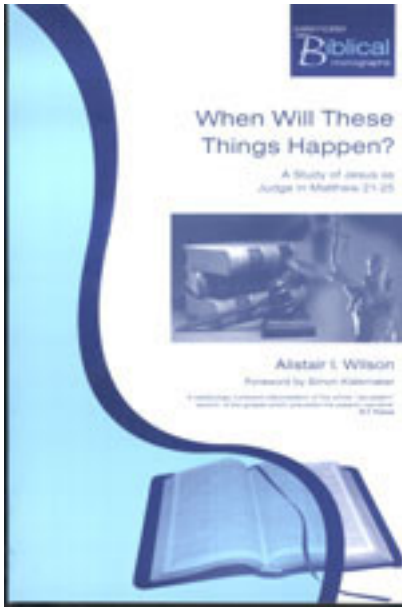


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When Will These Things Happen? A Study of Jesus as Judge in Matthew 21–25

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When Will These Things Happen? A Study of Jesus as Judge in Matthew 21–25 is a light revision of the author's 2001 doctoral dissertation directed by Professor I. Howard Marshall at the University of Aberdeen. The book is an ambitious exploration of Jesus as judge in Matthew's Gospel, particularly Matt 21-25. The book consists of seven carefully constructed chapters. In his chapter 1 Alistair Wilson challenges the portrait of Jesus as a noneschatological judge evident in the work of Marcus J. Borg (*Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* [New York: Mellen, 1984]). Undaunted by decades of historical Jesus research, Wilson argues an intriguing case that there is in fact no "noneschatological Jesus" to be found in Matthew's Gospel. Instead, there is a Jesus who acts as judge, both in the present and in the future, as presented in that Gospel.

In chapter 2 Wilson investigates two sets of academic work that either (1) deals with Jesus' view of judgment, on the basis of materials drawn from each of the Synoptic Gospels, or (2) engages in some discussion of Matthew's view of judgment. In the first category, Wilson briefly surveys the works of J. Weiss, A. Schweitzer, W. G. Kümmel, C. K. Barrett, R. H. Hiers, D. C. Allison, M. Reiser, C. H. Dodd, T. F. Glasson, J. A. T. Robinson, M. Borg, and J. D. Crossan. In the second, Wilson briefly discusses the works of G. Bornkamm, D. Marguerat, B. Charette, and D. C. Sim. Wilson observes that the

studies done on Jesus' view of judgment in the Synoptic Gospels in general and in Matthew in particular reveal a need for a comprehensive approach to the theme of judgment in the First Gospel, if one is serious about finding a coherent picture of Matthew's presentation of Jesus. Wilson states that

there is a need for a study which (i) recognises the literary skill of Matthew and therefore seeks to bring out a coherent message from his gospel, without resorting to the claim of incoherence. This demands that we take careful note of the way in which Matthew has arranged his material, and allow him to tell his story in his way. (ii) recognises the subtleties of language employed by ancient authors, and therefore does not neglect the possibility of metaphorical significance for phrases which are difficult to understand on a literal reading. This will require sensitivity to the allusions to other literature that may be found, and careful consideration of the most likely background to the use of particular words and phrases. (iii) recognises the significance of Matthew's narrative for understanding the "Historical Jesus" and seeks to take it seriously as a means of better approaching Jesus' ministry in the context of his first century Jewish setting. (iv) provides a corrective both to Weiss and Schweitzer and their heirs and to Borg and his colleagues. (44)

Chapter 4 deals with issues of methodology. First Wilson asks several questions, such as, "In Matthew's view, was judgement a key theme in Jesus' preaching?" "What kind of judgement did Jesus speak of, according to Matthew?" "What role did Jesus envisage for himself in judgement?" "Did Jesus expect an imminent final judgement?" and "How did Jesus' proclamation of judgement relate to the totality of his message?" (45–46). Then, in order to answer those questions, Wilson seeks to build up a methodology that takes into consideration the literal, temporal, social, historical, comparative, and traditional presentations of Jesus' in Matthew's Gospel. For Wilson, Matthew has produced "an account of Jesus' life and teaching which is no more selective and affected by personal circumstance than any contemporary contributor to 'Life of Jesus' research" (64).

Chapter 4 examines whether Matt 21–25 is a unit that presents a coherent picture of Jesus as "agent" of judgment and also how the theme of judgment permeates the Gospel as a whole and particularly in chapters 21–25. Wilson assumes the Two Document Hypothesis (Markan priority plus Q) in analyzing the theme of judgment in Matthew's Gospel. However, he exercises caution with regard to the exact interrelationships between the Synoptic Gospels (72 n. 27). As Wilson summarizes, "There is evidence to suggest that chapters 21–25 of Matthew's gospel form a distinctive block of material which coheres by means of several literary and thematic connections" (80). This conclusion is crucial to his

discussion of Matthew's portrayal of Jesus as judge and his mode of presentation in the following chapters.

Chapters 5 and 6, the heart of this study, attempt a formal analysis of the theme of judgment in light of the prophetic tradition and the wisdom tradition in order to establish the fact that "Jesus reflects aspects of both of these traditions in his ministry, and that he does so in a coherent and holistic manner" (81). One of the reasons Wilson chose these two categories is to contrast his conclusions with those of Marcus Borg's portrait of Jesus. Chapter 5 examines Jesus' prophetic acts against the background of the Old Testament and how the actions of Jesus reveal such prophetic activities as they are presented in Matt 21–25. Wilson maintains that Matthew's presentation of Jesus not only reflects the prophetic language of the Old Testament but also exceeds a mere prophetic role. "Jesus does not simply announce judgement, but he enacts it as the judge. He takes on the role of Yahweh himself" (172). Against the view of M. Borg, who dismisses the "coming Son of Man" sayings as inauthentic and rejects an "eschatological" Jesus, Wilson argues that the "coming Son of Man" sayings (e.g., Matt 24:23–31) are an integral part of Matthew's discussion of judgment and are not just a reference to the *parousia*, as traditionally conceived. For Wilson, Matthew uses the *parousia* language to describe figuratively the vindication of Jesus before the Jewish authorities who rejected him. Wilson points out that Jesus is an "eschatological" judge and that Matthew draws on prophetic language to present the passages in which Jesus emerges as both the present and the future judge. The Excursus on "Matthew's 'Coming Son of Man' Sayings Outside Chapters 21–25" further demonstrates the legitimacy of Matthew's account of Jesus as judge and is also consistent with how Matthew describes of Jesus in chapters 21–24: as the one who brings judgment on his contemporaries now and all the nations in the future (161–72).

In chapter 6 Wilson further investigates the theme of judgment in light of Jewish wisdom literature and shows how the results of that investigation are reflected in Matt 21–25. Wilson examines Jewish wisdom literature such as Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Ben Sira, and the Wisdom of Solomon and concludes that the theme of judgment occurs frequently in these works as having both earthly and, less commonly, eschatological perspectives. It is interesting to note that the agent of judgment in these works is more often depicted as God himself, although sometimes God delegates such authority to the kings and the judges (e.g., Wis 6:3–5; Job 11:7–11; 21:22). Turning his attention back to Matt 21–25, Wilson analyzes Jesus' teaching in the form of *meshalim*, which includes not only his method of teaching in parables but also his use of riddles, questions, and the like. Through the use of *meshalim* Matthew presents Jesus as a teacher of wisdom who pronounces judgment on his contemporaries and stands as judge in the future for a final day of reckoning (e.g., Matt 24:36–25:30).

Chapter 7 summarizes the findings of the monograph by highlighting Matthew's presentation of Jesus as both temporal and eschatological judge. Wilson affirms, "Thus Matthew presents to his reader a Jesus who exercises authority in his earthly ministry without hesitation or any sense of presumptiveness because he knows that he will exercise authority in his role as eschatological judge" (250). It is from the perspective of Jesus as the eschatological judge (the Son of Man) "that Jesus' earthly judging activity in Jerusalem finds its true significance" (254). For Wilson, Matthew has faithfully transmitted traditions concerning Jesus, and therefore Matthew's narrative stands as a witness to the "historical Jesus."

It is a delight to read a book that is so carefully crafted and provocative. Wilson's clear development of his position is plausible even where questions remain. Most valuable is his argument for "Matthew's portrayal of Jesus as judge as a literary whole" (5). Against historical critics such as Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, who have tended to compartmentalize and atomize excerpts from Gospel texts in their zeal for historical accuracy, Wilson maintains that these should be examined as coherent historical narratives grounded in the life and teachings of Jesus (64). The whole range of issues, of course, is greatly affected by the source-critical theory one adopts for one's work with the Synoptic Gospels as sources for isolating the words and deeds of the historical Jesus. One can still arrive at a different conclusion about the historical Jesus by making use of Matthew's text.

Items of remaining criticism of this work relate to Wilson's assumption that "Matthew has written what is ostensibly an account of events which actually happened" and that the text of Matthew is "a faithful account of historical events" (65). While it is true that a text may expand our knowledge of a person's or period's history, it is equally true that history informs the text. It is simply not enough to articulate how the theme of judgment is presented in Matt 21–25 against the background of the Old Testament (chs. 5 and 6). Crucial to a thorough appreciation of the theme of judgment is an understanding of the historical Jesus in first-century Palestine, but this, of course, presupposes that one has a valid method of distinguishing these elements of the life and teachings of the historical Jesus from the various available portraits of Jesus that provide the sources for such work. The First Evangelist's presentation of Jesus could plausibly represent a second level of faith that may be devoid of information about the historical Jesus, and, thus, it would have no historical value. For instance, the appearance of the Son of Man at the end of times in Matt 21–25 poses a real problem for isolating the historical Jesus. The fact that the "Son of Man" sayings appear on the lips of Jesus and are never explicitly equated with Jesus in the Gospels tends to support the view that Jesus anticipated someone other than himself to assume the role of an eschatological judge (Matt 25:31). It is very doubtful that the historical Jesus thought of himself as the coming Son of Man. Certainly Jesus, as a Jew,

would have shared the view of the apocalyptic judgment of his time, but whether he cast himself into the role of Yahweh or the Son of Man, as Wilson maintains, remains doubtful. Perhaps the solution to the problem of method here would be the linking not only of literary and narrative studies but of historical criticism that seeks to uncover the layers of faith superimposed on the historical Jesus as found in the Gospels. All in all, however, Wilson has made an important contribution to the study of Jesus as judge in Matthew's Gospel, with some challenging implications for modern scholarship.