



# Nü Jidu in Matthew 24:27: An exegetical evaluation of *Dongfang Shandian* in China



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This study examined the text of Matthew 24:27 using the exegetical method, which included textual, contextual, grammatical-structural, lexical and theological analysis. The purpose of this research was to evaluate and critique the interpretation put forth by the Eastern Lightning group, which claims that Christ has returned to the world as a Chinese woman through a second incarnation based on this text. However, the analysis revealed that the verse does not prophesy Christ's second coming; rather, it depicts the nature of that coming, likening it to lightning flashing from the east to the west. This coming will be public, universal, clear, evident and witnessed by all humanity. Christ's return has not yet occurred, but it will happen at the end of time, preceded by various terrifying events around the world known as the tribulation. Christ will return in his male form, as he ascended to heaven, not as a woman, and in his glory as King, not in the humble state of a human, to judge all humanity living on earth.

**Contribution:** This study contributes to the discourse on Christology and eschatology by critically examining a modern theological movement in light of traditional interpretations of Scripture, providing clarity and insight into the nature of Christ's return as articulated in the New Testament.

**Keywords:** eastern lightning; incarnation; second coming; female Christ; China.

## Introduction

Eastern Lightning (China: *Dongfang shandian*), also known as 'The Church of Almighty God' (China: *Quannengshen jiaohui*) and sometimes referred to as 'the Real God' or 'Practical God' (China: *Shijishen*), is a new religious movement that teaches Jesus Christ has returned to earth in the form of a Chinese woman to judge humanity and bring the Age of Grace to an end (Dunn 2015). According to the movement's records, its origins can be traced back to February 1991, when a church member claimed to receive enlightenment from the Holy Spirit and began to speak and bear witness in the name of God regarding his return. These proclamations spread to churches and quickly garnered enthusiastic responses from congregants who believed the messages to be revelations and words from the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

Dunn (2015) notes that the movement began in Henan province and gained recognition around 1993, when these proclamations were believed to be the words of God incarnated in the form of a woman, who was considered the second coming of Jesus Christ. This individual later became known as Almighty God (Zoccatelli 2018). Although the church claims that God has incarnated as a woman, the identity of this woman is not explicitly stated. Some scholars have identified her as Yang Xiangbin, a woman born in 1973 in northwest China. Zhao Weishan, a central figure in the movement, is referred to as 'The Man Used by the Holy Spirit, Priest, or Brother' and serves as the church's administrative leader (Zoccatelli 2018). According to a report by Sky News (2018 @14:22), this movement is classified as a cult in China. Zhao Weishan is also mentioned as the partner of Yang Xiangbin, a former physics teacher. In 2001, the couple was granted political asylum in the United States of America, and since then, they have led and directed the movement from New York.<sup>2</sup>

The teachings of the Church of Almighty God are based on the book 'The Word Appears in the Flesh', first published in 1997. This book contains over one million words, comprising the utterances of the incarnated Almighty God, and is believed to be the truth revealed by the Spirit of truth to the churches in the last days, according to their interpretation of Revelation 2:7, 11, 17; 3:12 and John 16:13 (Introvigne 2021).

1. See <https://id.godfootsteps.org/about-2.html>.

2. See <https://news.sky.com/story/leading-members-of-chinas-church-of-almighty-god-put-on-trial-11471730>.

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At the core of the church's doctrine is the belief that Christ has returned to the world in the form of a woman, referred to as the 'Female Christ' [*nü jidu*]. This belief is linked to Matthew 24:27, where the phrase 'lightning comes from the east' is seen as symbolic of the incarnation of Christ as a woman in China (Penny 2020). The group asserts that God has chosen China as the site of his second coming. Furthermore, they argue that the incarnation of Christ as a female is based on Genesis 1:27: 'So God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them'. According to this verse, God created humanity in his own image – both male and female. Consequently, Eastern Lightning reasons that God can manifest himself in both male and female forms (Dunn 2015:68).

In 'The Word Appears in the Flesh', the term 'Son of Man' in Matthew 24:27 is interpreted as God incarnating in the flesh – not in a glorified body, but in an ordinary, limited form. Thus, they claim that the second coming of Christ is in the form of a woman (Christ of the Last Days 1997:1897), in line with the concept that God is always new and never repeats his work:

Every time He comes to earth, God changes His name, His gender, His image, and His work. He does not repeat His work. He is a God who is always new and never old. When He came the first time, He was called Jesus; can He still be called Jesus if He comes again? When He first came, He was male; could He be male again this time? His work during the Age of Grace was to be crucified on the cross; if He came again, would He still redeem humanity from sin? Would He still be crucified? Wouldn't that be repeating His work? Don't you know that God is always new and never old? (Christ of the Last Days 1997:1291–1292)

Furthermore, the reason behind God's incarnation as a woman is stated to correct gender inequality, which would occur if God always appeared as male. According to the church, if God only appeared as a man, humanity might view him as the God of men alone, leaving women feeling inadequately represented in salvation. Therefore, God is proclaimed as the God of both men and women (Christ of the Last Days 1997:803, 900).

The church also teaches that Christ will come as 'lightning', with the term 'east' referring to East Asia, specifically China ('God has incarnated in mainland China', Christ of the Last Days 1997: 409, 627, 632, 1216, 2087), while 'west' is taken to reference the Western nations. Thus, they claim that God has incarnated in China and that his teachings will spread to the West (Dunn 2009).

This theological view demands critical evaluation, particularly their interpretation of Matthew 24:27, which serves as the primary foundation for their claim that Christ has returned in the form of a woman. Key critical questions arise: Has the second coming of Christ truly occurred, as they claim? Has his return really taken place in the form of a reincarnation, this time as a Chinese woman? Further evaluation and analysis of this text will provide deeper insights into the validity of the interpretations presented by this church.

## Research methodology

This study employs an exegetical approach to Matthew 24:27, incorporating various analytical methods, including textual, contextual, grammatical-structural, lexical and theological analysis. The aim is to uncover the original meaning of the text (Porter & Clarke 2002). Following the exegetical study, Eastern Lightning's interpretation of this passage will be critically evaluated based on the findings, in order to assess the validity of their theological claims.

## Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was submitted to the Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Injili Indonesia Surabaya (Evangelical Theological Seminary of Indonesia Surabaya), and ethical consent was granted on 08 October 2024. The ethics approval number is 00264/KEP-STTII Sby/EC/X/2024.

## Results and discussion

### Textual: The issue of manuscript variants

In the apparatus of the 2012 edition of NA28, the word *φαίεται* [to appear or shine] is noted to have a variant *φαίει* [shines], which appears in manuscripts D Θ f1 700 (Aland et al. 2012). However, in the 5th revision of NA28 in 2014, this variant issue was not included, as the edition only addressed significant variants (Aland et al. 2014). The word *φαίεται* is classified as a present middle or passive indicative verb, third person singular, while *φαίει* is a present active indicative verb, third person singular (cf. Jn 1 1:5; Jn 1 2:8; Rv 1:6). The difference between the two lies solely in morphology, where *φαίεται* functions as a deponent and/or passive verb ('Middle-only') and cannot be considered an 'active' verb, despite being translated in an active sense (Mounce 2019). Thus, both words carry the same meaning and can be translated as 'shines' or 'appears'.

### Context: The Eschatological discourse

Matthew 24–25 is often referred to as Jesus' 'Eschatological Discourse' (the Olivet Discourse) (Bomberg 1992) and is also identified as the 'Apocalyptic Discourse' (Hagner 1995). According to Talbert (2010), this discourse consists of two main sections: Matthew 24:3–36 addresses future end-time events, while Matthew 24:37–25:46 provides exhortations to remain vigilant in light of the final judgement. The first section is further divided into two subsections: the components of the end times (24:4–31) and the timing of these components (24:32–36).

The discussion in Matthew 24:4–31 begins with a description of the events anticipated before the end times (24:4–29), followed by the parousia itself (24:30–31). Verses 24:4–29 are composed of two aspects: tribulations on earth (24:4–28), where Jesus foretells various trials and deceptions that his people will endure and disturbances in heaven (24:29), which depict cosmic events accompanying

the end of the age. Talbert presents the tribulations on earth (24:4–28) in an ABA' pattern as follows:

- A False messiahs and prophets (24:4–14)
- B Desecration of the temple (24:15–22)
- A' False messiahs and prophets (24:23–28)

Thus, in the broader context, Matthew 24:27 is part of the discussion on the end times and does not refer to current events. In the immediate context, Jesus warns his disciples not to believe in false prophets or individuals claiming to be the Messiah, asserting that he has already returned to obscure places, such as the desert or hidden rooms (cf. 6:6; Lk 17:23–24), even though they may perform great signs and wonders (vv. 23–26). In fact, the discourse on false messiahs and prophets begins earlier in verse 4.

Christ then illustrates the nature of his second coming by comparing it to lightning that flashes from the east to the west (v. 27) (Hagner 1995). All interpreters agree that the imagery of 'lightning from the east to the west' portrays the second coming of Christ as public, unmistakable and visible to all, leaving no room for doubt. His return will be universal in scope, affecting the entire earth, where every eye will see him (Bomberg 1992; Carson 1984; Hagner 1995; Keener 1999; Morris 1992; Talbert 2010; Turner 2008, among others). This statement is reinforced by several parallel texts, such as the following verse (v. 30), 2 Thessalonians 1:7, Revelation 1:7, and 19:11–16.

Therefore, the question arises: What is the sign of Christ's second coming, as posed by the disciples earlier (v. 3)? Verse 27 provides the answer to this question. The inquiry posed by the disciples can also be interpreted as a relevant question for the church today: what is the sign of Christ's second coming? The sign indicates that this event will be public, universal and clearly visible to all; every eye will witness him at the end of the age. This view sharply contrasts with the claims of Eastern Lightning, which asserts that Jesus has secretly returned in the form of a Chinese woman in 1991. Contextually, the second coming of Christ will occur at the end of the age, not during the present church age.

## Grammatical: A simile

Matthew 24:27 begins with the subordinating conjunction *ὥσπερ* [just as], which serves as a marker of similarity between events and conditions. This conjunction is used in the protasis of a comparison, where the apodosis is introduced by the adverb *οὕτως* [in the same way] (Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich [BDAG]):

*ὥσπερ* γὰρ ἡ ἀστραπή ἐξέρχεται ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν καὶ φαίνεται ἕως δυσμῶν **Protasis**

*οὕτως* ἔσται ἡ παρουσία τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου **Apodosis**

For **just like** the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, **Protasis**

**so** the coming of the Son of Man will be (NET) **Apodosis**

The use of *ὥσπερ* ... *οὕτως* indicates that this passage is figurative, involving comparison and falls into the category of a 'simile'. A simile is a comparison in which one thing is explicitly likened to another, often using the word 'like' or 'as'. The main point of a simile is to highlight a specific similarity between two objects (Zuck 1991), where one part of the simile clarifies a particular aspect of the other (Tate 2012). For example, the book of Job says, 'man... is like a flower that blooms and then withers' (14:1–2a), comparing the brevity of human life to the short existence of a flower. The author is not interested in other characteristics of the flower, such as its colour, fragrance or shape. The comparison is straightforward and contextually clear.

When applied to Matthew 24:27, Jesus is comparing the nature of his second coming to that of lightning that flashes from the east to the west. Therefore, the question arises: what is the similarity between 'lightning that flashes from the east to the west' and 'the second coming of Christ'? Or, what aspect of 'lightning flashing from the east to the west' explains 'the second coming of Christ'? Thus, the phrase 'lightning flashing from the east to the west' should not be interpreted literally, as the meaning of the simile lies in the similarity itself (Tate 2012).

Moreover, this phrase functions as a figurative expression. In this context, Eastern Lightning misinterprets the literary genre of the expression 'lightning flashing from the east to the west'. They tend to interpret this phrase literally, engaging in eisegesis by reading into the text their own interpretation. They view 'lightning' as Christ, 'east' as China and 'west' as Western nations.

## Syntax: An event in the future

Verses 29–31 outline the events of cosmic signs (v. 29), the coming of the Son of Man (v. 30), and the gathering of the elect (v. 31), which will occur 'after' the suffering during that time. The term 'after' serves as a chronological reference in this passage, alongside the words 'immediately' and 'at that time' (Culpepper 2021). Thus, the word 'after' indicates that the events described in verses 29–31, including the second coming of Christ, will take place following the tribulation (Turner 2006). This is also noted by France (2007):

'Immediately after' closely links these two events. Matthew does not use the word 'immediately' as frequently as Mark does as a narrative device, but when he does use it to connect events or stages in a story, it always carries its normal meaning; here, the word is deliberately introduced, and when combined with 'after', it can only mean that there is no delay separating the two events. n.p.

Therefore, the phrase 'immediately after' signifies that the events previously recounted will occur prior to Christ's coming. These events include (1) the emergence of false messiahs who deceive (vv. 4–5; 23–26); (2) wars, famines and earthquakes (vv. 6–8); (3) persecution, deception and apostasy (vv. 9–12); (4) the endurance of believers and evangelism (vv. 13–14); (5) the rise of the Antichrist (vv. 15–22)

and (6) human life characterised by revelry and marriage (vv. 37–39). The second coming of Christ will take place immediately after this period of tribulation (Lowery 2020).

Meanwhile, at the very moment of his arrival, several events will unfold, namely: (7) chaos in the heavens, with the sun and moon losing their light and stars falling (v. 29); (8) the sign of the Son of Man appearing in heaven, and all the nations on earth mourning as they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds (v. 30); (9) angels will blow their trumpets and gather his elect from all over the world (v. 31) and (10) a global judgement (v. 39) (Evans 2012). These 10 events have not occurred from 1991 to the present, which is the time claimed by Eastern Lightning as the second coming of Christ.

### Lexical: The direction of sunrise and sunset

This lexical analysis will focus on the meanings of two key terms in the relevant text: east [*ἀνατολῶν*] and west [*δυσιμῶν*]. The term *ἀνατολῶν*, literally meaning ‘rising’, is closely related to the verb *anatello*, which can be interpreted as ‘to cause to rise’ or, in its intransitive use, ‘to rise’. In contrast, the term *δυσιμῶν* refers to the location where the sun sets, derived from the word *dusis*, which means ‘sinking’ or ‘setting’. This term is also associated with the verb *duno*, which means ‘to sink’, thus contextually referring to the direction of the west (Vine 1981).

According to the BDAG lexicon (Danker 2000), the term *ἀνατολῶν* has several meanings, including: (1) the upward movement of celestial bodies, translated as ‘rising’ when used in the singular form (Danker & Krug 2009); (2) the position of the sunrise, interpreted as ‘east’ and (3) the transition from darkness to light in the morning, denoted as ‘dawn’. On the other hand, the term *δυσιμῶν* can be understood as an action encompassing the process of setting, interpreted as ‘descending’ or ‘setting’, or as the ‘direction of sunset’, which refers to the ‘west’. The use of the adverb *ἕως* [until] with *δυσιμῶν* indicates a distance towards the west (Danker & Krug 2009).

Thayer (2000) notes that the term *ἀνατολῶν* has two meanings: ‘rising’ and ‘west’, both referring to the direction of the sun’s rise. Meanwhile, the term *δυσιμῶν* is defined as ‘the setting of the sun’ or, in a local context, denotes the direction of the west, the region where the sun sets. Thayer also observes that the phrase ‘from east to west’ reflects inclusivity, encompassing all regions or nations, as recorded in Matthew 8:11; 24:27; and Luke 13:29.

Thus, the terms *ἀνατολῶν* and *δυσιμῶν* in the New Testament are not used to describe specific parts of the world, such as the East and the West. In the context of Matthew 24:27, these terms refer more to the directions of sunrise and sunset, from east to west. The expression ‘from east to west’ represents all regions or nations in the world, in accordance with Thayer’s assertion. Therefore, this expression emphasises that the second coming of Christ will be witnessed by all areas and

nations on earth, just as lightning flashes across the entire expanse of the sky. Consequently, the interpretation by Eastern Lightning, which regards the terms ‘east’ and ‘west’ as referring to China and Western countries, does not accurately reflect the biblical meanings of these words.

### Theological: The second coming of Christ

Several theological questions can be raised regarding the Eastern Lightning group’s doctrine of the second coming of Christ: (1) Does this coming occur through reincarnation? (2) Is its location in China? (3) Was it fulfilled in 1991?

Firstly, the term ‘coming’ in the context of Christ’s second coming is translated from the Greek word *παρουσία* (Mt 24:37, 39; 1 Cor 15:23; Th 1 2:19; 3:13; 5:23; Ja 5:8; Jn 1 2:28). Derived from *παρεῖμι*, meaning ‘to be present’, this term emphasises the ‘presence’ of someone in a specific location (Radl 1990). Generally, *παρουσία* is understood as ‘presence’ or ‘coming’, often with the special connotation of a ‘visit’ by a king, emperor, or someone in authority to a place (Moulton & Milligan 1930). Therefore, the term *παρουσία* describes the manner of Christ’s second coming, namely, by directly appearing on earth in his glory as King. This event will occur with splendour and majesty, reflecting the royal and imperial nature of his ‘visit’ (Spicq 1994).

The angels in Acts 1:11 explain the manner [*τρόπον*] in which Christ will return, stating that he will come ‘in the same way’ [*ὁν τρόπον*] as he ascended into heaven (Schnabel 2012). Since Christ ascended in the clouds, he will likewise return in the clouds, as prophesied in Daniel 7:13 (*‘en tais nephelais’*; cf. Lk 21:27; Mk 14:62b) (Barrett 1994; Bock 2007). The second coming of Christ will be accompanied by glory and power (Lk 21:27), will be public and universal, where every eye will see him (Rv 1:7) and will be accompanied by his angels (Lk 9:26; Th 2 1:7) (Peterson 2009). He will come as a victorious King, riding a white horse in accordance with ancient tradition (Rv 19:11) (Osborne 2016). Thus, the second coming of Christ will not occur through reincarnation, as taught by Eastern Lightning, but in the same glorified body seen and touched by the apostles after his resurrection (Keener 2012). This is affirmed by the demonstrative pronoun *houtos* [‘this same’] in Acts 1:11, which emphasises that the Jesus who ascended to heaven is the same Jesus who will return (Longenecker 2007).

Secondly, the phrase *ὁν τρόπον* also indicates that the location of his return will be the same as the location of his ascension – namely, the Mount of Olives (Ac 1:12) (Keener 2012). This location was prophesied as the place of the LORD’s return in Zechariah 14:4–5 (Lindsey 2018; Patterson & Hill 2006). Therefore, the claim that Christ’s return occurred in China contradicts the testimony of Scripture.

Thirdly, biblical prophecies concerning the events preceding, accompanying, and following the second



coming of Christ remain unfulfilled to this day (e.g. Dn 7:13–14; Zch 14; Mt 24; 25:31–46; Rv 19:11–16, among others). The second coming of Christ is an eschatological event marking the end of this age and the beginning of the age to come (Tt 2:12–13). If Christ's return had indeed occurred in 1991, as claimed by Eastern Lightning, this age should have already ended, and humanity would have entered the new age – an assertion clearly inconsistent with the current state of the world.

### The meaning of the term 'Son of Man'

The term 'Son of Man' in the Gospel of Matthew and other Gospels carries profound theological significance. This phrase appears 86 times in the New Testament, with 82 occurrences referring to Jesus across the four Gospels (Quarles 2019).

According to Zaspel (2020), the term 'Son of Man' in Scripture holds three meanings: (1) an ordinary human being (Nm 23:19; Job 16:21; Ps 8:3–4); (2) the Messiah (Dn 7:13–14; Ps 8:4) and (3) a transcendent Messiah (Dn 7), who is also identified as the 'Most High' (Dn 7:18, 22, 25, 27). In Matthew 24:27, the term refers to Christ's second coming as King (Mt 19:28; 25:31), with its theological background rooted in Daniel 7:13–14 (cf. Mt. 26:54).

Jesus explicitly cites Daniel 7:13–14 on two occasions: Firstly, in the context of his coming in the clouds (Mt 24:30; Mk 13:26; Lk 21:27); and secondly, in his declaration as the Son of Man before the Sanhedrin (Mt 26:64; Mk 14:62; Lk 22:69) (Quarles 2019). In both cases, the term 'Son of Man' emphasises the glory and authority of Jesus as King at his second coming (Lowery 2020). Therefore, the term does not refer to his nature as a mere human being, as claimed by Eastern Lightning, but affirms his identity as the glorious and transcendent Messiah.

## Conclusion

Based on the analysis of Matthew 24:27, it can be concluded that the meaning of this text does not align with the claims made by the Eastern Lightning group. Their interpretation is characterised by eisegesis rather than exegesis, rendering it biblically indefensible.

Matthew 24:27 describes the nature of Christ's second coming, rather than prophesying the event itself. His coming is illustrated as lightning that flashes from east to west, indicating that this event will be public, universal, clear and evident to every person on earth. Therefore, this text serves as a sign of Christ's second coming.

This depiction should not be interpreted literally, as the Eastern Lightning group attempts to impose external meanings onto the text. In this regard, they reinterpret biblical texts based on their own experiences or preconceived notions. Such interpretations should be avoided as they have the potential to mislead.

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H.Z.L. and J.S. contributed equally to this research article.

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## Data availability

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