

What Is the Parousia?

One Greek Word, an Invisible Presence, and the Return Every Eye Will See

by Richard Whiting

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Contents

- I. The Word the System Stands On
- II. The Watchtower's Teaching in Its Own Words
- III. What Parousia Meant on the Royal Road
- IV. The Discourse Answers the Rendering
- V. As You Saw Him Go
- VI. The Authority Already Given
- VII. The Presence That Moved: 1874 to 1914
- VIII. The Hope the Church Holds
- Endnotes
- For Further Reading

I. The Word the System Stands On

Every other Bible has the disciples asking for the sign of Jesus' *coming*. The New World Translation has them asking for the sign of His *presence*: "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your presence and of the conclusion of the system of things?" (Matt. 24:3, NWT).¹ On that one rendering of one Greek word, *parousia*, the Watchtower's entire system stands. For if the parousia is an invisible presence rather than a visible arrival, then Christ can have "returned" without anyone seeing anything; a date can be assigned to the event; and an organization becomes necessary to announce what no eye could witness. This essay asks what the word actually means—in the Greek the apostles wrote, in the papyri their neighbors wrote, and in the very discourse where the question was asked—and then asks a question of Watchtower history the doctrine cannot easily survive.

II. The Watchtower's Teaching in Its Own Words

Fairness first. The Society teaches that *parousia* literally means “being alongside”—a presence extending over time, not a momentary arrival.² Christ's return was never to be a visible descent watched by the world: he told his disciples “the world will see me no more” (John 14:19), and the angels said he would return “in the same manner” as he left—quietly, observed only by his followers. His return is therefore a royal presence: in 1914 he was enthroned in heaven as King, and he has been invisibly present ever since. The disciples' question itself is read as support: one does not ask for a *sign* of an event everyone will see. Precisely because the presence would be invisible, Jesus gave a composite sign—wars, food shortages, earthquakes, the preaching work—by which the faithful could recognize it, and the troubles that began in 1914 are that sign. The texts describing a visible return are read figuratively: clouds signify concealment in Scripture (Jehovah told Moses, “I am coming to you in a dark cloud,” Ex. 19:9), and “every eye will see him” is understood of discernment rather than literal sight—all peoples will “see” the enthroned King in the sense that events will force them to perceive his presence.³

III. What Parousia Meant on the Royal Road

Parousia was not a mystical term when Matthew wrote it; it was a civic one. In the everyday Greek of the first century it named the official arrival of a king or emperor at a city—an event provinces prepared roads for, minted coins for, and dated eras from, as the papyri and inscriptions show in abundance. Adolf Deissmann, who assembled that evidence a century ago, concluded that the early Christians, in calling their hope the *parousia* of the Lord, were claiming for Christ exactly what the world claimed for its emperors: the arrival of the true King.⁴ The standard lexicon of New Testament Greek accordingly glosses the word: “arrival, advent ... the coming of Christ ... in messianic majesty.”⁵ A royal presence, yes—the presence that *begins with a public arrival*, the least invisible occasion in ancient public life. An invisible *parousia* is not found in the lexica, the papyri, or the fathers who read this Gospel in its own language.

IV. The Discourse Answers the Rendering

Whatever the disciples meant by their question, what settles the matter is Jesus' answer—and His answer is a sustained warning against exactly the kind of claim the Watchtower makes. If they say “he is in the wilderness,” do not go out; if they say “he is in the inner rooms”—present, but hidden from view—“do not believe it” (Matt. 24:26). Why not? “For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming [*parousia*] of the Son of man” (Matt. 24:27). Lightning is Jesus' own chosen image for the event: instantaneous, unannounced, and impossible to miss. And He says who will see it:

“all the tribes of the earth ... will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matt. 24:30).⁶

Hold the Watchtower’s claim against that answer. A parousia that no one on earth can see; a presence that must be announced by an organization telling you he is here, though hidden; a sign that only the instructed can read. That is not a hard case for this discourse. It is the case the discourse was built to forbid—the “inner rooms” claim, dressed in a Greek word.

V. As You Saw Him Go

The rest of the New Testament speaks with one voice. The angels at the Ascension: “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11)—and the disciples *watched* Him go; the “same way” is bodily and visible, not secret. John: “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, every one who pierced him” (Rev. 1:7)—every eye, the hostile ones included, which no invisible presence can satisfy. Paul: the Lord descends “with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God” (1 Thess. 4:16)—the loudest verse in his letters. And Paul once more: the lawless one is destroyed “by his appearing and his coming” (2 Thess. 2:8)—in the Greek, the *epiphaneia* of his *parousia*, the manifestation of his presence. When the presence comes, it is manifest by definition. Not one text in the New Testament describes an unwitnessed return.⁷

VI. The Authority Already Given

There is also a question the 1914 enthronement cannot answer. The risen Jesus’ parting words to His assembled Church are a coronation announcement: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt. 28:18). All authority—given, past tense, at the resurrection. If Christ has held all authority in heaven and on earth since the first Easter, what remained for Jehovah to give him, invisibly, in 1914? A king cannot be enthroned twice over the same dominion. And the sentence that closes the same Gospel undoes the doctrine from the other side: “lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matt. 28:20). The presence of Christ with His people did not begin in 1914; He promised it for every day between the Ascension and the end. The Church has never lacked her Lord’s presence and has never needed a date for it. What she awaits is not a presence but an appearing.⁸

VII. The Presence That Moved: 1874 to 1914

Watchtower history then supplies the argument’s last step. Most Witnesses today do not know it, but for roughly six decades the Society taught that Christ’s invisible presence

began in 1874. The doctrine ran from Charles Taze Russell's *Studies in the Scriptures* through the 1920s, and as late as 1929 the Society's book *Prophecy* stated it flatly: "The Scriptural proof is that the second presence of the Lord Jesus Christ began in 1874 A.D."⁹ Only in the 1930s and 1940s was the presence relocated to 1914, where it has remained; the transfer was completed in *The Truth Shall Make You Free* (1943).¹⁰

Ask what kind of event can be moved forty years by a publishing committee, and the answer is: only an event with no witnesses. A visible parousia could never have been redated, because someone would have had to see it. The portability of the presence is not an incidental embarrassment; it is a demonstration that nothing observable ever anchored the doctrine. An arrival leaves evidence. An invisible presence leaves only the say-so of the men announcing it—and their say-so, on the record, has already moved once.

VIII. The Hope the Church Holds

None of this diminishes the doctrine of the Lord's return; it restores it. The Church awaits what the creed says and the New Testament shouts: He *will come again*, in glory, visibly, to judge the living and the dead—the blessed hope no believer needs an organization to certify, because when it happens, no one will need to be told.¹¹ Until then His kingship is real and His presence with the Church is real—in His word, His Spirit, and above all the Eucharist—but the parousia remains ahead of us, undated, exactly as He insisted it must remain: "of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (Matt. 24:36).

The choice the word forces is simple. Either the parousia is what the word meant to everyone who first heard it—the arrival of the King, public as lightning—or it is what a nineteenth-century movement needed it to be after its visible expectations failed: an event no one can check. The reader who was taught the invisible presence is invited to read Matthew 24:23–31 whole, look up *parousia* in any lexicon, and ask why, if the presence began in 1914, the men who proclaim it spent sixty years proclaiming a different year with equal confidence.

Endnotes

1. Matthew 24:3, *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (2013 revision). Other Scripture quotations, unless noted, are from the Revised Standard Version.
2. The study note on Matthew 24:3 in the Society's current Study Bible glosses *parousia* as literally "being alongside."
3. jw.org, "What Is the Coming of Christ?" (Bible Questions Answered), on clouds as concealment and "seeing" as discernment.

4. Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, on *parousia* in the papyri and inscriptions.
5. Bauer–Danker–Arndt–Gingrich (BDAG), *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., s.v. *parousia*, pp. 780–781.
6. Matt. 24:26–27, 30 (RSV).
7. Acts 1:11; Rev. 1:7; 1 Thess. 4:16; 2 Thess. 2:8 (RSV).
8. Matt. 28:18–20 (RSV).
9. *Prophecy* (1929), p. 65.
10. *The Truth Shall Make You Free* (1943), presenting 1914 as the year of the Kingdom’s establishment and the beginning of Christ’s presence.
11. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§668–682, esp. 671–673.

For Further Reading

A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament (BDAG), s.v. *parousia*, pp. 780–781; the standard lexicon.

Light from the Ancient East, by Adolf Deissmann—the papyri and inscriptions behind *parousia* as a royal visit.

Jesus, Paul and the End of the World, by Ben Witherington III.

The Language and Imagery of the Bible, by G. B. Caird.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, esp. §§668–682 on Christ’s return in glory.

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“This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

—Acts 1:11

*Ad maiorem Dei gloriam
To the greater glory of God*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the Catholic doctrine of Christ's return and the assessment of the Watchtower's invisible-presence teaching*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.