

First Sunday of Advent

“...so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man”

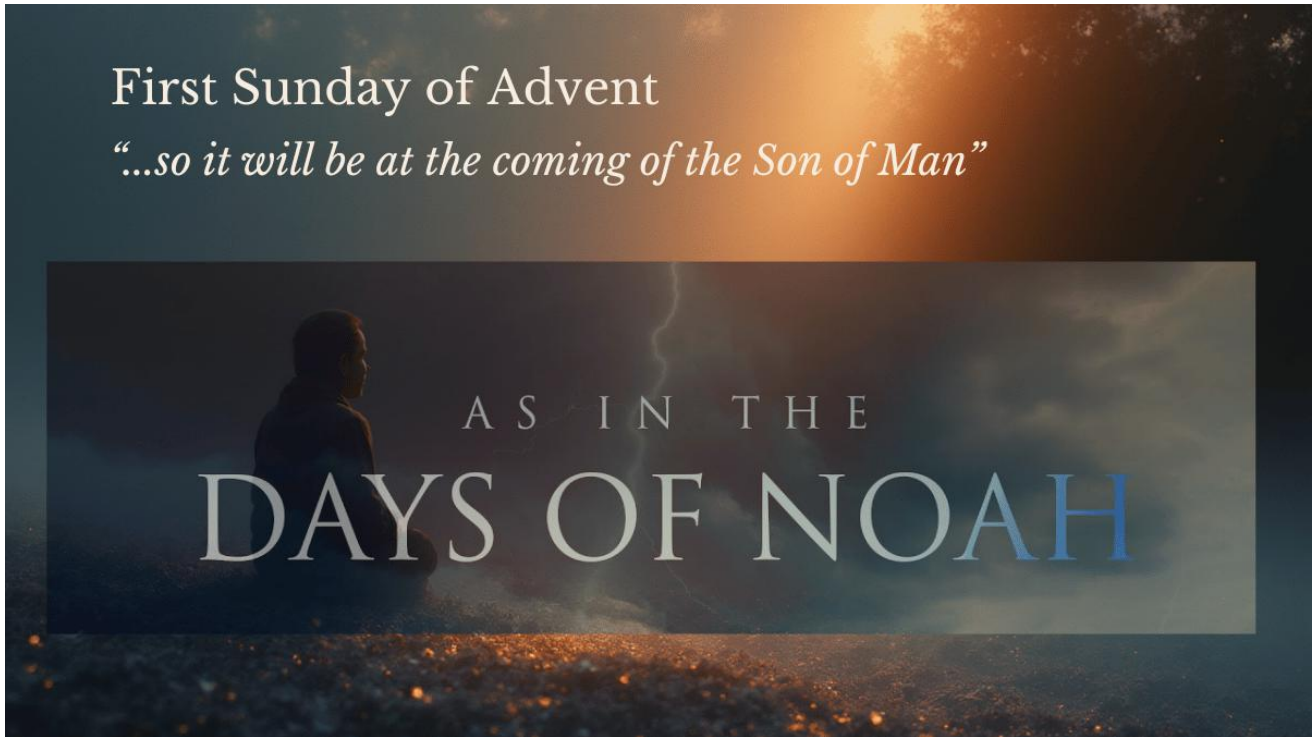


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³⁷ For as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ In (those) days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day that Noah entered the ark. ³⁹ They did not know until the flood came and carried them all away. So will it be (also) at the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Two men will be out in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left. ⁴² Therefore, stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come. ⁴³ Be sure of this: if the master of the house had known the hour of night when the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and not let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ So too, you also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come. (Matthew 24:37-44)

Context

This text is part of the fifth discourse in Matthew (24:1-25:46), which centers on the coming of the Son of Man – and that does not necessarily imply “end times” as in end of the world. The theme for the 1st Sunday in Advent for all three years is preparedness – in the everyday of life as well as for the end of life. What is common to all times is the victory of the reign of God.

Matthew’s Perspective of the End Time

Eugene Boring (*Matthew*, 457-58) notes Matthew 24 is not an “eschatological discourse” that presents Matthew’s or Jesus’ doctrine of the end, but is part of chaps. 23-25, whose aim is pastoral care and encouragement. Although he has included the “little apocalypse” of Mark 13 into this larger framework, Matthew (affirms but) reduces the significance of apocalyptic *per se*, subordinating it to other, more directly pastoral concerns. Matthew’s focus is judgment and warnings on Christian discipleship oriented toward the ultimate victory of the reign of God represented in Christ.

Matthew focuses on this by a variety of pictures that are sometimes at odds and sometimes in agreement. No one picture can do justice to the transcendent reality to which it points. There are

basically two types of pictures:

1. In the first of these, the risen Christ is present with his church throughout its historical pilgrimage and mission. Matthew affirms the transcendent lordship of the living Christ. This is expressed in pictures of Christ's continuing presence with his church through the ages, a major theme of Matthean theology (see 1:23; 28:20). In such a framework, there is no need or room for an ascension in which Christ departs, a period of Christ's "absence," and then a "return" of Christ, for the risen Christ never departs (cf. the last words of Matthew's Gospel).
2. In a second type of picture, the transcendence of the living Christ is pictured in a different way that had already become traditional in early Christianity—that of the departure of Christ at the resurrection/ascension and his return at the *parousia*.

In the first picture, Christ continues to be present; In the second, Christ is absent from this world during the period between ascension and *parousia*. Only this second picture can speak of a "return" of Christ; only the first can speak of Christ's "presence." Each has its valid theological point to make, but they cannot be nicely resolved. Matthew inherited and adopted both pictures. He affirmed them both. The modern tendency is to interpret the relationship of these two fundamental pictures to neat, manageable concepts, such that, e.g., Christ is now present "spiritually" but will return "physically" at the *parousia*.

Inconsistent pictures such as these are a theological advantage, pointing beyond each way of conceiving the transcendent lordship of Christ to the reality itself that cannot be simply or neatly represented. Matthew takes each way of talking about Christ's transcendent lordship with utmost seriousness as representing the reality. Christ is already present/Christ will come again. The final scene pulls these two together, but not in a conceptually neat way; the Son of Man who comes in glory at the end (25:31) is already present, not only in the high moments of inner-church life, but especially as the one who is met in the encounter with the poor and needy (25:40, 45).

Did Matthew expect the *parousia* to occur soon? As encouragement to his persecuted community, Matthew repeats as his own conviction the message of the first Christian generation that the end would come in their own time (16:28; 24:34; cf. 1 Cor 15:51-52; 1 Thess 4:15; Rev 1:3). As the first century drew to a close, this did not mean for Matthew that he devised a historical view that allowed for an indefinite "delay of the *parousia*." In Matthew's view, by his time there had already been a delay, which meant that the time of the end was closer than ever. By twice repeating the statement that some of Jesus' contemporaries would still be alive when the *parousia* occurs (16:28; 24:34), even near the end of the first century, Matthew affirms that the end is even nearer than previously thought.

The repeated references to "delay" (e.g., 24:48; 25:5) represent the contrary view, apparently in the air in Matthew's church, but always expressed by unfaithful characters in the story, never by the narrator. Matthew's own concern is to oppose this view, since it breeds complacency (cf. 2 Pet 3:3-13). Rather, Matthew's point is that he and his community already live in the time of the final tribulation; the days have been shortened (24:22), so the end will come soon—and may come at any time.

Near expectation is not incompatible with his emphasis on discipline and structure in the community. Matthew's conviction about the nearness of the *parousia* is not a speculative interest in calculating the time of the end, but a pastoral concern: He wants Christians to be ready by using the intervening time responsibly (24:39, 42, 50; 25:13).

Matthew expected the near *parousia*, and it did not occur. Although the church through the centuries has devised numerous ways to rescue Matthew from this error and explain texts that seem to affirm it

in ways more agreeable to later perspectives, it is more in accord with the nature of Scripture and the integrity to which the interpreter is called to allow Matthew to express his faith in his own apocalyptic terms, including its mistaken temporal elements. Matthew will not be forced to become a modern man, and the contemporary reader can still be grasped by the apocalyptic message in all its urgency and compelling power.

With these paradoxes of perspectives in mind, what might Matthew's gospel say to contemporary readers?

- Such pictures can be heard as an affirmation of Jesus' and Matthew's radical monotheism—living our own lives in faith in the one God whose kingdom (reign) is presently often hidden, but ultimately prevails.
- The eschatological age has begun. To confess that the Christ has come, and that he is Jesus of Nazareth, is to say that there will be no further, supplementary revelation until this same God who is definitively revealed in the meekness and suffering love of Jesus is revealed at the end as the One and only God.
- Matthew's pictures of the threat of false messiahs as the end approaches should not be heard in our time as specific predictions of deceitful figures to arise. They can still speak to our own time of the urgent danger of accepting other values as ultimate and other means of redeeming our lives and world than the way revealed in Jesus the Messiah.

Matthew's Pastoral Concerns

John Meier (*Matthew*, 291) notes that a good part of Ch. 24 in Matthew is spent in attempting to calm off-based eschatological (end-time) fervor and calculation. Something that even in our day has become a cottage industry as folks pore over *Daniel* and *Revelation* attempting to "crack the code" about the end-time when/where. The three rapid-fire parables in our gospel reading attempt to establish a proper eschatological fervor (watchfulness). The three parables (the generation of Noah, the two pairs of workers, and the thief in the night) announce the major theme of the second part of the discourse: vigilance and preparedness for the coming [*parousia*] of the Son of Man.

Our verses are also part of a larger pastoral theme in which believers are instructed about the manner in which we are to live as we vigilantly wait. Warren Carter (*Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*, 486) writes about this fifth discourse:

E. Käsemann has argued that the basic question of apocalyptic material is, "To whom does the sovereignty of the world belong?" Chapters 24-25 are an unequivocal assertion of God's ownership, God's right to determine cosmic destiny. Judgment falls on those who do not acknowledge god's sovereignty. Rome's empire, or any empire, is not ultimate. Eternal Rome is not the future. cf. 4 Ezra 11:37-46). It is mortal (24:28) and subject to God's empire.

This critique of Rome gains some force because of the material's proximity to the struggle of 66-70 [AD]. Rome's victory and destruction of Jerusalem suggest invincible power. But chapters 24-25 contextualize this power in God's purposes, thereby revealing it to be limited and under judgment (see 22:7). Moreover, as U. Mauser has argued, the frequent references to false prophets and messiahs (24:5, 11, 23-26) show that the chapter rejects the way of violence adopted by those who took up arms as the means of trying to throw off Roman oppression. While the goal of liberation was commendable, the means was not. Armed revolution is a false way, just as passive compliance was rejected previously in the gospel (see 5:38-42; 17:24-27). Ultimately god will bring the promised

salvation through Jesus' return and the establishment of God's empire (so 1:21). In the meantime, the Matthean community is to live its alternative, countercultural existence of active, subversive, nonviolent resistance in the sure hope of God's coming triumph.

This section of Matthew begins with foretelling the destruction of the temple, (which had happened by Matthew's time) and a two-part question from the disciples: "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (24:3). Answers to the question: "What signs?" are given in 24:4-35. Answers to the question: "When?" are given in 24:36-25:46.

Commentary

Our gospel combines several pictures in order to describe the arrival of the Son of Man (v. 37). The Noah parable (vv. 37–39) contrasts Noah and the other people of his generation. The flood came upon them suddenly and had dire consequences for many. The pictures of the two men in the field (v. 40) and the two women grinding meal (v. 41) emphasize the suddenness of the coming and the separation that it will bring. Since the exact hour of the coming is unknown, the only appropriate attitude is constant watchfulness (v. 42). This attitude is encouraged further by the story of the homeowner (v. 43). If a homeowner knows when a thief is coming, he exercises watchfulness at that time. But since the time of the Son of Man's coming remains unknown, the watchfulness must be constant (v. 44).

Matthew (and Luke) use this material that is common to them – but not in the Gospel of Mark – in a way that is very different from the "little apocalypse" of Mark 13 (*you should take a quick read of that short chapter to gain a sense of Mark's vision and purpose*). It is clear that Mark emphasizes a wickedness upon the earth that only a final eschatological cleansing can rectify. Matthew (and Luke) refer to the days of Noah "*When the LORD saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how no desire that his heart conceived was ever anything but evil, he regretted that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was grieved. So the LORD said: 'I will wipe out from the earth the men whom I have created, and not only the men, but also the beasts and the creeping things and the birds of the air, for I am sorry that I made them'*" (Gen 6:5-7). And yet the gospel writers do not compare this generation to Noah's. Compare the two gospel accounts:

Matthew 24:37-44

³⁷ For as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.

³⁸ In (those) days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day that Noah entered the ark.

³⁹ They did not know until the flood came and carried them all away. So will it be (also) at the coming of the Son of Man.

⁴⁰ Two men will be out in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left.

⁴¹ Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left.

⁴² Therefore, stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come.

⁴³ Be sure of this: if the master of the house had known the hour of night when the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and not let his house be broken into.

⁴⁴ So too, you also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come.

Luke 17:26–27, 30

²⁶ As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be in the days of the Son of Man;

²⁷ they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage up to the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all.

³⁰ So it will be on the day the Son of Man is revealed...

³⁵ And there will be two women grinding meal together; one will be taken, the other left."

Luke 12:39-40

³⁹ Be sure of this: if the master of the house had known the hour when the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into.

⁴⁰ You also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come."

This text has been preceded by: “*But of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone*” (Mt 23:36). The emphasis is that life goes on as normal. The emphasis is that the disciples will not know the day – no one knows – but that does not remove the need to *stay awake*.

The Matthean text, written well after Paul’s *Letter to the Thessalonians*, does not contain a “rapture” eschatological understanding. The “*taken*” (vv.40,41) is, as in Noah, a gathering of the saved community. Those on the Ark did not escape the tribulation, as always, they are witnesses and thus their mission continues. Matthew’s pastoral concerns are the same. The new tribulations of Matthew’s time (and ours) are not something from which to escape, rather the tribulations are a time in which the faithful/saved are revealed – as well as the lost. It is revelatory of what “already is.”

If the time is unknown...

It will catch people unprepared. The analogy with *the days of Noah* suggests that judgment is to be a major feature (though it is not the whole picture) of *the coming of the Son of man*. But the main point is the unpreparedness of Noah’s contemporaries. Whereas Noah and his family were ready, everyone else carried on oblivious to the threat of judgment, and so, while Noah was saved, they were *swept away*. The implication is that it is possible to prepare for the *parousia*, not by calculating its date, but by a life of constant readiness and response to God’s warnings and introductions. There will apparently be only two categories, the prepared (and therefore saved) and the unprepared (and therefore lost).

Some are taken – some are not...

This radical division is reinforced by two cameos of ordinary life suddenly disrupted. Both men are involved in the same work in *the field*, both women in the same *grinding at the mill*. It is not a difference in work or situation which causes the separation, but a difference in readiness. (Cf. 13:30 for the idea of a coexistence of the ‘saved’ and the ‘lost’ until the final judgment.) *Taken* is the same verb used e.g. in 1:20; 17:1; 18:16; 20:17; the word for “taken” (*paralambanomai*) doesn’t mean “to go up” or “to meet”, but “to go along with”. It is used in the Transfiguration story: “Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother.” It is used in the section on church discipline. If someone has sinned against you, you are to go to him and tell him his fault. If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you.

If indeed discipleship is a primary focus of the narrative, it is perhaps useful to speculate what the people are doing when this “taking” or “leaving” occurs? They are at the place of employment. They are busy at work. I would guess that the man working in the field is “left”, because he couldn’t leave his important work. The woman working in the mill is “left”, because she couldn’t leave her important work. Work is important. One needs to provide food and shelter for self and family, but there is something more important than your work: the Son of Man. God might show up at your work place without an appointment. What would you tell him? “Great, let’s meet. I’ve got work to do right now, but have your people call my people and we can do lunch.” Of course, “his people” have been calling all along.

I would suggest, in the Matthean verse, the word “taken” (*paralambanomai*) points to the salvation of rather than the destruction of the one ‘taken’. No indication is given of where they are ‘taken’ to; the point is simply the sharp division which the *parousia* will entail.

What disciples should be doing

The practical conclusion to be drawn from vv. 36–41 is that of constant readiness, which will also be the focus of the rest of the chapter and of 25:1–13. The point of vv. 36–42 is summed up in a little

parable (paralleled in Luke 12:39–40). If house-breakers (*broken into* is literally ‘dug through’, an easy mode of entry into a mud-walled house) gave prior warning, no-one would be caught out. In a rather bold analogy, *the Son of man*, like the burglar, does not advertise the time of his arrival. The only precaution, therefore, is constant readiness. In view of such plain statements as this it is interesting that some Christians still attempt to work out the date of the parousia.

But this is Advent...

So far we have looked at this gospel in its Matthean context. But what about its use on the first Sunday of Advent, the first Sunday of the Liturgical Year? If last Sunday (Christ the King Sunday) represents a culmination of things – when Christ reigns above all – then what are we to make of the First Sunday in Advent? Do we go back to the beginning and again work our way through the year until Christ is again King?

Yes...in way. The beginning is not the birth of Jesus. The beginning is the advent (the coming) of Jesus as the fulfillment of the promise of God and thus the hopes and dreams of the Jewish people. This is the first Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of Expectation and Hope. The Old Testament Lectionary reading for this first Sunday of Advent is Isaiah 2:1-5.

This is what Isaiah, son of Amoz, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come, The mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established as the highest mountain and raised above the hills. All nations shall stream toward it; many peoples shall come and say: "Come, let us climb the LORD'S mountain, to the house of the God of Jacob, That he may instruct us in his ways, and we may walk in his paths." For from Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and impose terms on many peoples. They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; One nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!" Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

Israel had a troubled history. She was a tiny nation wedged between huge and ambitious empires that were constantly vying for superiority. Israel had few times during her 700-year history in which she did not live under threat. Wars were almost constant, some were devastating. For much of her existence she lived under the sovereignty of some other nation, unable or sometimes unwilling to establish her own existence in the world as God's people.

In the time of Isaiah of Jerusalem, Judah was a vassal state of Assyria. During Isaiah's lifetime the Assyrians would sweep in and totally annihilate the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and threaten to do the same to the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Judah had weak leaders who saw it more politically expedient to appease the Empire than to be faithful to God.

And yet there were those like Isaiah who could envision a different reality, who could hope for a time when Israel would be faithful and allow God to be God. Israel was weary of war and threat, weary of the divisions that had torn her country apart after Solomon, weary of the instability of a world in which power and the oppression that it brings were the controlling factors in the world. Some like Isaiah knew that God's vision of the world was much different. They knew that the God they served was the same God who had heard the cries of oppressed slaves in Egypt and entered history to relieve their oppression. And they knew that because God was such a God, he would not forever tolerate oppression in the world.

And so they hoped. And they dreamed. They dreamed of a time when God would enter the world and bring an end to war and suffering, when he would establish his reign on earth and restore all creation

to what he intended it to be. They dreamed of a time when the division that had torn their people apart and divided them into north and south might be healed, and they could once again be a whole people under God.

This is the context of the cautionary tale of Matthew's gospel on this first Sunday of Advent. Those things hoped for and dreamed about are at the door – so “Wake Up!” and be prepared for the time when we will “allow God to be God.” And be prepared that God will be God – even if it is in ways we cannot imagine. A King in swaddling clothes. Who'd have thought.

Notes

Matthew 24:37 *it will be like it was in Noah's day.* Humans living in the days preceding Jesus' return will be as unaware of it as Noah's contemporaries were of the flood (Gen 6:5ff; Isa 54:9; cf. 2 Pet 2:5; 3:6). The timing of God's judgment in both instances is totally unanticipated. The analogy with *the days of Noah* suggests that judgment is to be a feature of *the coming of the Son of man*. But the main point is the unpreparedness of Noah's contemporaries. Whereas Noah and his family were ready, everyone else carried on oblivious to the threat of judgment, and so, while Noah was saved, they were *swept away*. The implication is that it is possible to prepare for the *parousia*, not by calculating its date, but by a life of constant readiness and response to God's warnings and teaching. There will apparently be only two categories, the prepared (and therefore saved) and the unprepared (and therefore lost).

Matthew 24:37 *coming: parousia* The general meaning of *parousia* is “presence,” specifically “active presence” (e.g., of representatives or troops, in person; cf. 2 Cor. 10:10). In Hellenistic writings it referred to the visit of rulers or high officials. The word has no exact parallels in Hebrew, but similar terms (“to be present” and “to come”) are plentiful and point to the coming of the end of time (Lam. 4:18), end of evil (Prov. 1:27), or of the day of redemption (Is. 63:4) or recompense (Dt. 32:35). Above all, God comes draws near to his people. (e.g., Gen. 16:13–14; 28:18; 2 Sam. 24:25). The entry of the ark is God's coming (1 Sam. 4:6–7). But God is not tied to places; he may come in dreams (Gen. 20:3), theophanies (18:1ff.), clouds and storms, visions, the quiet breath (1 Kgs. 19:12–13), and in his Word or Spirit (Num. 22:9; 24:2). The OT refers to God's coming as World King (Dt. 32:2ff). He is king forever and ever in Ex. 15:18. He will finally assume full kingship (Is. 2:2). His coming as world king will mean the creating of a new heaven and earth (Is. 66:15) and universal peace and joy (Is. 2:2ff.; 65:21ff.; 66:10ff.). The concept also refers to the coming of the Messiah whose main task is to establish peace (Zech. 9:9–10). This coming has a universal sweep and is historical, but with eschatological aspects (Dan. 7:13). In the Psalms the stress is on God's coming, not that of the Messiah. The place of the *parousia* concept in the NT is that Jesus has come already, but so strong is the hope of his coming in glory that the word is not used for his first coming. There is not a twofold *parousia*.

Matthew 24:37 *Son of Man*: In Matthew, as in all the other Gospels, the title which Jesus uses to describe his own mission is usually ‘the Son of man’. Matthew's recording of this title differs little from that by Mark and Luke. None of them use it themselves in narrative or comment, but all agree that Jesus made frequent use of it, and, most remarkably, that when the title ‘Christ’ was offered to him, he substituted ‘the Son of man’ (26:64).

This is not the place to give a full account of the voluminous and continuing debate about this title. Even the description of it as a ‘title’ is controversial, as the phrase ‘a son of man’ in Hebrew and Aramaic means simply a human being. When God addresses Ezekiel frequently as ‘Son of man’ (Ezek. 2:1, 3; 3:1; etc.) it is as ‘man’ in contrast with God, almost meaning ‘little man’! (Cf. also Pss. 8:4; 80:17.) In later Aramaic a similar phrase came to be used sometimes, rather like the English

‘one’, to refer to oneself or (occasionally) someone else, in contexts where modesty or prudence made a direct statement undesirable. But the phrase ‘*the* Son of man’ seems to demand a more specific content than that, especially when it is seen that Jesus uses the phrase predominantly in discussing the nature of his specific mission, not the lot of men in general.

But there is no clear evidence that the phrase ‘*the* Son of man’ was used thus as a title in any Jewish literature before the time of Jesus. It is therefore likely that Jesus developed this strange usage himself, perhaps deliberately in order to avoid a familiar title (such as ‘Messiah’) which would already have carried its own meaning for Jesus’ hearers.

It is a strange usage: the Greek phrase *ho hyios tou anthrōpou* is as unnatural as the English, and the Aramaic phrase *bar-nāšā* would not normally be used, as Jesus always used it, with a definite article. It seems most likely that Jesus ‘coined’ the title on the basis of the vision of ‘one like a son of man’ in Daniel 7:13 (a passage to which he frequently referred in explaining his mission: see on 10:23; 16:27–28; 19:28; 24:30; 25:31; 26:64; 28:18); in Daniel this is no title, simply a description of a human figure (as opposed to an animal) in a vision, but Jesus’ definite article functions virtually as a demonstrative, ‘*that* Son of man’, i.e. the one described in Daniel 7:13–14, which Jesus clearly saw as a figure for his own mission.

But while the phrase was probably derived from reflection on Daniel 7:13f., Jesus’ use of it as a title for himself extends far beyond what that passage suggests. In addition to the future glory and triumph depicted in Daniel 7:13–14, Jesus uses the phrase particularly in predicting his own rejection, suffering and death, a theme which Daniel 7 alone would not have required. Further, he speaks of his ministry on earth, both in its humiliation (e.g. 8:20) and in its authority (e.g. 9:6; 12:8), under this title. It is, then, a wide-ranging term whose content is fixed not by any predetermined meaning as a title (for it had none), but by the breadth of Jesus’ own understanding of his unique mission. [France, 46-47]

Matthew 24:41 *taken*: *paralambánō*. the term is used for the reception of Christ by the world (Jn. 1:11) and for acceptance into the kingdom of Christ

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