

The Kingdom of God and the Parousia of Jesus

A.M. OKORIE*

The word *parousia* was used in classical and koine Greek to mean "presence, arrival or coming." It has been transliterated and adopted to describe the eschatological coming of Jesus. In this sense, the word occurs sixteen times in the New Testament.¹ In Hellenistic literature the term was often employed in connection with the official visit of a ruler or the epiphany of a deity.²

Much discussion has taken place on whether Jesus expects and teaches a future consummation in the form of a parousia (his Second Coming or Second Advent). Norman Perrin opines that G.R. Beasley-Murray and O. Cullmann are in the affirmative, while T. Francis Glasson, J.A.T. Robinson, and Erich Grasser are in the negative.³ Different emphases exist on the parousia concept, but the three basic possibilities on the theological problem of its interpretation are: the whole eschatological idea may be taken as part of the eternal divine revelation and hence accepted with comparative literalness; the eschatological idea may be discarded as temporal garb in which the gospel appeared and thus a "drastic use of the scissors of literary historical criticism" would show that it was a myth created by the early Church and put in the mouth of Jesus; or the eschatological idea may be translated into other terms or "neo-theologies".⁴ There is no single dominant pattern.

However, the mainstream of traditional Christian interpretation assumes that Jesus did look forward to a consummation in the future of that which had begun in his own proclamation and ministry concerning the Kingdom of God.⁵ My evaluation falls in line with this interpretation. I am convinced that God will bring to perfect completion the work which has begun through Jesus Christ. With this viewpoint, some specific saying of Jesus on the theme are now surveyed.

Mark 8:38 records Jesus as saying: "For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the son of man be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of the Father with holy angels." This saying has a close parallel passage in Luke 12:8-9, and Luke 9:26 reproduces the words of Mark very closely. Matthew 16:27 reproduces only the latter section. It could

*Rev. Dr. A.M. Okorie teaches in the Dept. of Religions, University of Ilorin, Nigeria.

be different versions of one saying or at least two different sayings; there is no certainty.⁶ "For whoever" (*hos gar ean*) shows that the statement applies generally to man's relation to Jesus, and how the relation can affect one's life so profoundly.⁷ "Adulterous" (*moichalidi*) is favourite figure of the prophets by which sin is represented as unfaithfulness to the close relation which God seeks to draw man to himself.⁸ Mark 8:38 simply has, then, statement of denial in a twofold aspect: the grave consequences of denying Jesus through what one does after having accepted Christ (for example, Peter's denial under pressure, but he repented and was forgiven); and the grave consequences of standing for Jesus or being against him, for Jesus must be seen as either the Messiah or the pretender (for example, the Jews who strongly opposed him and sought his crucifixion).⁹

In Luke 12:8-9 Jesus says: "And I tell you, every one who acknowledges me before men, the Son of men also will acknowledge before the angels of God; but he who denies, me before men will be denied before the angels of God." This saying may apply to standing on the point of decision, and then accepting Jesus with the kingdom of God or rejecting him. *Homologesei en emoi* (acknowledges me, or confesses in me) underlines the fact that the destiny of men and women when they come to the last judgement refers to their present confession or denial of Jesus. In his parousia, he will confess such persons accordingly.¹⁰

Jesus often uses the title *ho uarios tou anthropou* (the Son of man) to describe himself. It has been a subject of debate among commentators as to whether Jesus is actually the son of man, since the gospel references are seen to be ambiguous. The term *ho uarios anthropou* occurs 82 times in the gospels, 69 in the synoptics, 13 in John. If the parallels are counted once, the synoptics occurrences are reduced to 38. Thus the different instances become 51 as follows: Mark 14 times. Material common to Matthew and Luke 10 times, additional instances peculiar to Luke 7 times.¹¹

Cranfield postulates that it seems clear that the New Testament use of "Son of man" designates Jesus, since the term is retained in the sayings of Jesus, and not on the lips of a disciple; that in the Aramaic spoken by Jesus *bar-nas(a)* meant "a man" "anyone" or "one" and with a reference to the speaker himself; that Daniel 7:13 and the Similitudes of Enoch show that "Son of man" is not an apocalyptic figure different from Jesus; that it does not describe a collective group of Jesus and his followers; and that "Son of Man" is Jesus' characteristic self designation.¹² However, some argue that the phrase is not integral to any of Jesus' parables, which are perhaps the most distinctive feature of his teaching, and the phrase occurs only in the interpretation of some parables. Interpretations attached to parables

usually are presumed to be marks having arisen out of the early Christian preaching.¹³

Jeramias shows that Jesus always speaks about the Son of man in the third person, yet the 'Son of man' is the only title used by Jesus himself whose authenticity must be taken seriously. When Jesus speaks in the third person he simply makes a distinction not between two separate figures, but between his present and his future state of exaltation and royal status.¹⁵

Further, the answer as to whether there is a difference between Jesus and the Son of man hinges on knowing what is the role of Jesus, and what is the role of the Son of man.¹⁶ The role of Jesus is that of bringing the kingdom of God. The role of the Son of man can be seen in Daniel 7 which tells of a vision of the passing of kingdoms to make way for the kingdom of God. 7:13-4 says:

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a Son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

While the four monsters from the deep represent the devil, the Son of man represents the Kingdom of God. The conqueror of the monsters is the representative from above. The Son of man comes and receives the kingdom. Jesus is the representative, instrument and champion of the kingdom of God; and the Son of man is equally the representative, instrument and champion of the kingdom of God. Therefore, the representation of Jesus as the Son of man is simply a pictorial language as to what Jesus is doing and will do. Consequently, every ambiguous instance about the gospel usage of the phrase *ho uarios tou anthropou* should be identified as Beasley-Murray puts it, 'the son of Man is Jesus in his total ministry for the kingdom of God.'

Since Jesus is the Son of man, his role to the kingdom of God at the parousia becomes eternally decisive. Mark underscores these eternal consequences. Jesus as the son of man in parousia first, confesses or acknowledges his disciples before God, and second, denies or refutes his opponents before the divine throne. Hence he is the Chief Witness, the Chief Advocate. What the Son of man says is crucial in the judgement, his word is the final word. Revelation 3:5 resembles the synoptic note: 'He who conquers shall be clad thus in white garments, and I will not blot his name out of the book of life; I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.' Jesus' confession of one's name before his Father is final, hence in the judgement, he has ultimate authority.

"When he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (Mark 8:38b), shows that the Son of man speaks about his Father, thus the Son of man equals the Son of God. The Son of man is not only a representative of God, he is peculiarly related to God. In John's gospel the expressions "Son of man," and the "Son" are used interchangeably (John 5:19-30). The significance then is that the eschatological function of the Son of man is to exercise judgment at the end.

Luke 12:8-9 has no reference to the parousia of Jesus, unlike Mark 8:38 which includes a variation of *erchomeno*, "to come." This has led some interpreters, such as Robinson and Weiss, to posit that there is an eschatological evolution in the gospels. Jesus has a supreme role in bringing the kingdom of God but gradually the message is changed by Jewish eschatology of the early Church. So there is no authentic parousia sayings on the lips of Jesus.¹⁸ It needs to be noted, nevertheless, that while the Lukan passage omits the verb "to come," yet it underscores the Lordship of Jesus. It is an adaptation of Daniel 7:13. Mark also takes up the picture of Daniel 7:13 applying it to the consummation of the age. Thus it is made explicit in Mark, but only assumed in Luke, still the main point is that Jesus is the Advocate.

Being asked by the high priest "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" Jesus replies in Mark 14:62: "I am; and you will see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." This saying comes in the trial context, and it is the last statement of Jesus on the Son of man. Jesus for the first time in public declares that he is the Son of man, it is an ultimate interpretation with the emphatic *ego eimi*. Hans Lietzmann and Vincent Taylor, however, contend that the passage has no reference to the parousia nor is it historical, but rather emerges from the early church's tradition. They further argue that the Old Testament passages echoed here (Psalm 110:1, Daniel 7:13) refer to exaltation and not to a particular apocalyptic event.¹⁹ Possibly, they postulate, it means the priests will see facts and circumstances which will show that the prophesies are fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus.²⁰

The majority of scholars, notwithstanding, feel that Mark 14:62 is to be accepted. John 18:31 talks of Pilate trying to hand Jesus to the Jews saying, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." Sherwin-White has demonstrated that there is a general agreement of the trial of Jesus with ancient Roman procedures, and a general agreement with the restriction on capital punishment in the Roman society. He states that his main point is not to suggest the literal accuracy of ancient sources, whether secular or sacred, "but to offset

the extreme scepticism with which the New testament narratives are treated in some quarters.'

On Mark 14:62 one finds that the declaration of Jesus "I am" is not blasphemous, rather the alleged blasphemy rests on his words that follows: "and you will see the son of man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." In the ears and understanding of the Jews, no man sits next to God, and it is only God who comes in the "clouds of heaven," for *tes dunameos* is a peripherals for God.²⁴

Since Jesus' task is to be interpreted in terms of the Son of man, then, the Son of man in Mark 14:62 is on trial for life. He is at the climactic point of his human opposition. This echoes Jesus' statement in Mark 8:31 that "the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed...." Yet Jesus says the son of man will be seen not in the grave, but coming in the "clouds of heaven." Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13 are the background pictures. The Son of man is surrounded by his foes, but the *Lord* says, "sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool" (Psalm 110:1). Thus the import is that the declaration of authority, "sit at my right hand," is also a declaration of judgement, "footstool." The unbelieving Jews will be at the footstool of Jesus, while he will be vindicated at God's right hand and will be exercising the Messianic power.

Therefore, contrary to Robinson's view that Mark 14:62 does not necessitate a future "coming,"²⁶ one finds a prediction of both Easter and the Final Advent. Daniel 7:13 to some view points is an ascent, to others its is a theophany or a descent.²⁷ To the Jewish understanding it is a theophany of coming from heaven to earth. To the Christian the traditional parousia expectation has a two fold aspect. These are the element of vindication, of victory out of defeat (resurrection from death), and the element of visitation, of a coming among men in power of the son of man.²⁸ Thereby men shall see the exalted Jesus exercising the authority of God in judgement and righteous rule. This is the fundamental saying of Jesus on the kingdom of God and the parousia, which ushers us into a Christological assurance and an eschatological hope.

Another description of the parousia of the son of man is in Mark 13:24-27 which resembles Jesus saying at his trial. This passage speaks of cosmic signs immediately heralding the parousia. The ideas and languages are derived from the Old Testament (for instance, Isaiah 13:10, Jeremiah 3:16, Joel 2:10). There are doubts among some exegetes as to whether the apocalyptic form and colouring reflect authentic tradition, or comes from a source wrongly assigned to Jesus in the primitive Church. This writer accepts the

authenticity of the parousia saying, and following Cullmann, one notes that the teaching of Jesus presupposes an eschatological continuation of the *Heilsgechichte* (salvation-history or redemptive-history).³⁰

Mark 13:24-27, therefore, speaks of the parousia in terms of the theophany of the Lord. The final eschatological event will be the coming in glory of him who has all along proclaimed the breaking in of the kingdom of God. And *tote* (the final eschatological "then") *opsonτai* (all men, not just the disciples) will be gathered. The cosmic phenomenon (vv.24-25) of the sun being darkened, the moon not giving its light, the stars failing for heaven, and powers of the heavens being shaken, are entirely Old Testament symbolism of God's intervention in judgement. As Israel has always looked for the gathering of the tribes, so the gathering in of the elect (v. 27) is the eschatological consummation of the faithful in the parousia, the completion of the kingdom of God. Thus Mark 13:24-27 graphically depicts the glorious Son of man and representative of God who acts in supreme judgement and salvation.³¹

Yet, the parousia of the son of man needs to be distinguished from the Day of the Lord. Mark 13:30 speaks: "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place." This refers to the destruction of Jerusalem and the tribulation of Israel in 70 AD.³² Mark also points out the fact that parousia cannot be calculated by any figment of imagination: "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (v. 32). The time dimension of the eschatological end of the age is only in the mind of the Father, who alone has the authority (cf. Acts 1:7).

Again, Luke 17:20-37 (the Q apocalypse) gives some insight into the kingdom of God and the parousia of Jesus. Verse 24 puts it clearly: "For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will be the Son of man in his day." It will be utterly unmistakable when he comes. Hence there is the concept of an eschatological suddenness in the parousia. This echoes Psalm 18 where God is pictured as coming in a storm and lightning. Thus the parousia of Jesus, the Son of man, is characterized as a theophany in power and majesty. "But first he must suffer many things and be rejected" (v. 25); therefore the glory of the parousia comes after the cross.

The Lukan apocalypse contains grave warnings drawn from the fate of the flood generation of Noah, the inhabitants of Sodom, and Lot's wife. While men are occupied with mundane issues in drinking, marrying, buying, selling and building, the kingdom of God is in process of being consummated. So there is an eternal danger in

being totally absorbed in this mundane life without any thought of what lies ahead relating to the judgement and coming of the Kingdom of God. "Remember Lot's wife" captures the deep necessity of detachment from temporal obsession, so that one's expectation of the coming of the kingdom is not deflated.³⁴

The parousia of the Lord will also effect a decision which is utmost and can divide the closest family or relationship. Luke 17:34-35 reads: "I tell you, in that night there will be two men in one bed; one will be taken and other left. There will be two woman grinding together; one will be taken and the other left." The fundamental unity of society can be split aside if such has to be. As a result, there is the notion of individual accountability and the deep negative result of rebellion to God. For the coming of the kingdom in the parousia of the Son of man includes salvation and judgement.

Further, there is the certainty and inevitability of the parousia. Being asked where the Son of man and his people will be located, Jesus replies, "where the body is, there the eagles (vulture) will be gathered together" (Luke 17:37). Here "eagle" is not a reference to the Roman standard. Jesus is not a vulture, nor mankind a corpse, but event is compared to event. It is the self-evident visibility (like lightning), and the aspect of judgement that must fall where it deserves. Jesus' reply is also a significant appeal to faith with a terse warning: as surely as vultures find the carcass, so surely will divine intervention come with salvation or judgement; therefore one must be sure he is always ready.

John 14:1-3 gives another expression of the coming of Jesus in the future to welcome his people to a home prepared for them. In a symbolic language Jesus says:

Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms.... And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

This Johannine passage does not only relate to his impending death and resurrection, but also to his disciples who will be translated in to his eternal presence. The present *erchomai* has a future eschatological advent of Jesus.³⁵ The kingdom of God consequently interlocks with a present-future identity, a reality of the present life and a subsequent coming of the Son of man.

In view of the certainty and effects of the parousia, then, Jesus gives a series of parables which deal with the general theme of watchfulness, because the time of his coming is unknowable. Some of the parables of the parousia are about the burglar (Matthew 24:43-44), the widow and the judge (Luke 18:1-8), the wise and foolish girls (Matthew 25:1-13), the talents (Matthew 25:14-30), and

the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46). These parables are set in the context of exhortations to be ready and alert. C.H. Dodd calls them "parables of crisis" or "eschatological *parenthesis*," meaning ethical instructions intended to inculcate the necessity of preparedness for an approaching crisis.

In the parable of the burglar, Matthew 24:44 reads thus: "Therefore you also must be ready; for the son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect." Dodd postulates that the predictions of the coming of the Son of man run parallel to the predictions of the coming of the Son of man run parallel to the predictions of the Day of the Lord. The parables of crisis are within the context of the ministry of Jesus, and embrace him, his disciples and nation. Jeremias follows Dodd closely but modifies his opinion in that Jesus does not bracket the doom coming on himself and on the nation. What Jesus says is to be ready for the judgement that comes upon the nation.³⁹ Jeremias premises that when Jesus speaks of coming to his disciples he has something of joy in mind, but when speaking to the wider people, he has judgement in mind. One needs to note, however, that the judgement to fall upon Jerusalem must be separated from the time of Jesus' death and his future parousia. For the parousia represents the climax of the revelation, which will be joy to the followers of Jesus, but judgement to the unbelievers. Like the nocturnal burglar who comes in an unknowable and unexpected time, so will be the parousia. Therefore one is to be *gregoreo* (keep awake, be on the alert, be prepared).

In the parable of Luke 18:1-8 the widow cries out for justice. Her faith is that of a woman who will not be silenced until she is vindicated. Jeremias points out her helpless and defenseless situation, as well as her being too poor to bribe the judge, hence persistence is her only weapon.⁴² Jesus asks, "will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? ... Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (vv. 7-8). Thus there is a gift of vindication and a demand to be spiritually awake until the parousia.

Matthew 25:1-13 gives the parable of the wise and foolish girls in which they have one main job—to meet with lighted lamps the bridegroom when he arrives. The dramatic detail, according to Dodd, is to emphasize the folly of unpreparedness and the wisdom of preparedness. The parable expresses the fitting eschatological posture of the faithful in the world—to stand up with burning light and wait to celebrate with the Son of man in the end.

Matthew 25:14-30 tells of the parable of the talents. The central figure in the parable is the one who received one talent but buried it. The importance here is the danger of hearing the word of the kingdom but doing nothing about it. The importance here is the

danger of hearing the word of the kingdom but doing nothing about it. One must hear and put the kingdom's word into action in service to God and man.⁴⁴

In Matthew 25:31-46 the parable of the sheep and goats sets forth the only eschatological picture of the judgement by the Son of man. Jesus illustrates the simple acts of compassion and love which exercises and delights in. Contrary to some interpretations, the "least of these my brethren" (v. 40) are not the brothers of Jesus, nor the disciples, but all the afflicted and needy.⁴⁵ Hence at the last judgement God will look for that faith that has been lived out.

Summing up, then, the kingdom of God and the parousia of Jesus dialectically connote both an encouragement and a challenge, both a gift and a demand, both a confession and a denial by men, both an acknowledgment and a refutation by the Chief Advocate, both a vindication and a visitation, both the suffering and the glorification of the Son of man, both a hidden kingdom and a theophany, both an element of unknowability and an element of inevitability of the event, both an apocalyptic vision of the prophets and an eschatological hope of the evangelists, both a throne of salvation and a footstool of judgement, both a presence and a future. The "betweenness" of the First Coming and the second Advent must therefore be predicated on the believers' spiritual awakeness. For the concept of eschatological suddenness in salvation and judgement evokes an eschatological *parenthesis*: "And what I say to you say to all: Watch" (Mark 13:37).

References

1. H.K. McArthur, "Parousia" *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), vol.3., p. 658.
2. *Ibid.*,
3. Norman Perrin, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), p. 130.
4. McArthur, *op. cit.*, p. 661.
5. John A.T. Robinson, *Jesus and His Coming* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1979), p. 18.
6. C.E.B Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (Cambridge: University Press, 1959), p. 283.
7. Ezra Gould, "St. Mark," *The International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), p. 158.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 159.
9. *Ibid.*,
10. Alfred Plummer, "St. Luke," *The International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1977), p. 320.
11. Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1971), p. 260.
12. Cranfield, *op. cit.*, pp. 273-6.
13. S.E. Johnson, "Son of Man," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), vol. 4., p. 418.
14. Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 276.
16. George R. Beasley-Murray, *The Coming of God* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1983), p. 49.
17. *Ibid.*, 52.
18. Johannes Weiss, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), p. 129.
19. Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1952), p. 569.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Gould, *op. cit.*, p. 279.
22. A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), pp. 24-47.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
24. Cranfield, *op. cit.*, p. 245.
25. Gould, *loc. cit.*
26. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 81.
27. Beasley-Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 54.
28. Perrin, *op. cit.*, p. 141.
29. Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 517.
30. Perrin, *op. cit.*, p. 135.
31. Cranfield, *op. cit.*, p. 406.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 408.
33. Ray Summers, *Commentary on Luke* (Waco: Word Books Publisher, 1971), p. 203.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 204.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 205.
36. C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956), p. 382.
37. C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), p. 122.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
39. Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), p. 48.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
41. Beasley-Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 59.
42. Jeremias, *Parables*, p. 153.
43. Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
44. Beasley-Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
45. Jeremias, *Parables*, p. 207.