correct, there is nothing in the context that would indicate that this is a reference to something unique to Daniel’s 70th Week, but instead the description of persecution fits the entire Church Age.⁷⁵ However, it seems more likely based on the context that Jesus is referring to the finishing of the mission to Israel. Instead of meaning something like “to run out” or “exhaust” (as the second option—the persecution option—would seem to require) τελέω means “to complete an activity or process.”⁷⁶ Therefore, the first option (i.e., the mission is completed) also allows the verb to retain its usual sense.⁷⁷ Even the command to “flee” (φεύγετε) in 10:23a is not primarily about avoiding danger (as 10:16–20 makes clear) but is given to ensure that the disciples remain alive to continue the mission.⁷⁸ The disciples are told to be “as shrewd as snakes” (10:16) and not needlessly remain in dangerous situations. However, going to the next town is not for the purpose of hiding, but

⁷²The future return of Israel from exile is compared to the Exodus in passages such as Isa 11:10–16; 43:16–44:5. Especially relevant is a prophecy like Zech 10:6–12 which was given after the return from Babylon, yet speaks of a still future return from exile which includes the “tribes of Joseph” (v. 6).

⁷³*The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Greek Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 426. Nolland favors the second option.

⁷⁴Darrell L. Bock and Benjamin I. Simpson, *Jesus According to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 255. See also Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 200. As Moore notes, there is a longer reading of 10:23a (which includes ἅλῃν ἐὰν δὲ ἐν τῇ ἅλῃ διώκουσιν ὑμᾶς, φεύγετε εἰς τὴν ἅλῃν) which might lend some support to this option, but it “is not strong support” (*Parousia in the New Testament*, 144). Bruce Metzger concludes that the longer reading reflects a later addition (*A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Hendrickson, 2006], 23).

⁷⁵Glasscock, *Matthew*, 231.

⁷⁶BDAG, “τελέω,” 997.

⁷⁷Moore, *Parousia in the New Testament*, 144.

⁷⁸Osborne, *Matthew*, 390. Once it is noted that the command to flee persecution is primarily about the completion of the mission, France’s observation regarding the small difference between the two options related to the ellipsis is appropriate (*Gospel of Matthew*, 395, n. 22).

to continue preaching the gospel of the kingdom. And the disciples are commanded to continue this preaching indefinitely, because it will not be completed until the coming of the Son of Man completes it. Jesus's promised coming to complete the mission is the motivation for the disciple to continue preaching in the face of opposition.

Theological Context

The argument proposed above for this admittedly difficult passage is supported by the clear teaching of the remainder of Scripture. Jesus prepared his disciples for a long interim before his Second Coming (see esp. "long time" in Matt 24:48, 5, 19). It will be of such a length that he could ask, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). Jesus himself said that he was not aware of when his Second Coming would occur, that only his Father knows the timing (Matt 24:36; Acts 1:7); but he promised that it was imminent—without any preceding signs (Matt 24:38–39, 44).⁷⁹ Therefore, it follows that Matthew 10:23b is not describing something that must take place prior to Christ's return. During the interim, Jesus's servants must work diligently to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19–20) thereby being used by God to form a constituency of the coming kingdom (i.e., οἱ υἱοὶ τῆς βασιλείας—Matt 13:38). At the forefront of this disciple-making is the proclamation regarding the King and his coming kingdom. This is a message that must go to the "ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8) including the "towns of Israel," that is, all the places in the world where the "lost sheep of Israel," the descendants of Jacob, continue to live in exile. From the beginning of the book of Acts to its very end (Acts 28:23–27), we see the Apostles engaged in this mission to their Jewish countrymen by "explaining about the kingdom of God" and trying "to persuade them about Jesus."

Despite persecution, those who witness to the Jewish nation should take heart, for "in the end...Israel [will] repent (23:29), just as the prophets had spoken (e.g., Deut 4:30; Jer 31:33; Ezek 37:23; Hos 2:14–23; 11:5–11; 14:1–7; Mal 4:6)."⁸⁰ On the plains of Moab, before the newly formed nation of Israel had even entered their Promised

⁷⁹The immanency of Christ's return, represented by the imagery of the thief, becomes a reoccurring theme throughout the NT (Matt 24:43; 1 Thess 5:2–4; 2 Pet 3:10; Rev 3:3; 16:15). While a discussion regarding the timing of the rapture in relationship to the Second Coming of Christ is outside the scope of this study, I would suggest that the Second Coming, i.e., the Day of the Lord, is a complex of events that will begin with the rapture of the Church, include the completion of the Jewish mission, and culminate with the establishment of Christ's kingdom on earth. Craig Blaising has helpfully likened this complex of events to a military campaign (i.e., a campaign can take a long period of time but still be referred to as if it was a punctiliar event, e.g., the Battle of Stalingrad), and it is this complex of events, which is referred to in Scripture as "the Day of the Lord" or simply as Christ's "coming," that is imminent ("A Case for the Pretribulational Rapture," in *Three Views on the Rapture*, ed. Alan Hultberg [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010], 47–52).

⁸⁰Keener, *Gospel of Matthew*, 324.

Land, God predicted that they would go into exile as a covenant curse, but would also be restored one day following repentance (Deut 30:1–10; cf. Lev 26:41–45; Deut 4:30–31). The establishment of the kingdom of God is contingent on the repentance of Israel,⁸¹ and the nation will repent in conjunction with the return of the Messiah (Zech 12:10–14). The obstacle standing in the way of repentant faith, for Jewish as well as Gentile sinners, has always been a hard, calloused heart that has no desire for God (Deut 5:29; 29:4; Isa 6:10). But God can change a heart (Deut 30:6). Therefore, Jesus commanded his disciples to persevere and reassured them that his coming would complete their mission. This is a great encouragement to evangelists because it frees them from the responsibility of securing results: “They themselves will not succeed in winning the Jews to allegiance of the gospel.”⁸² In his wisdom and grace, the sovereign Lord included in his immutable, comprehensive plan for the universe a delay in the realization of the promises made to the OT saints, because he “had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect” (Heb 11:40).

CONCLUSION

The doctrine of imminence does not require that Jesus *must* return very soon. It just requires that he *could* return very soon, that is, there is nothing that must occur before his coming. Every believer can live with the hope that Jesus could return today but must work and plan in case his coming is another two thousand years away. Therefore, to return to Bertrand Russell’s essay, his observation that the preacher seen planting trees in his garden had contradicted his own preaching regarding the imminence of Christ’s return misses the point of imminence, at least as the term is used by most Christians when speaking of eschatology.⁸³ Nothing in Jesus’s teaching, including Matthew 10:23, indicates that he promised or even expected to set up his kingdom immediately or even soon. He was content to submit to the will of the Father regarding the timing of the kingdom’s establishment. Therefore, there is no reason to claim that Jesus was mistaken. Instead, his words in Matthew 10:23b are consistent with the rest of Scripture. At some point in the future, the Son of Man will come from heaven to establish an everlasting kingdom on earth. In conjunction with his coming, the nation of Israel will repent, thus meeting the condition to come out of exile and enter the kingdom. Christian evangelists to Jewish people should persevere in the face of opposition for the outcome is certain.

⁸¹Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 141. Cf. Michael J. Vlach, “Israel’s Repentance and the Kingdom of God,” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 27 (Spring 2016): 161–86.

⁸²Moore, *Parousia in the New Testament*, 145.

⁸³*Why I Am Not a Christian*, 16. Robert L. Thomas rightly defines the doctrine of imminence in the NT as the belief that “no predicted event will precede the coming of Christ” (“Imminence in the NT, Especially Paul’s Thessalonian Epistles,” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 13 [Fall 2002]: 204). Thomas’s article acknowledges that not all Christian scholarship subscribes to this definition.