

Matthew 28: 16-20 Reconsidered

L. G. Parkhurst Jr., *The Expository Times*, Volume XC, No, 6, March 1979, pp. 179-80.

Professor Moule, in his book *The Origin of Christology*, says: 'It is true that there is little or no evidence for the actual *worship* of Jesus in early Palestinian traditions. The verb *proskunein*, "to prostrate oneself", is too ambiguous in its usage to provide evidence, as an examination of its occurrences in the New Testament shows.' He then provides an excellent Excursus on the subject at the end of his book. 1

I contend, however, that the justification of the worship of Jesus was precisely one of the important purposes for Matthew as he compiled his gospel. Professor Moule points out that Matthew uses the word *proskunein* with some frequency, while its use in Mark and Luke is quite rare, and concludes that Jesus was probably worshipped, or at least 'received the highest honours', during his ministry. 2 But more important than this slight evidence is the justification for such worship within the NT itself. To justify their worship of Jesus the early strictly monotheistic Christians needed a direct command from their Lord. Matthew justified the propriety of their worship of Jesus in Mt 28:16-20, where the NEB translates *proskunein*, 'fell prostrate,' and the RSV and the GNB, 'worship.'

The key to the argument centres on the three words: 'but some doubted'. Which did they doubt, the appearance of Jesus or the propriety of worshipping him? For too long, scholars have assumed that some of those present doubted the appearance of Jesus (see any commentary that deals with the doubts). They have been misled by the tradition found in Luke, where some did doubt Jesus' resurrection. But Luke then reported that they were reprimanded and given proof by Jesus that he was no ghost. In Matthew, if some doubted the appearance of Jesus, Jesus evaded their doubts. His speaking to them and giving them the great commission would have been doubted equally by those who doubted seeing him at all. On the other hand, if some doubted the correctness of worshipping Jesus as they fell prostrate before him together with the others, Jesus answered those doubts straightforwardly and concisely: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.' In modern vernacular, Jesus was saying: 'I am as God to you now because my Father has granted me all power and authority both in heaven and on earth. From this point on, make all people *my* disciples and teach them to obey all of *my* commands. Just as my Father is with you, I will

be with you always to the end of the age.' Jesus speaks directly to the doubts about the justifiability of worshipping him, and not to doubts about his appearance. Matthew even included a safeguard in his gospel so that Christian worship would not degenerate into polytheism or Christomonism when he wrote that baptism will now be in the *name* (singular) of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. (Could he have been thinking of Dt 6:13, 'make your promises in his (God's) name alone' (GNB)?) I conclude that the early Palestinian tradition does indeed indicate worship of the risen Lord, as well as its justification.

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1 C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (London [1977]), 41, 175-176.

2 *Ib.*, 176.