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Living in the Post-Easter Era: The Theology of the Matthean Eschatological Discourse (Matthew 24–25)

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Despite the masterful character and strong influence of the First Gospel both in Jewish- and Gentile-Christian communities of the early church, its author, Matthew, is not considered by contemporary authors to be one of the pre-eminent theologians of the first century, in rank with Paul and John. While his literary creativity is beyond discussion,[1] it has been argued that his theological thinking is not hallmarked by innovation, as is that of the above mentioned two apostles.[2] Nevertheless, the Matthean version of the Eschatological Discourse (chs. 24–25) provides the theologically richest glimpse into Jesus's teaching on the eschaton in the New Testament.[3]

This notorious and much debated text is full of interpretative difficulties. A lot of ink has been spilt over issues such as the cryptic "abomination of desolation" (βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως; 24:15),[4] the relationship of the destruction of the temple and the parousia, the great

[1] See e.g., Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1986); John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005), 23–29.

[2] W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, ICC, 3 vols. (London: T&T Clark, 1997), 3:722; R. Alan Culpepper, *Matthew*, NTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2021), 19.

[3] The Markan and Lukan versions are significantly shorter: they are respectively 37 and 32 verses long, as compared with the 97 verses of Matthew.

[4] All the biblical texts in this chapter are taken from the NRSV, unless otherwise stated, as in this case.

tribulation, the problem of "this generation" (ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη; 24:34), etc.[5] In some Christian circles, the discourse has served and still serves as the foundational text for cataloguing the "signs of the times" which are seen as heralding the impending parousia.

While a number of detailed studies have been published in the last several decades on Matthew 24–25, the theological exploration of the discourse has been largely neglected.[6] One of the rare exceptions is the work of Barna, who examines the discourse by employing a theological-thematic reading which he sees as a "complementary" and "necessary" step to the exegetical work.[7] His study is, however, focused on the discussion of the problem of signs of the parousia in chapter 24, hence no attention is given to the theological investigation of the discourse as a whole. Talbert also explores, in his commentary, theological matters related to the Matthean Eschatological Discourse, but his approach is selective: he concentrates mainly on the apocalyptic pattern of Matthew's eschatology.[8] Similar selectivity is characteristic of the work of Luz, whose theological enquiry focuses on Matthew's judgment theology.[9] Furthermore, a number of comprehensive earlier studies, such as those by Ladd, Ridderbos or Berkouwer, discuss theologically the

[5] The Matthean version of the Eschatological Discourse has received incomparably less scholarly attention than the Markan version, because of the influence of source critical discussions.

[6] Some of the major studies are the following: Fred W. Burnett, *The Testament of Jesus-Sophia: A Redactional-Critical Study of the Eschatological Discourse in Matthew* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981); Victor K. Agbanou, *Le Discours Eschatologique de Matthieu 24–25: Tradition et Rédaction* (Paris: Libraire Lecoffre, 1983); David Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives: The Rediscovery of Jesus' Eschatological Discourse.* Volume IV (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984); Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Jerusalem and Parousia: Jesus' Eschatological Discourse in Matthew's Gospel* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Academic Press, 2000); Alistair I. Wilson, *When Will These Things Happen? A Study of Jesus as Judge in Matthew 21–25*, Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006).

[7] Jan Barna, "The Progression in the Signs of the Parousia in the Eschatological Speeches of Jesus," in *Eschatology from an Adventist Perspective: Proceedings of the Fourth International Bible Conference.* Rome, 11–20 June, 2018, eds. Elias Brasil de Souza et al. (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2021), 139–60.

[8] Charles H. Talbert, *Matthew*, Paideia (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 278–81.

[9] Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew*, New Testament Theology, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 125–32.

Eschatological Discourse, but without nuancing carefully the contribution of each of the three synoptic authors.[10]

This study seeks to break fresh ground in the theological reading of the discourse by paying attention to Matthew 24–25 as a literary and theological whole. It aims to identify and investigate the cardinal theological themes of the discourse giving insight into the rhetorical agenda of Matthew. It argues that Jesus's use of apocalyptic language in the discourse is not given for speculation over the future, but rather for ethical-ecclesial purposes: to help the disciples to live attentively and responsibly in the presence of the one who has come and who will come.

Before we turn to the discussion of the theological themes of the Matthean Eschatological Discourse, necessary preparatory work needs to be done. First, the wider theological context of the discourse will be briefly explored, since the Eschatological Discourse is not to be approached as an isolated text. Second, the arrangement of the discourse will be examined. Both of these steps have important implications for the task of the theological interpretation of Matthew 24–25, which will be undertaken as the third step in the course of this investigation.

1 Jesus's Kingdom Theology and the Eschatological Discourse

According to Matthew, the theological center point of Jesus's teaching (διδάσκειν) and proclamation (κηρύσσειν) was "the good news of the kingdom" (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας; 4:23; 9:35).[11] The proclamation of "this good news of the kingdom" is mentioned also in the Eschatological Discourse (24:14), referring to the mission of the church in the post-Easter era.[12] As announced by Jesus, this theme implies the arrival of God's eschatological kingship with its two distinct aspects: the kingdom as a present reality established in this world (immanent dynamic dominion of God) and its future manifestation (transcendent spatial kingdom).[13] Both aspects of the kingdom have

[10] George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 3–42; Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, trans. H. de Jongste (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1975), 477–97; G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*, Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 235–59.

[11] The same expression (τοῦτο τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας) is found also in 26:13.

[12] Matthew 26:13 has the shorter version of "this good news."

[13] The understanding of the coming of the kingdom was an intensive debate in 20th century scholarship. For an overview of the history of research, see Ladd, *Presence*, 3–42.

strong eschatological overtones, and they are integral stages in the fulfillment of God's plan. The human existence between the Christ-event and the parousia takes place in the tension of the "now-but-not-yet" in which God's promises are realized, but not fully extended.

In this connection, the Eschatological Discourse is highly significant, because it provides an extended discussion on the coming of the future reign of God. This coming has already been referred to in Matthew's gospel in a number of ways: (1) in the "Your kingdom come" petition of the Lord's Prayer (6:10); (2) in statements about "entry" into the kingdom (5:20; 7:21; 18:3) and its opposite of "being cast out" (7:2; 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; cf. 24:51; 25:11, 30); (3) in expressions on inheriting (eternal) life (19:29); (4) in the image of the promised land (5:5); (5) in references to the future judgment (5:3, 10; cf. 25:34); (6) in the expression "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (19:12; cf. 19:29); (7) in using future tenses with "in the kingdom" (5:19; 13:43); (8) in the statement on the coming of the Son of Man in his glory (16:27); and (9) in major images such as the great banquet prepared by God (8:11; 22:11–13; cf. 25:1–12, 21, 23), the harvest (13:24–30), the catch of fish (13:47) and the leavened mass (13:33).[14] Clearly, in these images and expressions a culmination in the fulfillment of the coming of God's perfect kingdom is envisioned and an appeal is made which stresses the value of living in the perspective of the eschatological hope.

Since Matthew portrays Jesus primarily as a teaching Messiah, the "messianic teacher of wisdom,"[15] it is natural to expect that his discourses address not only the kingdom life which arrived already in his earthly ministry, but also the divine purpose that leads to the full realization of the kingdom. The Eschatological Discourse, which is the second longest discourse out of the five discourses in the First Gospel, provides this final capstone in Jesus's multifaceted kingdom theology.[16]

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[14] For a somewhat different categorisation, see Rudolf Schnackenburt, *God's Rule and Kingdom*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Herder and Herder; London: Burns and Oates, 1968), 160–63.

[15] Martin Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 73–117. For the tradition of the teaching Messiah in ancient Judaism, see e.g., Isa 11:2–4; 1 En 49:1–3; 51:3; Pss. Sol. 17:43; 4Q521 frag. 2.1–2; Tg. Isa. 42:1; 53:5, 11–12.

[16] Surprisingly, the Eschatological Discourse is almost completely ignored by some scholars in reconstructing the theology of Matthew. See e.g., Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Daniel P. Bailey (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018). Similarly, Barry D. Smith (*Jesus' Twofold Teaching about the Kingdom of God*, NTM 24 [Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009]) overlooks the Eschatological Discourse in discussing Jesus's kingdom theology. The reason for this ignorance might lie in the fact

As such, its detailed discussion is of utmost importance for understanding the great divine work of salvation and the human response to it embodied in the idea of entering into or failing to enter the kingdom of heaven.

2 The Arrangement of the Eschatologial Discourse

The complexity of structuring the Matthean Eschatological Discourse is noteworthy. It is almost impossible to find two authors who agree on all the details.[17] The basic problem is that Matthew seems to move freely between describing the impending crisis (the destruction of Jerusalem) and the end of the age (the parousia). Mounce calls our attention to the fact that "it is not uncommon for prophetic material to move between type and antitype without calling attention to exactly what is happening."[18] So, the fluidity of the discourse reflects the author's own setting, rather than sharing our contemporary western concern for meticulous, orderly continuity.

Still, I suggest, there are clear structural indicators in the text which signal the flow of the argument and consequently the main sections of the discourse. First, the discourse starts with a narrative introductory scene which provides the setting for what follows: Jesus's prediction about the destruction of temple and the double question of the disciples (24:1–3).[19] Second, in a didactic section, Jesus focuses on human history by delineating events on earth and in heaven followed by the parousia (24:4–31). Third, in a paraenetic section, Jesus exhorts the disciples by stressing the importance of vigilance (24:32–25:30). Fourth, in a scene of the final judgment, human accountability is emphasized and the theme of living appropriately in the light of the coming eschaton is continued (25:31–46). On the basis of this macro-structure, it seems that 24:32 constitutes the "hinge" of the Eschatological Discourse, because it draws

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that Jesus's primary emphasis was on the present aspect of the kingdom and not so much on its future coming.

[17] I came to this conclusion by examining about thirty major commentaries, monographs, and scholarly articles which discuss the structure of the discourse.

[18] Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew*, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1991), 222.

[19] Matthew 23 provides a wider setting, though there is a shift from a wider audience (the crowd and his disciples; 23:1) to a private one (his disciples only; 24:1, 3). Burnett (*Testament*, 21–25) considers that the discourse begins at 24:4, but the narrative introduction of 24:1–2 is related contextually to the Eschatological Discourse and also to the discourse of Woes in chapter 23 which provides a bridge between the two.

a line between the didactic and paraenetic sections.[20] In the first one, the emphasis is on the expected events, while in the second one the church is urged to respond in vigilance and preparation for the coming eschaton. The paraenetic section is longer: 50 verses (and an additional 16 verses of the final judgment scene), as compared to the 28 verses of the didactic section. This difference in length is not insignificant for establishing the rhetorical purpose of the author.

This analysis demonstrates that any comprehensive theological analysis of Matthew 24–25 which focuses on the events preceding the eschaton, the eschaton itself, the judgment or simply on discipleship, is incomplete and one sided. The structure indicates that while the discourse has an eschatological overtone, end-expectation and the conception of church are strictly indivisible. Thus eschatology and ecclesiology are closely related in the discourse, which is not surprising, because no other Gospel is as strongly shaped by the concept of church as is the First Gospel.[21] Since discipleship is to be understood not only as an ecclesiological concept, but also as an experiential reality linked to the person of Jesus, Christology must also be given some consideration in the theological analysis of Matthew 24–25.

3 Theological Themes

In the following, I will discuss five cardinal theological themes featuring in Matthew 24–25. I will aim to uncover how they are woven into the material of the discourse and how they are linked together.

3.1 The Fairness of God: Justice and Judgment

The Eschatological Discourse is impregnated with the theme of God's justice as expressed in judgment. In the Matthean worldview, both the righteous and the wicked are to face consequences for their deeds in this world.[22] On the one hand, seeking first the kingdom and its

[20] Though Gibb's (*Jerusalem*, 174–176) interpretation of the Parousia in terms of first-century events is problematic, he correctly maintains that 24:36 is the dividing line between the two cardinal sections of the discourse.

[21] Günther Bornkamm, Gerhard Barth and Heinz Joachim Held (*Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* [London: SCM, 1963], 15–24) rightly note that all discourses in the Gospel of Matthew have an eschatological slant in which end-expectation and the concept of church are closely linked.

[22] Anders Runesson (*Divine Wrath and Salvation in Matthew: The Narrative World of the First Gospel* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2016], 165–171) suggests that these deeds can be categorized as "external deeds" (e.g., "good fruit" or hospitality–3:10; 7:17–

righteousness results in experiencing God's care (6:33); moreover, the righteous "will inherit the earth" (5:5). On the other hand, like Sodom and Gomorrah which were destroyed because of their wickedness (11:23), Jerusalem must count on judgment (21:18–19; 22:7; 24:2) because of its history of rejecting messengers sent by God.[23] The deeds–consequences line of reasoning is strongly present in the Eschatological Discourse. Surprisingly, this is overlooked by Reiser, who fails to consider the discourse in constructing the judgment theology of Jesus as reflected in the Synoptic Gospels.[24]

The wider literary context of the Eschatological Discourse is of vital importance for understanding the judgment theology of Matthew 24–25. Indeed, 24:1–2 functions as the culmination of the theme of God's judgment upon Israel as foreshadowed in chapters 21–23.[25] As the narrative progresses, the emphasis on the judgment on Israel becomes increasingly stronger (21:23, 31, 43), until the judgment oracle of the Woes is uttered in chapter 23. Climactic to it is Jesus's abandoning of the temple (24:1) which is preceded by the statement: "See, your house is left to you, desolate" (23:38). The account is reminiscent of Ezekiel's vision of the departing of God's glory from the temple (Ezek 10:18–19), particularly since link is made with the Mount of Olives (Ezek 11:22–23; cf. Matt 24:3).[26] So, even if Matthew 23 is a separate discourse from chapters 24–25, it is intricately linked to it, providing a theological clue for its interpretation.

Not only is the starting point of the Eschatological Discourse a judgment oracle (24:1–2), but so is its concluding scene (25:31–46). Namely, the Eschatological Discourse ends with a portrayal of the universal final judgment conducted by the Son of Man sitting "on the throne of his glory" (25:31).[27] This scene reflects an apocalyptic

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19; 10:40–42), "verbal deeds" (e.g., insults, blasphemy or careless words–5:22; 12:32, 36) and "internal deeds" (things that happen in secret–6:2–4, 16–18). On divine justice as equivalent repayment of deeds in the Matthean thought, see Cedric E. W. Vine, *Jesus and the Nations: Discipleship and Mission in the Gospel of Matthew* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2022), 141–143.

[23] Vine, (*Jesus,* 62) notes: "The destruction of Jerusalem is thereby related to the history of the people of Israel and the justice of God."

[24] Marius Reiser, *Jesus and Judgment: The Eschatological Proclamation in Its Jewish Context*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997).

[25] Burnett, *Testament,* 22–23.

[26] Wilson, *When*, 135.

[27] In opposition to this view, Chad Venters (*The Sheep and the Goats: A Matthean Teaching in Historical Context* [Lanham, MD: Lexington and Fortress Academic, 2022],

awareness according to which justice will prevail at the end and no one will be able to escape it. This provides grounds for confidence in the future, an incentive to look forward to God's radical transformation of the present order of things, and to the coming of the eschatological kingdom that includes no trace of evil.[28]

In addition to the beginning and the end of the discourse, its heart, the parousia scene (24:29–31), also resonates with the notion of judgment. Davies and Allison appropriately name this scene "the dramatic zenith" of the discourse.[29] The cosmic "shaking" (σαλευθήσονται), described in the Day of the Lord language drawn from the Old Testament, implies that all quake, since the Son of Man comes as a judge and ruler over all things (cf. 16:27; 19:28; 25:31).[30] The parousia brings "a mighty reversal of fortunes," reflecting the materialization of God's justice (24:31).[31]

Thus, the Eschatological Discourse sees judgment as integral to God's plan. It is made clear that there are lesser judgments as well as the final judgment of God, and the two are related. As De Pressensé notes, "Every period has its own decisive event, and receives its own solemn sentence. These partial judgments foretell the great and final judgment."[32] At the end, divine justice is inescapable, because it is the reflection of the moral structure of the universe rooted in God's fairness.

3.2 Time of Woes, Time of Hope: Interpretation of History

Matthew portrays a fundamentally apocalyptic picture of history. The present is seen as evil and dark: a time of woes likened to "birth pangs" (ὠδῖνες; 24:8). Interpreting the current era and the immediate past in terms of the messianic woes is not unique to Matthew. Allison calls our attention to the fact that such an outlook can be established also in

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4) argues that 25:31–46 does not describe "the end of the space continuum–time continuum, rather it was to build on the theme of judgment against Israel when her temple fell." This hypothesis is built on parallels with Psalm 80, but it fails to take seriously the eschatological language which permeates the discourse and the character of the Matthean theology of judgment developed throughout the book.

[28] Margaret Davies, *Matthew*, Readings (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 175.

[29] Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3:358.

[30] For a detailed study on the background of Matthew's catastrophe language, see e.g. Edward Adams, *Stars Will Fall from Heaven: Cosmic Catastrophe in the New Testament and Its World*, LNTS 347 (London: T&T Clark, 2007).

[31] G. B. Caird, *Jesus and the Jewish Nation* (London: Athlone Press, 1965), 20.

[32] Quoted in George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days: The Interpretation of the Olivet Discourse* (Vancouver: Regent, 1993), 129.

the Testament of Moses, portions of the Dead Sea Scrolls, 4 Ezra, Mark and Revelation.[33]

The "time of woes" appears to be an extended period which involves continuous suffering, but it is also marked by a worldwide proclamation of the "good news of the kingdom" (24:14). In this age not only has love grown cold (24:12), but the people of God are to live with false prophets (24:11, 23–28), experiencing hate and tribulation (24:9). Additionally, they are to witness catastrophes including Israel's national catastrophe. From a phenomenon of "abomination of desolation" (24:15), the fulfillment of a Danielic prediction, one can only try to flee.[34] Essentially, the Eschatological Discourse defines "the character of time as one of 'crisis.'"[35] As Luz notes, "Matthew paints his own present black because he no longer sees a future for the world"–things have gone beyond the point of repair.[36]

An exclusively negative view of history in Matthew 24–25 must be tempered by an often overlooked aspect. Namely, the darkness of evil does not prevail in the narrative, but it is counterbalanced by the great hope for the parousia of the glorified Christ (24:29–44). While the immediate future is horrific, the ultimate future is glorious. I suggest that God's people are prompted by the Eschatological Discourse to relate to the future as to a time of woes and time of hope at the same time. Affliction is to be seen as only the prelude to God's vindication of his people and his transformation of the present evil world. The fact that human history is pictured as moving in the direction of the final solution of the problem of evil, despite the troublesome experiences of God's people, provides an assurance that would have encouraged Matthew's original audience to persevere in faithfulness and hope.[37] While they

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[33] For details, see Dale C. Allison, *The End of the Ages Has Come: An Early Interpretation of the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1985), 7–14, 26–39, 70–73.

[34] As Vine (*Jesus*, 47) notes, Jesus's command to "flee to the mountains" echoes the command to Lot to "flee to the hills" without looking back and stopping anywhere (Gen 19:17). For an in-depth discussion of the "abomination of desolation," see Desmond Ford, *The Abomination of Desolation in Biblical Eschatology* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1979); Michael Theophilos, *The Abomination of Desolation in Matthew 24.15*, LNTS 437 (London: T & T Clark, 2012).

[35] Ridderbos, *Coming*, 477.

[36] Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Hermeneia, 3 vols. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1989–2005), 3:206.

[37] Davies, *Matthew*, 175–176. Similarly, Michael Green (*The Message of Matthew: The Kingdom of Heaven*, The Bible Speaks Today [Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity,

were prepared by the discourse for a dramatic time marked by a long haul, they were also ensured that living in a waiting mode is made possible because of a hope made real–a hope grounded not in illusion, but in the reality of Jesus's promise.[38]

So, the Eschatological Discourse defines the character of human history by reinforcing hope in the midst of overwhelming despair. The hardships are not indefinite and they will not last forever. While the present evil age inflicts wounds on God's people, hope is nurtured "by showing how a good future can issue from an evil present."[39]

3.3 Christ and the Eschaton

The Eschatological Discourse presents Jesus not only as a teacher, but as a prophet who foresees the eschatological future. This Christological perspective is not new. Throughout the entire Gospel Jesus prophesies events related to the end-time scenario: the activity of false prophets (7:15–23), the persecution of disciples (10:21–39), the coming of the Son of Man (16:27) and the angelic harvest (13:49). The Eschatological Discourse clarifies these details and enlarges them significantly.

In the discourse itself, Jesus appears as a messianic-eschatological figure with a crucial role in history. While the rest of the Gospel emphasizes the "newness of the new situation created by Jesus' coming"[40] and his function in the era which he has inaugurated, in Matthew 24 he is portrayed as the Son of Man "coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (24:30).[41] This coming, the parousia, represents the ultimate triumph of God's plan. This triumph is solidly grounded in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and it will be made

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2000], 48) notes that according to the Eschatological Discourse "the world is moving not towards chaos, though there will be plenty of that (24:3–31), but towards Christ and his return. Every moment worth salt has an eschatology, an expectation of how it will all end."

[38] Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, SCM Theological Commentary on the Bible (London: SCM, 2006), 207.

[39] Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3:328

[40] Nolland, *Matthew*, 41.

[41] The "Son of Man" title is found only on the lips of Jesus. The meaning of the title was one of the most significant debates of the last century in New Testament scholarship. For a recent comprehensive overview of the discussion and the main interpretative possibilities, see e.g., Craig D. Saunders, *A Mediator in Matthew: An Analysis of the Son of Man's Function in the First Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2021), 2–29.

complete by the termination of the order of evil when the Son of Man will publicly reveal his kingly rule over the universe. Although a throne is not specifically mentioned in 24:29–31, the fact that he is "coming on the clouds of heaven" (ἐρχόμενον ἐπὶ τῶν νεφελῶν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ; 24:30) is telling. Namely, the Son of Man is pictured as coming "with the clouds of heaven" (עם־ענני שמיא) to the Ancient One in Daniel 7:13.[42] Not less significantly, during the exodus the Shekinah presence of God guided Israel in a cloud by day and in a fire at night (Exod 13:21–22; 14:24); later the Shekinah glory covered the sanctuary as a cloud (Exod 40:34–38). In the light of these Old Testament backgrounds, the Son of Man's parousia "on the clouds of heaven" seems to represent the coming of Yahweh himself.[43] "The throne of his glory," the symbol of his kingly rule, is directly mentioned later in Matthew 25:31, in the context of the eschatological judgment scene (καθίσει ἐπὶ θρόνου δόξης αὐτοῦ).

Clearly, in the Eschatological Discourse, Christology is integrated into eschatology. The future holds the coming of the one who has already come and whose "good news of the kingdom" is proclaimed in the present (24:14). Therefore, the hope for humanity is centered on the person of Jesus, the one capable of renewing humanity and its life space, rather than on the future itself. Ultimately, the world is not moving towards chaos, though plenty of it is evident in human history (24:3–31), but rather towards Christ and the future he brings at his parousia. To that hope Matthew looks Christologically, "with quiet but unshakeable assurance."[44]

3.4 Vigilance and Endurance: Church, Ethics, and the Eschaton

The main concern of the Eschatological Discourse is not the events marking the crisis before the eschaton, but the present existence of the church. The present is a time in which affliction and proclamation take place in parallel–in such a situation the church is called to faithfully follow Christ enduring to the end (24:13).[45] No discussion of the new world is given in Matthew 24–25, but the discourse is rather dominated by an emphasis on the ethical implications of the coming eschaton.

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[42] Tremper Longman (*Daniel*, NIVAC [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999], 186–88) notes parallels with the "divine cloud-rider" motif in the OT and outside of it–a language used consistently for the designation of a deity itself.

[43] E.g., Grant Osborne, *Matthew*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 894.

[44] Green, *Matthew*, 49.

[45] Beasley-Murray, *Last Days*, 352.

Clearly, eschatology, discipleship and ethics are inextricably interwoven, and this link frames the discourse.[46]

This perspective is reflected in the structure of the Matthean Eschatological Discourse, as seen in the relevant section above. Namely, the shorter section on the eschatological portrayal of human history (24:3–31) functions only as a preparation for the longer warning section (24:32–25:30) which stresses vigilance. So, the discussion on human history exists in the interest of paraenesis. This feature indicates that Matthew's primary interest lies in praxis, rather than in speculation along the lines of date-calculating imminent eschatology.[47] Thus, the readers of the discourse are to discover in it how God calls them to live in the light of the coming parousia.

The paraenetic section consists of two larger parts. First, the unexpectedness of the parousia is emphasized (24:32–44); this is followed by three parousia parables which discuss the character of waiting (24:45–25:30). The resulting picture brings out clearly that a thoughtless and careless attitude toward the parousia is to be guarded against. The congregation of disciples is rather to demonstrate watchfulness (γρηγορεῖτε οὖν; 24:42) and preparedness (γίνεσθε ἕτοιμοι; 24:44).[48] What faithfulness, readiness and responsibility in the assigned tasks in the interim period mean is illustrated by the parables of the faithful and unfaithful slave (24:45–51), the ten bridesmaids (25:1–13) and the talents (25:14–30). In these parables, the church is urged to understand discipleship in terms of living responsibly in endurance and carrying out duties in a spiritually prepared state, since the followers of Christ do not know the time of the Son of Man's return (24:36). The warnings "function as catalysts for the disciples' spiritual wakefulness."[49]

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[46] Vicky Balabanski, *Eschatology in the Making: Mark, Matthew and the Didache*, SNTSMS 97 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 152. This link is characteristic to Matthew's eschatological thinking throughout the First Gospel. For the union of eschatology and ecclesiology in the Matthean discourses, see Bornkamm, *Tradition*, 15–24.

[47] Luz, *Matthew*, 3:203.

[48] Rabbi Zera claims that three come when the mind is diverted: the messiah, a found article, and a scorpion (*b. Sanh.* 97a).

[49] Talbert, *Matthew*, 278.

The present is also seen in the Eschatological Discourse as a time of worldwide mission.[50] Bearing witness to the "gospel of the kingdom" is directly linked to the coming of the end (24:14). As background to the idea is the motif of the nations' end-time conversion to the Lord which features eminently in the Old Testament prophetic literature.[51] Though in the Greek future passive construction of 24:14 the subject of the preaching is not specified (κηρυχθήσεται ["will be proclaimed"]), the context indicates that those who endure the trials delineated in the discourse are precisely those who persevere until the end, faithfully bearing witness to "the gospel of the kingdom." In the wider context of the entire Gospel, this missionary task is clearly given to the church and it has an eschatological overtone (28:19–20). As demonstrated, church, ethics and eschatology are strongly linked in the theological horizon of the Eschatological Discourse: neither ranks above the other, but they are all integral to the realization of the pastoral purpose of the author.

3.5 The Only Crisis that Matters: Serving While Waiting

While the Eschatological Discourse alerts its audience to the time of crisis in the post-Easter era and emphasizes the triumph of God's plan, its aim is not to inspire a short-term eschatological fervor. On the one hand, the discourse communicates important information about the end-time, listing many of the signs that marked the end in contemporary Jewish literature.[52] Although these prophecies make the suffering of the people of God bearable, they are, however, not of cardinal significance. The exhortative nature of the discourse makes of focal interest the instruction on how to live in the light of the impending parousia. So, the invitation to the disciples is not so much to discern the future, but rather the present.[53] This practically means that the expectation of the parousia does not entail any passivity in the life of the believing community, but

[50] This emphasis is typical to the post-Easter period: e.g., Acts 1:8. Since in Matt 24:14 the post-Easter period is in view, there is no contradiction with 10:5–6.

[51] E.g., Isa 2:2–4; 45:20–22; 49:6; 55:5; 56:6–8; Mic 4:1–3; cf. 1 En. 48:4–5; T. Levi 18:5–9; Sib. Or. 3:710–723.

[52] Craig S. Keener (*The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009], 566 n. 104) lists the following Jewish sources: Jub. 23:11–25; 1QM 15:1; Sib. Or. 2:6–3:33; 3:213–215; 4 Ezra 8:63–9:8; 13:19–20, 30; 2 Bar. 26:1–27:13; 69:3–5; T. Mos. 7–8; m. Sota 9:15; b. Sanh. 97a; Pesiq. Rab Kah. 5:9; Qoh. Rab. 2:15 §2; Lam. Rab. 1:13, §41; Song Rab. 2:13 §4; 8:9, §3; Pesiq. R. 1:7; 15:14/15; 34:1.

[53] Hauerwas, *Matthew*, 206.

rather it requires a careful and dedicated activity in the service of God. This perspective is emphatically reinforced in the concluding scene of the discourse, the parable of the sheep and the goats, which portrays the universal judgment scene taking place in front of (ἔμπροσθεν; 25:32) "the throne of his glory" (θρόνος δόξης αὐτοῦ; 25:31). The significance of the location is highlighting the divine authority in serving cosmic justice.

The point of the universal judgment scene (25:31–46) is to emphasize the criterion used at the last judgment. The characteristic of "the righteous" (οἱ δίκαιοι) is that they give food to the hungry, give something to drink to the thirsty, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, take care of the sick and visit those in prison (25:35–45). The concept of demonstrating mercy to "the least of these" (25:40, 45) reminds us of Proverbs 19:17: "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and will be repaid in full." What is new in Matthew 25 is not the idea of mercy (cf. 5:7), but the identification of the needy person with Jesus himself. According to the judgment scene, Christian piety is directly linked with the love commandment: serving God takes place when acts of love are extended towards other human beings, including one's enemies.[54] Vine notes that "this is not a self-imposed status"[55]–acts of love are rather marked by a genuine, warm fraternity which becomes an extension of the messianic era of *shalom*. At the end, it seems that this is "the only crisis that matters,"[56] the way to remain awake in waiting for the fulfillment of the promise of the glorious second coming.

4 Conclusion

The theology of the Matthean Eschatological Discourse is a pastoral theology: its primary concern is to guide the community of believers. The author incarnates crucial moral imperatives by setting up a complex interplay of eschatology, judgment theology, philosophy of history, Christology, ecclesiology and ethics.

Instead of an extended speculation on the question of "the sign" of his coming (24:3), the Matthean Jesus discusses rather with his disciples how they are to wait in the era between the two advents. Unfortunately, Christians have often been unable to heed Jesus's warning. They have

[54] I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 110.

[55] Vine, *Jesus*, 52.

[56] Hauerwas, *Matthew*, 212.

often made apocalyptic constructs on the basis of the Eschatological Discourse, attempting to determine the end of the age and doing exactly what Jesus warned against: stepping on the territory of the knowledge reserved for the Father only (24:36). The recent Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, also the recent events in Israel have provided ample evidence of that.

This essay has argued that Jesus's use of apocalyptic language in Matthew 24–25, despite its strong judgment theology, is not given for speculation over the future, but rather for ethical-ecclesial purposes: to help the disciples to live attentively and responsibly in the presence of the one who has come and who will come. As such, the discourse helps us to see ourselves and the world in which we are called to live in the light of God's purposes for his creation. While the discourse undeniably calls attention prophetically to the challenges the followers of Christ face between the two advents, focusing on reading "the signs of the times" does not do justice to Jesus's teaching which seeks to instruct on how to live in the light of the coming parousia.

The challenge the church of the 21st century is facing is to bring the study of the Eschatological Discourse out from a purely academic realm into the concerns of everyday life. Our age strongly resonates with apocalyptic dystopia as far as human history is concerned, but this is only part of the story. Our generation has the privilege of learning to recognize and embrace the "seeds of hope"[57] sown with intentionality in the Eschatological Discourse. The church is tasked with carrying forward these "seeds of hope" as "this good news of the kingdom" (24:14) in the conviction that God is at work through the processes of human history and that he will complete his job of restoration in his own time. According to the Eschatological Discourse, such a perspective will materialize in an attitude of watchful expectation of the future that will be brought about by the eschatological intervention of God which goes hand in hand with service to those in need.

[57] An expression taken from Henri Nouwen (*Seeds of Hope*, ed. Robert Durback [London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1989]).

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