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"The least of these?" The origins and evolution of a misunderstood group in Matthew 25

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“THE LEAST OF THESE?” THE ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF A MISUNDERSTOOD GROUP IN MATTHEW 25

by

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this paper to my daughters, MacKenzie Victoria and Abigail Carmela, you are my source of inspiration. I love you both to the moon and back.

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First and foremost, I would like to thank God, through whom all things are possible. To my good friend Diana Raschella, thank you for always being there for me and pushing me. To Alex Cameron, even from across the pond, your support and encouragement was paramount in my determination to complete this endeavor. To Father Robert Sinatra of Saint Padro Pio Parish, thank you for lending me the countless books and resources. Without your generosity, I would not have had the opportunity to complete my research. Finally, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Scott Morschauser. Thank you for your unwavering guidance and patience. Most of all, thank you for your knowledge and spiritual guidance. Without your help and direction this thesis would not have been possible.

Abstract

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2020-2021
Scott Morschauser, Ph.D.
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The intention of this paper is to analyze and explore the different aspects of Matthew 25:31-46. This research briefly examines how modern Biblical scholars and theologians have approached and interpreted Matthew 25. Further, I will place Jesus' announcement of the "coming of the Son of Man" within its historical context and explore how this announcement would have fit within and against First Century Israelite beliefs. By extension, I will attempt to examine the textual relationship of Matthew 25 to Jewish, non-Jewish and Early Christian texts. Finally, I will conclude with how Matthew 25 was interpreted and influential in both the Patristic and Medieval Eras.

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Introduction

Matthew 25:31-46

> When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.
>
> Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'
>
> Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'
>
> The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'
>
> Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'
>
> They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'
>
> He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'
>
> Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.[1]

[1] Matt 25:31-46

Introduction

In the 1960's, Martin Luther King Jr. had asked for the world to "open its eyes to the plight of those who languished in poverty."[2] In his final sermon "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution." King proclaimed:

> America has not met its obligations and its responsibilities to the poor. One day we will have to stand before the God of history, and we will talk in terms of things we've done. Yes, we will be able to say that we built gargantuan bridges to span the seas, we built gigantic buildings to kiss the skies. Yes, we made our submarines to penetrate oceanic depth. We brought into being many other things with our scientific and technological power. It seems that I can hear the God of history saying, "That was not enough! *But I was hungry, and ye fed me not. I was naked, and ye clothed me not.* I was devoid of a decent sanitary house to live in, and ye provided no shelter for me. And consequently, you cannot enter the kingdom of greatness. *If ye do it unto the least of these, my brethren, ye do it unto me*."[3]

Decades later, Matthew 25:31-46- - - a centerpiece of King's rhetoric and shown in italics- - - has been used in numerous American political forums. In June of 2018, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez referenced Matthew 25 in her fight for criminal justice reform. "And let us not forget that guiding principle of "the least among us" found in Matthew: that we are compelled to care for the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick and, yes - the imprisoned."[4]

In April of 2020, the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi creatively reworked these same passages to defend releasing inmates from federal prisons to slow the spread

[2] Lewis Baldwin and Vicki L Crawford, *Reclaiming the Great World House: The Global Vision of Martin Luther King Jr* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2019), 59

[3] Baldwin, *Reclaiming the Great World House: The Global Vision of Martin Luther King Jr,* 59-60

[4] Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on Her Catholic Faith and the Urgency of the Criminal Justice Reform." *America: The Jesuit Review* (27 June 2018), www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2018/06/27/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-her-catholic-faith-and-urgency-criminal (Accessed 20 Feb. 2021.)

of the Coronavirus.[5] "In our caucus, we are very devoted to the Gospel of Matthew — 'when I was hungry, you fed me, when I was homeless, you sheltered me, when I was in prison, you visited me.'"[6] Even more recently, in June of 2020, following the horrific murder of George Floyd, Christian preacher, John Pavlovitz, evoking undercurrents of Matthew 25, claimed that with the suffering and death of Floyd, Jesus suffered and died too.[7]

References to Matthew 25 have become so widespread in public discourse that one can find quotations of it variously in anti-abortion ads, pro-immigration movements, and the foundation of charitable organizations[8]. It is obvious that the gospel chapter has become one of the more prominent Biblical passages for politicians and activists to cite.

Even though Matthew 25 has become something of a "go-to" text in terms of justifying modern social critique, one must point out that the origin of the gospel account was First Century AD/CE Israel, not modern and post-modern America. As one writer astutely noted:

> Matthew 25 isn't meant to be a warm and fuzzy, feel-good passage as if it were a preview of the kind of justice we think the "other side" will get come judgement day. It's not meant to be a promise of utopia or a more perfect union. God's kingdom just doesn't fit our terms of order. It is ushered in not by platitudes nor is it established by the building blocks of any of our civilizations, past and present. It comes to us through those who are on the outside, not only of all our political

[5] Jack Davis, *"*Nancy Pelosi Invokes Gospel of Matthew in Push to Free Federal Prisoners," *The Western Journal* (April 27, 2020), https://www.westernjournal.com/pelosi-invokes-gospel-matthew-push-free-federal-prisoners/?utm_source=email (Accessed August 10, 2020)

[6] Ibid.

[7] John Pavlovitz posted an image that referenced Matthew 25:31-46. Reverend John Pavlovitz connected Matthew 25:31-46 to the horrific murder of George Floyd stating that: "When you slowly suffocate a Black Man to death in the streets while he pleads for breath, you're slowly suffocating me. When you drive your knee into his neck until it closes, you're driving your knee into my neck." See John Pavlovitz "To White Police, From Black Jesus." (*John Pavlovitz*. 2 June 2020.) johnpavlovitz.com/2020/06/02/to-white-police-from-black-jesus (Accessed 8 June 2020)

[8] The foundation of The Matthew 25 Network was based on Matthew 25:31-46

> structures, but even our theological categories and systems. Neither the right or left have got all the answers.[9]

So, how did these passages sound and what might they have meant to an audience of Second Temple Jews, who formed the earliest followers of Jesus of Nazareth? Can one trace a consistent interpretation of the parable from its original context throughout the centuries, or is there a possibility that ancient listeners might have heard Jesus' words in a different manner than in our present age?

Before proceeding further, some historical background is helpful. Scholars have stressed that Jesus' announcement of "the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven/God" is the central-most theme of the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus' Kingdom announcement had three major components: Israel's return from exile, the defeat of evil and the return of God to Zion- - - all elements derived from Old Testament prophecy.[10] Importantly, Jesus saw his followers and disciples as the restored eschatological community promised through Old Testament Scripture,[11] and were the people with whom God would reveal his glory to the world.[12]

The Final Judgement that is envisioned in Matthew 25**,** which contains the memorable words about charity, forms the prophetic climax to the gospel-writer's eschatological discourse. The series of kingdom parables in Matthew 13, 18, 20, 22, 24 and 25 address "the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven" and "the coming of the Son of Man." These parables were intended to warn the disciples and followers to be ready,

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[9]Mihee Kim-Kort, "What Do Politicians Mean When They Invoke Matthew 25?" *Sojourners* (5 Mar. 2020) https://sojo.net/articles/what-do-politicians-mean-when-they-invoke-matthew-25 (Accessed 10 August 2020)

[10]See Nicholas T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 477; Zion is the hill in Jerusalem where the city of David was built.

[11] Isa 61:9

[12] Nicholas T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 444

watchful, and prepared for the coming judgement. To First Century Jews, these parabolic references would have been understood as pointed allusions to God finally becoming King; that Israel was finally freed from her exile; and that Jesus was/is the prophesied Messiah and the instrument of divine restoration.[13] In these passages, Jesus reveals himself to be "the Son of Man" with and through whom the Kingdom of Heaven was being redefined and revealed.[14]

An examination of Jesus' Kingdom announcement shows that the coming Judgement of "all the nations" was a crucial element. Indeed, another parable bears a notable resemblance to Matthew 25:31-33: the parable of the Wheat and Tares in Matthew 13:24-30. The disciples are tempted to remove the weeds from the wheat (sinners from the righteous) in a field that was tainted by the satanic "enemy," but Jesus warns them that they should not anticipate the Final Judgement of God. It is only when "the Son of Man" comes with his angels, that the heavenly emissaries will gather the weeds and they will burn them with fire.[15]

> And the servants of the householder came and said to him, "Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds?" He said to them, "An enemy has done this." The servants said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" But he said, "No; lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn."[16]
>
> The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men

[13] Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVaristy Press, 1997), 228
[14] Witherington, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*, 229
[15] Matt 13:38-39
[16] Matt 13:27-30

> will weep and gnash their teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.[17]

Similar to Matthew 25, the discernment of the various groups under judgment is unclear in the present age but will only, and surprisingly, be revealed by the Son of Man at the final day.

Yet while Matthew 25 shows relations to other material in the gospel, it is also crucial to imagine the ancient reception to Matthew 25:31-46. The Final Judgement scene of Matthew 25 does encourage listeners to be generous, charitable, and caring to individuals who are less fortunate- - - as modern usages stress. However, Jesus' parable of the Sheep and Goats would have been disconcerting to his contemporary Jewish audience. The care for the categories of the unfortunate would have been viewed in a vastly different way within Second Temple Judaism, than in a modern social-welfare state.

Traditionally, individuals who were suffering from an aliment or social degradation were believed by some to have been under divine punishment by God. More importantly, these figures were often outcasts of society and considered "unclean" or "impure." Such groups would have been regarded as beyond the moral pale, even as they were vividly symbolic of being in a "state of exile." It needs to be stressed, then, that Jesus' healing of aliments such as leprosy and other skin diseases were not simply acts of charity, but demonstrations that forgiveness and restoration (return from exile) of seemingly dubious characters was now occurring through his agency. Compounding the

[17] Matt 13:41-43

startling nature of such actions, was the belief within First Century Israel that the forgiveness of sins (=Restoration from Exile) could only be through God.

To help understand the Jewish view of sin and sickness, healing, forgiveness, and restoration it is useful to cite Old Testament Scripture. There are numerous Old Testament verses that are related to the widely held belief that "sickness was evidence of sin." It was often accepted that individuals were punished due to their transgressions or iniquities. An example can be found in the Book of Zephaniah.

> I will bring distress on men,
> So that they shall walk like the blind.
> Because they have sinned against the Lord;
> Their blood shall be poured out like dust,
> And their flesh like dung.[18]

Similarly, one can see divine punishment in the Book of Micah that was attributed to the wickedness, sins, and false idolatry of the people as a whole.[19]

> Therefore, I have begun to smite you,
> Making you desolate because of your sins.
> You shall eat, but not be satisfied,
> And there shall be hunger in your inward parts.[20]

Note how blindness, hunger, and physical discharge are the consequences of Israel's transgressions. Throughout the Book of Psalms, we can find examples where sickness was placed upon individuals and the community for their transgressions**.** Importantly, it was the Lord- - - Yahweh, the God of Israel- - - through his love and forgiveness that healing, restoration, and salvation would take place.

[18] Zeph 1:17
[19] Mic 6:9-16
[20] Mic 6:13-14

Some were sick through their sinful ways,
And because of their iniquities suffered affliction;
They loathed any kind of food,
And they drew near to the gates of death

Then they cried to the Lord for their trouble,
And he delivered them from their distress;
He sent forth his word, and healed them,
And delivered them from destruction[21]

In an age of modern medicine, it is difficult for us to appreciate the reaction to people who suffered from aliments such as leprosy, or who were in extreme physical need. Not only were they regarded as "unclean" and "impure," but their homes- - - even their clothing- - - were also considered to be defiled. In the Old Testament, it was regarded as a divine command that the sick shall be separated from the rest of the society.[22]

> The Leper who had the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, "Unclean, unclean." He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp.[23]

> The Lord said to Moses, "Command that people of Israel that they put out of the camp every leper, and everyone having such discharge, and every one that is unclean through contact with the dead; you shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp, that they may not defile their camp, in the midst of which I dwell."[24]

Biblical scholars concur that sickness and corresponding isolation became powerful metaphors for "exile," even as the healing of aliments and sickness would have been symbolic of Israel's "return from exile. Jesus' cures were presented as such and

[21] Ps 107:17-20
[22] 2 Chr 26:20-12; Lev 15:31
[23] Lev 13:45-46
[24] Num 5:1-3

would have been considered as enacted "parables" of restoration, i.e. the "kingdom/God's restoring rule" had come.

By contrast, to many of his contemporaries, Jesus' generosity and care towards individuals regarded as being under divine punishment would have been considered as guilty of violating the "will of God." Therefore, Matthew 25:31-46 would have challenged traditional Jewish religious beliefs and practices surrounding holiness and cleanliness.

The intention of this paper is to analyze and explore the different aspects of Matthew 25:31-46. I will place Jesus' announcement of the "coming of the Son of Man" within its historical context and explore how this announcement would have fit within and against First Century Israelite beliefs. By extension, I will attempt to examine the textual relationship of Matthew 25 to Jewish, non-Jewish and Early Christian texts. Finally, I will conclude with how Matthew 25 was interpreted and influential in both the Patristic and Medieval Eras.

Procedurally, in Chapter two, I will briefly examine how modern Biblical scholars and theologians have approached and interpreted Matthew 25. Here, I have utilized representative commentaries on the Gospel. In some cases, scholars have reached similar conclusions about certain aspects of the text, but elsewhere there are differences in their explanations of the passages.

Chapter three explores how Matthew 25 fits within First Century Israel and what is called "Second Temple Judaism." Within this chapter, I look at the historical context of Jesus' teaching and preaching as presented in the Matthean scene of the Final Judgement. This is accompanied by a discussion of the diverse and sometimes,

contentious beliefs of First Century Israel surrounding eschatological expectations. Moreover, I point out the connection between Matthew 25 and the language of the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-6, and the covenantal curses in the Book of Deuteronomy. This has bearing on the issue of the "group-identity" of the so-called "least of these" in Jesus' parable.

Chapter four continues my reading of the parable, and once more reviews the numerous interpretations of the term "the Son of Man"; the central figure in Jesus' tale. I examine Jewish and Christian texts that elude to "the coming of the Son of Man in judgement." Within these accounts, I consider the implications of the term "the Son of Man" and how it relates to its usage within Matthew 25. I then study the identities of the other characters in the parable: the sheep and the goats, "the least of these," and "all the nations."

Chapter five is concerned with the linkage between Matthew 25 and early Christian teaching in the *Didache*, with similarities between the two texts.

Chapter six turns to Patristic interpretations of Matthew 25. Many of the theologians that I examine were the founding fathers of the early Christian Church. Individuals such as Saint Augustine, Saint John Chrysostom, Origen, Saint Jerome and Saint Caesarius of Arles were foundational for later religious thought, particularly the interpretation of our gospel materials.

Chapter seven deals with the Medieval Era. This period saw numerous influences of Matthew 25 on all aspects of life. Throughout the Middle Ages, the common belief was that the "end times" were at hand. Important political, social and religious

movements of the period were based on “the coming of the Son of Man in judgement.” Charlemagne was so influenced by Matthew 25, that some of his laws and capitularies were based upon it. Other important figures of study are Saint Thomas Aquinas and Saint Francis. In this section, I also deal with the impact of Matthew 25 upon practices of medieval almsgiving; its appearance in literature such as the *Heliand*; and religious iconography.

Originally, I had planned on exploring material from the First Century to the Twenty-first. However, due to the spread of the coronavirus and quarantine restrictions, my research was severely curtailed. I was forced to end my research- - - for the present- - - with the High Middle Ages. Ultimately, I plan to continue my research from the Reformation up into the modern era.

Chapter 2

Modern Biblical Scholars and Matthew 25

The parable of the sheep and goats presents a scenario surrounding the final judgement of the world. Jesus begins his dramatic narrative with the arrival of "the Son of Man" who is accompanied by his angels. "The Son of Man" then presides over the Final Judgement as king and shepherd. Ultimately, some will receive eternal reward, others will be cast into the fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

We have briefly noted how modern groups in America have utilized the prophetic parable in a socio-economic way to advocate state-support for the impoverished. We now examine the interpretations of Matthew 25 by modern biblical scholars.

Modern Interpretation of Matthew 25:31-46

Verse 31

Opinions clearly vary over the main figure in the parable, "the Son of Man." New Testament scholars such as Daniel Harrington, Craig Evans and Ben Witherington stress that the portrayal of the "Son of Man" as the eschatological judge is not original to Jesus, but can be found much earlier, within Daniel 7:9-14.[25] Daniel 7 speaks of the coming of the "Son of Man," with the accompaniment of the angels and thrones.[26]

> In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days[27] and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an

[25] Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 356; Craig A. Evans, *Matthew: New Cambridge Bible Commentary*. (New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 422; Witherington, *Matthew*, 466

[26] Evans, *Matthew: New Cambridge Bible Commentary*, 422

[27] The Ancient of Days is the name for God in the Book of Daniel

> everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.[28]

While many of the New Testament scholars agree that Matthew 25:31-46 had been influenced by Daniel 7, Ben Witherington also notes similarities with Zechariah 14:5.[29] In Zechariah 14:5 and Matthew 25:31 references are made concerning the Lord coming from heaven with angels.

> You will flee by my mountain valley, for it will extend to Azel. You will flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.[30]

In addition to these Old Testament prototypes, Ulrich Luz and John Nolland further connected Matthew 25:31 to Matthew 19:28.[31] In Matthew 19:28, the evangelist has Jesus claim that the "Son of Man" who sits on a "glorious throne" will pass his judgement on the world. The usage of the phrase "glorious throne" in both Matthew 19:28 and Matthew 25:31 points ahead to the royal figure (i.e."King") mentioned in the prophetic parable.

John Nolland likewise compared Matthew 25:31 to a prior passage in the gospel (Matthew 24:30-31). In Matthew 24:30-31 the "Son of Man" is also described as coming in glory with his angels.[32] The angels in Matthew 25:31-46 appear to be the attendants to the eschatological judge; linking the text to Matthew 24:30-31.[33]

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[28] Dan 7:13-14
[29] Witherington, *Matthew*, 466
[30] Zech 14:5
[31] See Matt 19:28 "Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."
[32] John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew – A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991), 1024
[33] Ibid.

Table 1

Matthew 25:31 as compared to Matthew 24:30-31

Matthew 24:30-31	**Matthew 25:31**
Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.	When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne.

In accord with OT models and earlier Matthean usage, scholars agree that Jesus depicts the "Son of Man" in Matthew 25 as a royal figure presiding over the eschatological court.

Verse 32-33

Matthew 25:32 shows "all the nations" present for the Final Judgement. Daniel Harrington takes a bold position in claiming that the "nations" are exclusively the Gentiles, i.e. non-Jews.[34] He argues that the term *panta ta ethne* would usually translate to mean nations of all sorts, but in the Gospel of Matthew it solely points to the Gentiles. To support his claim, Harrington mentions the same usage of *panta ta ethne* earlier in Matthew where "all the nations" clearly means the Gentiles.[35] Therefore, the Gentiles are

[34] Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 356.
[35] See Matt 4:15; 10:5; 12:18; 20:19; 21:43; 24:7; 28:19

the ones that are to face the judgement of the "Son of Man" according to their acts of mercy committed to "the least of these."[36]

Craig Evans and Ben Witherington, on the other hand, hold a slightly different viewpoint concerning these groups. Evans argues that that the separation of "all the nations" does not mean country from country. Rather, it is the people of "all the nations" in a mixed multitude that will be separated from being amidst one another.[37] They both agree that the Judge, who is the "Son of Man" will separate the people of "all the nations" according to how they had reacted indirectly to Jesus' announcement of the Kingdom of Heaven.[38] Therefore, the peoples of the nations will be differentiated not ethnically, but ethically, based on how they treated the restored Israel- - - the community of healed and forgiven followers of Jesus.[39]

Urich Luz claims that "all the nations" gathered before the "glorious throne" of the "Son of Man"[40] is itself a part of the Final Judgement, even before the pronouncement of blessing or censure. The judgement that the "Son of Man" will enact begins with the separation of the righteous and unrighteous, already demonstrating the "Son of Man's" decision prior to his actual verdict. The Separation of the good and the evil is a detail clearly attesting to the authority of the "Son of Man."

[36] The acts of charity and mercy, as well as the identity of "the Least of These" will be expanded on in later chapters.
[37] Evans, *Matthew: New Cambridge Bible Commentary*, 422-423
[38] Evans, *Matthew: New Cambridge Bible Commentary*, 422; Witherington, *Matthew*, 466
[39] Evans, *Matthew: New Cambridge Bible Commentary*, 422-23; Witherington, *Matthew*, 466; Nicholas T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Part 2 – Chapters 16-28* (London: SPCK, 2001), 143
[40] Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, translated by James E Crouch, edited by Helmet Koester (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 274

John Nolland draws a further important connection between Matthew 25:32 and both Joel 4:2 and Isaiah 66:18. Nolland observes that Joel and Isaiah also mention the gathering of "all the nations" for judgement.

Table 2

Matthew 25:32 as compared to Joel 4:2 and Isaiah 66:18

Joel 4:2	**Isaiah 66:18**
"I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. There I will enter into judgement with them on behalf of my people, my heritage, Israel; Because they scattered them among the nations, they divided up my land."	And I, because of what they have planned and done, am about to come and gather the people of all nations and languages, and they will come and see my glory.

As in Matthew 25:32, Isaiah 66:18 likewise uses the phrase "coming in glory," with the gospel evoking the OT passage.

Further, Nolland compared the usage in Matthew 25 of "all the nations" to Matthew 24:9. In the latter passage, "all the nations" referred to parties expressing their hatred of Jesus' followers. "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me."[41] A final use of the term "all

[41] Matt 24:9

the nations" within the Gospel of Matthew concerns the announcement of the gospel to "all the nations,**"** a surprising turn considering the earlier hostile usages.[42]

Once the nations have gathered before the "glorious throne," the "Son of Man" will distinguish them by their works of mercy. The reference to the separation of the Sheep and Goats needs to be considered within both its literary and historical contexts. The explanations for the terminology are varied. Some scholars suggest that during the first century in Israel and surrounding areas it was common for sheep and goats to graze together during the day. However, at night they were separated to protect the latter from the cool night air.[43] By the same token, sheep were seemingly more valuable than goats, perhaps accounting for their more favored status in Matthew 25:31-46. The sheep placed at the right hand of the Lord assume the place of honor, as demonstrated by Psalm 110:1:[44]

> The Lord says to my lord:
> "Sit at my right hand
> until I make your enemies
> a footstool for your feet."[45]

Luz, by contrast, claims that the symbolism of the separation of the sheep and the goat is more gruesome, referring to the removal of the male goats for slaughter.[46]

Verse 34

Although there were implicit associations with royalty, in Matthew 25:34 there is a distinct shift from the "Son of Man" to actual **"**king," which has generated scholarly

[42] Matt 24:14
[43]Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 356
[44]Evans, *Matthew: New Cambridge Bible Commentary*, 423; Samuel Lachs, 393
[45] Ps 110:1
[46] Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, 276

discussion. Daniel Harrington states that this is the evangelist's continuation of the theme of "sovereignty" from earlier in Matthew, beginning with the genealogy and birth of Jesus as the Messiah:

> After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.[47]

Now, at this ultimate juncture, Matthew portrays Jesus himself in his full glory as king, Messiah, "the Son of Man," and judge of the eschatological court.

John Nolland also mentions the change from the term "Son of Man" to "King." Nolland, along with Luz, believes that the usage of the "glorious throne" in Matthew 25:31 and the clear linkage to Daniel 7 easily accounts for the transition.[48] But he also focuses on the variation between the "Son of Man" as a "shepherd" who separated his flock, rather than just the actions of a monarch. In this regard, Nolland elsewhere cites Ezekiel 37:24, that clearly connects the King to a shepherd. "My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decree."[49]

Even with this linkage to Ezekiel 37:24, the transition from shepherd to king seems sudden to some commentators. However, Nolland claims that the move from the "Son of Man" to the King would have to be "abrupt," because of Matthew 13:41, which he claims has a similar dynamic. "The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil."[50]

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[47] Matt 2:1-2
[48] Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew – A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 1027
[49] Ezek 37:24
[50] Matt 13:41

Another point of interest to Nolland is the usage of "my Father." Normally, in a hereditary dynasty, kings do not have living fathers.[51] Nolland questions whether the relationship of Jesus as "Son" to the "Father" is challenging this point.[52] When compared with the language of Matthew 16:27, it appears that the relationship of God the Father to the "Son of Man" is unexpected. Significantly, the paternal imagery would seem to verify that Jesus is identifying himself with the "Son of Man" (=Son of God) who acts on behalf of the Deity, the (obviously living) Father.

The "Son of Man" who is the King and the Judge will determine who can enter the Kingdom of Heaven.[53] It is the people who have benevolently treated those who have accepted Jesus' proclamation - - - i.e. the Restored community - - -that will "inherit the kingdom of Heaven."[54] Craig Evans has stated that Jesus' Kingdom announcement was only for the lost sheep of Israel:[55] " Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel."[56] Unexpectedly, in the Final Judgement scene, the announcement pertains to everyone (even the Gentiles).

Ulrich Luz focuses on the terms "prepared for you from the time that the world began."[57] According to Jewish tradition, the elements of salvation were preexistent.[58] However, Luz claims that the verse 25:34 implies an early Christian belief of predestination.

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[51]Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew – A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 1027
[52] Ibid.
[53] Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 356
[54] Matthew 25:34
[55] Evans, *Matthew: New Cambridge Bible Commentary*, 423
[56] Matt 10:6
[57] Matt 25:34
[58] Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, 278

Verses 35-39 and 42-45

These crucial verses present the unexpected criteria of Judgement. The people who have fulfilled this requirement will receive eternal life and inherit the Kingdom of Heaven.[59] The people who have failed to fulfill their responsibility will suffer in eternal torment and misery.[60] The verdicts are in the past-tense, which helps to prompt the audience to examine their present life already under divine consideration.[61] According to verses 35-39, the Son of Man's judgement is hardly based on membership in the church, but rather the deeds of mercy and love towards the disadvantaged. Samuel Lachs cites pertinent Old Testament verses that urged deeds of mercy towards fellow Israelites.

> Is it not to share your food with the hungry
> and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
> when you see the naked, to clothe them,
> and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?[62]

> If you see your fellow Israelite's ox or sheep straying, do not ignore it but be sure to take it back to its owner. If they do not live near you or if you do not know who owns it, take it home with you and keep it until they come looking for it. Then give it back. Do the same if you find their donkey or cloak or anything else, they have lost. Do not ignore it.[63]

Most of the charitable acts would have been familiar to a Jewish audience such as feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. In traditional Jewish texts the failure to perform the "acts of charity" could play an important role in the final judgement. However, later rabbinic discussion differentiated between "acts of charity" and just almsgiving. It is clear that the "act of charity" involved not only a donation of money but

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[59] Ibid.
[60] John P Meier, *The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church and Morality in the First Gospel*. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1979), 177
[61] Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, 278
[62] Isa 58:7
[63] Deut 22:1-3

also constituted the ethical behavior of the "whole person."[64] The "acts of charity" combined with the almsgiving formed what was known as "good works." These "act of charity" or works of charity were incumbent for the Jewish community, gaining more importance after the destruction of the temple.[65]

Curiously, the visiting of the prisoners is not normally associated with traditional Jewish Literature.[66] According to Ulrich Luz, the reference to visiting captives could show this element was of particular importance for early Christianity.[67] John Nolland likewise claims that the third stipulation of welcoming a stranger and sixth of visiting a prisoner, were rare within Jewish practice. It is intriguing that these two elements alone can be found in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews 13:2-3, purportedly addressed to a Jewish audience.[68]

> Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.[69]

Nolland claims that the other elements such as feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, clothing the naked and helping the sick were the universally accepted basic needs of life.[70] However, welcoming strangers and visiting prisoners were acts of kindness towards individuals suffering from community isolation. Nolland further emphasizes that Matthew 25:42 offers the same criteria found earlier in the Final Judgement scene of the

[64] Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, 278
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew – A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 1029
[69] Heb 13:2-3
[70] Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew – A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 1029

blessed. But now this criterion becomes the charge. The people who failed to fulfil the will of God will face the consequences.

These verses reveal that anyone who performs these works of mercy to the unfortunate would have done so to the "Son of Man," and by extension to Jesus the Messiah, who is identified with the former. At this surprising disclosure, both the sheep and the goats question their Judge saying, "When was it that we have encountered you?"

The response is of vital importance. The Judge exclaims: "Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."[71] The claim here is that the exalted "Son of Man," the King, and the Judge of the World had suffered with, and even as, the poor and disadvantaged. Significantly, this shocking self-identification of the "Son of Man" and the disadvantaged is seemingly only made known here in the final judgement.

Verse 40

The question as to the reference to "the least of these" receives different answers from scholars. In earlier Matthean passages, the "least of these" appear to be Christians. If the "least of these" are in fact the Christians in Matthew 25:40, then according to Harrington, this means that Jesus or the "Son of Man" is identifying himself with members of the largely Gentile community that would form the church, in contrast to the non-Jewish peoples now gathered for judgement.[72]

Yet, another interpretation is that the "least of these" are the metaphorical "family members" of Jesus.[73] Nolland uses Matthew 12:48-50 in support: "He replied to him,

[71] Matt 25:39
[72] Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 357
[73] Evans, *Matthew: New Cambridge Bible Commentary*, 423

`Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' Pointing to his disciples, he said, `Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'[74] . The implication drawn by Nolland is that deeds of mercy and love offered to the "least of these" (i.e. towards Jesus' extended family represented by his followers) are done towards him.

Ulrich Luz claims that Matthew 25:40 is the most decisive statement within Matthew 25:31-46. Somewhat similar to Nolland's stance, Luz says that within the Christian Community the "least of these" would most likely be considered the members of the Christian Church, but are specifically, the ones who actually do the will of the Father.[75] The "least of these" will also be used as evidence for universal judgement, including upon Christians.[76]

It is important to consider that deeds of mercy done to the poor, while an important duty, were not normally considered to have been of world-shaking note. On the other hand, deeds done to a ruler were of great attention. As Nolland stresses, Jesus' self-identification with the poor and needy show that seemingly insignificant actions had actually served the King or Lord.[77] To honor the least is to give praise to the Greatest!

Verse 41

Verse 41 plays a vital role in the judgement of the "goats". The goats are to depart the Lord and go into Gehenna (eternal fire). Due to their failure to provide works of mercy and love to the "least of these" they are to suffer eternal torment.[78] What is ironic

[74] Matt 12:48-50
[75] Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, 279
[76] Luz, 281
[77] Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew – A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 1031
[78] Witherington*, Matthew*, 467

is the fact that the "goats" also called Jesus "Son of Man" or "Lord." This makes their failure to perform the "acts of charity" or mercy more odious, demonstrating that faith without virtue is empty.

According to Ulrich Luz, this passage is very similar to that of Matthew 25:34, although the evangelist does not state that the eternal fire had been prepared from the creation of the world: God had not created his people for destruction.[79] But references to an eternal fire are found elsewhere in Matthew. However, this is the first time that it is asserted that the eternal fire had been prepared for the devil and his angels.[80]

John Nolland also noted the similarity between Matthew 25:41 and Jesus' warning in Matthew 13:39-40:

> If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.[81]

Verse 46

Here, is a specification of the purpose of eternal reward or punishment. The actual emphasis is not on how the saved and punished will spend their eternity, but as Luz notes, rather these destinations represent the consequences of their ethical actions.[82] Verse 46 shows that the time of warning had long passed. The eschatological judge has placed his judgement on the world, and its conduct of life, and the verdict is final.

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[79] Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*,282
[80] Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew – A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 1033
[81] Matt 18:8-9
[82] Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, 282

General Interpretations of Matthew 25:31-46

Let us now turn to a summary of the different views of the parable. Daniel Harrington acknowledges that his largely theological interpretation of Matthew 25:31-46 is often rejected by other scholars. He claims that the Gentiles are the ones to be judged.[83] The Gentiles are to be gathered before the "Son of Man" and are to be evaluated by him according to the subsequent criterion, in a process separate from others. He references Matthew 19:28 as his textual evidence.[84] In this passage, it appears that the disciples will have a special place in the judgement of the twelve tribes of Israel. However, within Matthew 25:31-46 the disciples are not mentioned as any part of the world judgement of the Gentiles by the "Son of Man," suggesting their absence from this event.

A separate judgement for the Jews and Gentiles is also implied by Paul in Romans 2:9-10. "There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile."[85] The assumed Matthean judgement of the Gentiles indicates the presence of non-Jews who are non-Christians, that nevertheless will be allowed to enter the Kingdom of Heaven at their particular assize.

Ben Witherington claims that Matthew 25:31-46 can be considered an apocalyptic prophecy, [86] presented in both a poetic and parabolic form.[87] Early within the judgement scene appears the "parable of the sheep and the goats" representing the different people in

[83] Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 358
[84] Ibid.
[85] Rom 2:9-10
[86] Witherington*, Matthew*, 468
[87] Ibid.

a genre typical of Jesus' teaching. However, the final judgement scene is unique to Matthew, but clearly influenced by Jewish apocalyptic thought.

Ulrich Luz claims that the eschatological discourse is well-suited to Matthean theology. In contrast to Harrington, Luz avers that there will only be one judgement.[88] The judgement of the "Son of Man," will be universal and standard. For Luz, Matthew warns that not only will all of humanity be accountable before the Judge, but also the Church. The Matthean judgement will regard all the peoples according to their actions.[89] Luz concludes that this "final instruction of Jesus" is itself a culmination of Matthean Christology: "The Risen Jesus is with his Church as `Immanuel' until the end of the World."[90] This scholar also asserts that if Jesus, the "Son of Man" identifies himself with the poor and unfortunate, one is summoned to pay heed to Jesus' own earthly, historical, life.[91]

According to Nicholas T. Wright, the final judgement is based upon merciful deeds. The criteria depend upon the way people have generally treated others, with Wright claiming that this scene entails Jesus denouncing his own people for their failure to do the will of God.[92] However, Wright adds that a part of the decision is also based upon how the people had treated the renewed Israel.

John Nolland would not ascribe Matthew 25:31-46 as parabolic, although it centers around a comparison of a shepherd and his flock. Importantly, though this shepherd is the exalted "Son of Man" and King who will conduct the eschatological

[88] Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, 282
[89] Ibid., 282
[90] Ibid., 283
[91] Ibid., 283
[92] Wright*, Matthew for Everyone: Part 2 – Chapters 16-28*, 142

judgement.[93] Nolland interestingly speculates that if the people on the left had known that they would have been serving the King, they would have acted differently.[94] To Nolland, Matthew seems to have pieced together numerous verses from the Old Testament in the composition of this unit. Nolland also opines that if Matthew 25:31-32 and Matthew 25:34 were "missing," than the stress would have been focused on God's judgement of Israel alone.[95]

John Meier believes that even though Matthew 25:31-46 contains parabolic elements, it is meant to be a literal representation of the final judgement upon all the peoples of the earth, with the criteria being of the harshest nature.[96] In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus is not only identified as the "Son of Man," the King, Judge, but most tellingly, the "least of these." The "Son of Man" will treat both the good and the evil based upon their actions, which are ultimately- - - and unknowingly- - - directed towards him, the Exalted Ruler. Meier concludes that, "the Final Judgement scene makes clear the ultimate reason for the designation `just'; the ultimate reason for the command to show mercy, is a Christological reason: all is centered on the person of Christ as the "Son of Man."[97]

The Final Judgement in Matthew is unique to this source, and there are no parallels within the Gospels of Luke, Mark, and John. Walck, points out that in Matthew 25:31-46 the "Son of Man" is portrayed in not only an eschatological role but a legal one

[93] Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew – A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 1035
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid.
[96] John P Meier, *The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church and Morality in the First Gospel*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1979), 177
[97] Meier, *The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church and Morality in the First Gospel*, 178

as judge,[98] whose assessment is based on mercy to the poor and needy. The scene of the Final Judgement in Matthew presents important themes and characteristics surrounding contemporary and later theological speculation surrounding the "Son of Man."[99]

Modern scholars and theologians differ on details pertaining to the parties under judgment, e.g. whether they represent humanity as a whole, the Gentiles, or the church. They agree that the criteria for their assessment is their ethical conduct. However, some commentators see the acts of charity or the failure to do

them as being directed towards the poor and disenfranchised, without qualification.

It must be added, though, that others identify the "least of these" as the "church," with opinion divided between whether they are Gentile Christians; or parties identified as Jesus' metaphorical "family"- - - presumably Jewish individuals who followed him; or the "restored Israel" as a whole. In the latter case, that would presumably indicate the community gathered around Jesus and his Kingdom announcement.

But let us now return to our earlier inquiry: how would Matthew 25: 31-46 have been heard and processed by Jesus' First Century contemporaries?

[98] Leslie W Walck, The Son of Man Parable in Enoch and Matthew (London: T & T Clark, 2013), 194
[99] Ibid., 215

Chapter 3

Matthew 25:31-46 within First Century Israel

First Century Israel (Second Temple Judaism) and the Return from Exile

The Gospel of Matthew was clearly influenced by the beliefs and traditions of Second Temple Judaism. Technically, the Second Temple period lasted for almost six hundred years, beginning with the rebuilding of the Holy Sanctuary in Jerusalem during the Persian Period, and ending with the destruction of the shrine by the Romans in 70 CE.[100] However, most scholars would further apply this designation to the time from the renovation of the Temple by Herod the Great and its loss as a result of the First Jewish Revolt. Jesus' teaching is within this more abbreviated historical context**.**

The Jews of Second Temple Judaism regarded themselves as being partners in an unfolding series of covenants with their one God,[101] which had been revealed, and renewed, at decisive moments in their history.[102] However, the essence of this arrangement- - - portrayed as a "treaty" between an overlord and his vassals/servants- - - was consistent, and centered around the belief that Israel was intended to be the agent by which the one and only God, the Creator of the world, would bring meaningful order to Creation. In other words, Israel was chosen to be God's representative on earth. Inasmuch as this pointed to Israel's unique selection, the breaking of these pacts would be regarded as having dire, tangible consequences.

Within the Biblical narrative, the plan for Israel had gone wrong, due to its rebellion against its divine ruler by breaking his ordinances. The immediate result was

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[100] Charles Freeman, *A New History of Early Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, Cop, 2011), 9
[101] Gen 1:28-30, 9:1-7, 12-17; Exod 20:2-17; 2 Sam 7
[102] Freeman, *New History of Early Christianity*, 10

that the tribes of Israel had been deported and held captive in the pagan world, just as the covenantal curses at the end of the Book of Deuteronomy had warned. Israel had returned to its homeland, following its release by the Persians from Babylonian Captivity in the Sixth Century BCE, but after a brief period of political autonomy under the Maccabeans, it was now under the control of the Roman Empire. To the Jews of First Century Israel, they were strangers within their own country, essentially still in Exile: restoration and rescue from paganism was of the upmost importance.

Repentance and forgiveness were central to the belief in Scriptural prophecies, that in a great eschatological event, God Himself would return to Zion, decisively reveal his kingship, and rescue the Jews in their alienation. Once God had fulfilled this promise, Israel would sit on his right-hand, restored to the covenantal role and vocation that had been intended for it from the beginning. This language of "God becoming king," or "the coming of the Kingdom" encapsulated Jewish expectations of Restoration from Exile during this time.

Since the Jews believed that God had given them his word through the Torah, often translated as "the Law," some groups during this period of both anxiety and anticipation, held that strict adherence to divine instruction would be crucial in their being rescued from their enemies.[103] Thus, the Essenes- - - a Jewish community associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls- - - believed that intensification of Torah, was an essential preparation for Restoration. Torah was to be reinforced by adhering to the Essenes' strict interpretation of the covenantal laws of the Old Testament. An example

[103] Nicholas T Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press,1992), 221

of Essene belief was its stark discrimination against those who were sick and disfigured, based upon Leviticus 21, that any man with a blemish of any form cannot approach the altar of the Lord.[104]

In a similar fashion, the reforming Pharisees believed that through the "old/ancient traditions**"** they would help create the conditions for deliverance from their present oppression**.**[105] The 'old traditions" would be represented by their following OT holiness codes, geared towards cleanliness and purity that separated the Jews from the Gentiles.[106] N. T. Wright boiled such attitudes down to this formulation : "Israel's God must become king, and rule or judge the nation; at that time, those who remain faithful to this God and his Torah will be vindicated."[107]

Another important aspect of these Restoration expectations surrounded the Temple. To the Jews, the Temple was not only the most important symbol within Second Temple Judaism, but it was regarded as the "center" of the world. For many First Century Jews, the divine presence was believed to have resided within the shrine, with the sanctuary being the sacrificial center of their faith.[108] It was the place where heaven and earth physically met. In order for one to be spiritually and physically close to their conventual God, the Jews maintained a bond to the Temple.[109]

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[104] Lev 21:18-24
[105] Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 222
[106] Lev 5:2-3, 7:19-21, 11:24-47
[107] Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 222
[108] Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 406
[109] Ibid., 407

But if the temple in Jerusalem was the holiest of all places for most Jews, it was also the cause of great controversy for others.[110] The Essenes were opposed ideologically to the "present temple" because it was run by heretical individuals (Herodians and Hasmoneans). Additionally, the Essenes believed that the current structure needed to be 'destroyed' in order for Israel to 'return from exile,' and for God to return to Zion.[111] Some of the lower classes saw the temple as a symbol of subjugation and oppression by the rich elites who were collaborating with the occupying Romans. Some of the Pharisees would even claim that the blessings that would normally come from the Temple could be obtained instead through the study and observance of Torah.[112]

The reality for the Jews of First Century Israel was that although they were back in their land, they were living under the control of foreign rulers, even as their culture was heavily impacted by Hellenistic beliefs and practices. The Jews of First Century Israel believed that they were culturally, politically and religiously under siege. Moreover, they were separated from their true role and vocation as unique witnesses to God's covenant.

Through sources from the Second Temple Period, there are indications that some believed that the time for the end of Israel's exile was at hand, based on their readings of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and other prophets.[113] According to these authoritative figures, Israel would return from exile and their temple would be rebuilt properly. The God of Israel would show himself decisively to be King of the world and fulfill his promise by

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[110]James Hamilton Charlesworth, *Jesus and Temple: Textual and Archaeological Explorations* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, Cop, 2014), 148
[111] Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 416
[112] Ibid., 412
[113] Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 301

dramatically changing the current situation in Israel, through the restoration of the temple and land.

Thus, Restoration Eschatology revolved around three crucial symbols, the Torah, territory and temple. Additionally, there was intense speculation regarding the means of such restoration, which would become centered around an "anointed" figure- - - whom the prophets titled a "messiah" or in Greek, *christos*.

Jesus' programmatic announcement that the `the Kingdom of Heaven had come near/upon you,' along with other language and actions, fits within Jewish expectations about the "return from Exile," but also would challenge them, as would his own proclamation about his role in this ensuing drama.

Jesus the Nazarene and His Kingdom Announcement

One of the characteristics of Jesus, that is often overlooked, was the fact that he was clearly a Jew of the Second Temple Period. Jesus not only lived in First Century Israel, he actively preached and ministered throughout Galilee and her surrounding area. Jesus began his public ministry after the imprisonment and death of John the Baptist. Jesus proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven, and His kingdom announcement challenged some of the beliefs of Second Temple Judaism.[114]

A significant characteristic of Jesus' message is his associating it with a figure called "the Son of Man." The New Testament shows that Jesus' usage of the term "the Son of Man" was self-referential and linked to his messianic mission in the coming of the

[114] James D. G. Dunn, *A New Perspective on Jesus: What the Quest for Historical Jesus Missed* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2005), 76

Kingdom of Heaven. However, Jesus' Kingdom announcement would in keyways, present a different view of restoration eschatology. For now, the most obvious is that his "eschatology" did not mean the physical "end of the world," as is popularly understood by modern audiences, but rather the saving and rejuvenation of Israel, by the ending of the old age of exile and the fulfillment of the promise of Restoration.[115]

Some scholars have offered that Jesus demonstrated that this Restoration was now coming to its fulfillment through three highly charged events centered around the Passover celebration: his entry into Jerusalem, his actions in the Temple, and by his performance of the Last Supper. Up until his entry into Jerusalem, the Gospels claim that Jesus' messianic identity, while assumed**,** had only been implied, or restricted to his closest followers. On "Palm Sunday," when Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem on a donkey, he was explicitly declaring that he was indeed the long-awaited Messiah.

A few important details need to be mentioned about Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem. Normally Jewish pilgrims would enter the city of Jerusalem by foot.[116] While Jesus had never been portrayed riding on an animal throughout the rest of the Gospels, it can be concluded that Jesus' choice to ride on a donkey into Jerusalem was deliberate, and it was meant to clearly evoke a messianic prophecy from Zechariah.

> Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.[117]

[115] Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 279
[116] Curtis Mitch and Edward P Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2015), 266
[117] Zech 9:9

Other pilgrims into Jerusalem, mainly his followers, or disciples, went to greet him with the branches of palm trees. The use of palm tree branches was traditionally reserved for the welcoming of a king.[118] Some in the crowds that were gathering to witness this procession, well understood the implications of Jesus' manner of transport.[119] As Jesus approached the gates of Jerusalem, pilgrims begin to recite Psalm 118:25-26. "Lord, save us! Lord, grant us success! [26] Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. From the house of the Lord we bless you."[120] Not only was this Psalm typically reserved for processions to the temple for major feasts, such as the Passover, but it had messianic and Restoration associations.[121]

It is evident that Jesus's entry into Jerusalem with its royal overtones, presented a challenge to the Jewish authorities as well as to the Romans.[122] Jesus's provocative actions would likely warrant a response from the Temple Priests and the Roman officials.

After Jesus' royal entrance into the city, he goes to the Temple, where he again acts forcefully and deliberately. Jesus' "Temple action" has caused great debate amongst scholars. What were the intensions of Jesus? N. T. Wright's explanation has gained popularity: Jesus' overturning of the money-changers' tables and the driving out of the vendors from the shrine was symbolic of the Temple's imminent destruction. Jesus' deeds were prophetic, declaring that the temple was under threat, and the people of Israel

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[118] Jey Kanagaraj, *John: A New Covenant Commentary* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Lutterworth Press, 2013), 123-133
[119] Mitch, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 266
[120] Ps 118:25-26
[121] Mitch, *The Gospel of Matthew*,266
[122] J.F. Coakley, "Jesus' Messianic Entry into Jerusalem (John 12: 12—19 Par.)." *The Journal of Theological Studies*, New Series, 46, no. 2 (1995): 461-82, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23966002 (Accessed December 26, 2020)

needed to repent in the face of his Kingdom announcement.[123] The temple and all that it had signified in Second Temple Judaism was under divine judgement.

The third event, the "Last Supper," was where Jesus' Kingdom announcement reached its height. The meal over which he presided indicated that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand and it was happening through Jesus' agency.[124] The "new covenant" that Jesus proclaimed in the Upper Room at his Last Supper, refers to a restoration prophecy from Jeremiah 31:31-32:

> "The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord.

The Last Supper itself represented the new exodus, the new covenant, the arrival of the Kingdom on earth- - - the fulfillment of the Restoration promises- - - which Jesus deliberately links to his own end.[125] Jesus' actions and sayings at the Last Supper prophesied his death, but that through his death would be "the forgiveness of sins", i.e. Restoration.[126]

> Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."[127]

[123] Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 417
[124] Ibid., 557
[125] Ibid., 559
[126] Ibid., 560
[127] Matt 26:27-29

All three events- - - the "Triumphal Entry" into Jerusalem, the "Temple Action," and "the Last Supper"- - - were symbolic acts of prophecy, declaring that a- - - The- - - decisive point had been reached.[128] The divine return to Zion was about to take place, and the moment of judgement was at hand.

Eschatology and Judgement

As noted above, eschatology played an important role in the religious and social World of Second Temple Judaism and First Century Israel. Eschatology is generally defined as the "doctrine of the end things," or the "final destiny of humankind."[129] In some common views, this means that the current world, perfect or imperfect, just or unjust, will come to a literal physical end. The eschatological judge will appear to execute his final judgement on the world. During the First Century, some Jews did anticipate the coming of such a figure, encapsulated in the Restoration hope that God would return to Zion, and they (the Jews) would finally be rescued from their "exile." As we have seen, and which I shall discuss further below, in some thought, this individual was identified with "the Son of Man" who would come to judge the righteous and the unrighteous at "the end of the age."

There is little doubt that eschatological belief also provided a foundation for both Jewish and early Christian daily ethics.[130] Importantly, for some scholars a crucial aspect

[128] Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 417
[129] Jeannine Hill Fletcher, "Eschatology." In *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, edited by Fiorenza Francis Schüssler and Galvin John P. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2011), 621-652
[130] Johan Leemans, et al. *Reading Patristic Texts on Social Ethics Issues and Challenges for the Twenty-First Century*. (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 64-84

of Christianity's "eschatologically-shaped" ethos surrounded the issue of poverty and wealth:

> The link among eschatology, judgement, and the issue of wealth and poverty essentially takes the form of the vindication of the righteous and the condemnation of the wicked and is deeply rooted in the Jewish theological and cultural tradition of the "righteous poor" and "the wicked rich"[131]

The idea that God had concern for the poor is easily found in the Torah, in passages such as Deuteronomy 15:4: "But there will be no poor among you (for the Lord will bless you in the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance to possess)."[132] Within the ideal Israel, the divine intention was that there should be no wanting or unfortunates. During the period of Second Temple Judaism, this will be expressed in a dualistic fashion, where in apocryphal and pseudepigraphal literature one encounters the categories of the "righteous poor" and "wicked rich."[133] The care for the poor and needy is a central concern of the Book of Sirach:

> My son, deprive not the poor of his living,
> and do not keep needy eyes waiting.
> Do not grieve the one who is hungry,
> nor anger a man in want.
> Do not add to the troubles of an angry mind,
> nor delay your gift to a beggar.
> Do not reject an afflicted suppliant,
> nor turn your face away from the poor.
> Do not avert your eye from the needy,
> nor give a man occasion to curse you;
> for if in bitterness of soul he calls down a curse upon you,
> his Creator will hear his prayer.
> Make yourself beloved in the congregation;
> bow your head low to a great man.
> Incline your ear to the poor,

[131] Ibid.
[132] Deut 15:4
[133] Leemans, *Reading Patristic Texts on Social Ethics Issues and Challenges for the Twenty-First Century*, 64-84

and answer him peaceably and gently.
Deliver him who is wronged from the hand of the wrongdoer;
and do not be fainthearted in judging a case.
Be like a father to orphans,
and instead of a husband to their mother;
you will then be like a son of the Most High,
and he will love you more than does your mother.[134]

The treatment of the poor and unfortunate within the Old Testament and the Apocrypha will be become fused with eschatological beliefs of the Second Temple Period, and often expressed in "apocalyptic" terms of a clash between the poor and rich and God's judgement on the righteous and unrighteous.[135] Thus, the book of Jubilees predicts:

> And they shall strive one with another, the young with the old, and the old with the young, the poor with the rich, the lowly with the great, and the beggar with the prince, on account of the law and the covenant; for they have forgotten commandment, and covenant, and feasts, and months, and Sabbaths, and jubilees, and all judgments.[136]

This represents a common apocalyptic theme often named, the "reversal of earthly fortunes."[137] Notably, Jubilees- - - purportedly the revelation of God to Moses on Mt. Sinai- - - is highly dependent upon the much-earlier Book of Deuteronomy, containing a comparable emphasis on sin, repentance, future salvation and punishment.[138]

The conflict between rich and poor also appears in the apocalyptic Book of Enoch. Enoch has been attributed variously to Christian and Jewish authors of the First

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[134] Sir 4:1-10
[135] Leemans, *Reading Patristic Texts on Social Ethics Issues and Challenges for the Twenty-First Century*, 64-84
[136] Jubilees 23:19
[137] Leemans, *Reading Patristic Texts on Social Ethics Issues and Challenges for the Twenty-First Century*, 64-84
[138] George W.E. Nickelsburg, "Early Jewish Literature" in The Anchor Bible Dictionary (New York, Doubleday, 1992), 579-594

Century, but consistent with other texts the righteous are among those who are oppressed, persecuted, abused and robbed. On the other hand, the wicked are the rich and strong, with the Maccabees or Sadducees, being assigned such a negative role by commentators.[139] Curiously, the Book of Enoch does not explicitly claim the poor are among the righteous, but their inclusion is implied, because the rich are clearly denoted as the wicked. In some scholars' interpretation, the poor are the righteous because they are "the helpless and precarious victims of the very socio-economic exploitation and injustice by the rich and powerful sinners who prosper and enjoy this life,"[140] with the latter being "doomed to destruction on the Day of Judgement."[141]

It must be stated that although the early Christians did not see themselves exclusively as "the poor," some of them did belong to such a socio-economic category. More importantly, Christians sources show concern over the oppression and ill-treatment of the needy from the rich and powerful.[142] This was coupled with the belief that the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven had dawned through Jesus' death on the cross, and their faith that he had been raised from the dead and had been exalted to eschatological judge.

Throughout the New Testament, more precisely within the Gospels, Jesus' moral and ethical treatment of the poor provided both an example and imperative for the community's social behavior. As we shall see, the eschatological scene of Matthew 25:31-46 where Jesus shockingly associates himself with the disenfranchised, would

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[139] Leemans, *Reading Patristic Texts on Social Ethics Issues and Challenges for the Twenty-First Century*, 64-84
[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Ibid.

subsequently become something of a marker for the church's subsequent identity and call: "And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.' [143]

Yet even as poverty and wealth were important in the early church, it is curious that in Matthew 25, neither the objects of judgement, "the sheep" and "goats," are outrightly commended for their poverty, or condemned for their wealth. The "righteous poor" and the "wicked rich," while certainly categories of praise or aspersion, are conspicuously absent in the parable.

Restoration Eschatology and Messiahship within First Century Israel

During Second Temple Judaism, "the return from exile" meant, and was often expressed by the familiar phrase, "the forgiveness of sins." To the Jews of First Century Israel, the foundation story for such forgiveness was the Exodus from Egypt. Celebrated every year during Passover, the Exodus was politically, socially and religiously central to Israel. It was part of the "Jewish metanarrative,"[144] where the people had been rescued from bondage to pharaoh; given their freedom and vocation from the One God, Creator, and Ruler of the cosmos; and led through the Wilderness to the Promised Land to live as his unique nation. The kingdom/restoration language that was used within Second Temple Judaism, and which would underpin Jesus' message, evoked this miraculous event of "God becoming King" as he had done at Sinai.[145]

Many of Second Temple Jews further held that the longed-for "deliverance" would come after an intense period suffering, soul-searching, and penitence. In spite of

[143] Matt 25:40
[144] Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 577
[145] Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 202-203

their position as "the chosen people," they were a nation of sinners:[146] they had forsaken their God, by breaking his covenant with them**,** accounting for their present state of exile. This notion can be seen through numerous sacrifices and festivals centered around repentance and pardon.[147] Another important aspect of this belief is the separation of time between the present age and the future age.[148] The present age of exile was the age of pain and suffering; the future age was that of deliverance and forgiveness, sometimes understood as being marked by the making of a "new covenant" that was prophesied in Jeremiah.[149]

Jesus' presentation of restoration eschatology, while containing these elements, will differ from others' expectations in crucial details, which we can only summarize briefly.

As I have stressed, many people in Second Temple Judaism believed that they were indeed still living in exile,[150] due to Israel's disloyalty to God, and consequently falling prey to idolatry and paganism**.**[151] Yet while these dynamics were often expressed in nationalistic terms of both outside occupation, as well as the hopes for political liberation, there was among certain groups the conviction that a much more profound and overarching Evil had taken root, whose origin was not Roman, but demonic. In this regard, according to N. T. Wright, Jesus of Nazareth would identify the true enemy as The Satan. It was this apocalyptic conflict against the Ultimate Evil (the Satan) that Jesus

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[146] See Judg 10-16
[147] Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 278
[148] Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 299
[149] Jer 31:31-34
[150] Nicholas T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 445; Nicholas T Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 268-272
[151] Nicholas T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 446

would seek to undertake.[152] Wright states that, "Jesus was fighting Israel's real battle by challenging Israel's idolatrous nationalism."[153] Only by defeating the apocalyptic foe, who was misleading the nation away from its divine commission, could true restoration be accomplished, and God's ultimate rule be revealed. Accordingly, Wright claims that Jesus' "prophetic kingdom announcement" broadly corresponded to contemporary expectations but differed significantly in nuance and manner of execution.

For Wright, there is a very high degree of historical probability, that Jesus saw himself as the Messiah who was leading the people of Israel out of exile. Wright notes that Jewish expectations of, and about the Messiah ran across a broad spectrum, with the picture of a king being the most dominant.[154] There is little question that the followers of Jesus asserted that he was the long-awaited Messiah, both during his lifetime and after his death, bolstered by their belief in the Resurrection. Indeed, Jesus' death on the cross in Jerusalem, and faith in the Resurrection would themselves be the signs that God had returned to Zion and had revealed his Kingly rule through the defeat of the Ultimate Enemy (Satan/sin/death).

By extension, Jesus proclaimed that his disciples were in fact, the "returned from exile" people.[155] They were the members of the New Covenant[156] that had been forgiven and welcomed by God (restored) as revealed by Jesus' words and deeds. Subsequently, the followers of Jesus were to go and make known this Restoration, (i.e. the arrival of the

[152] Ibid., 446-449
[153] Ibid., 462
[154] Ibid., 483
[155] Ibid., 444
[156] Jer 31:31-32; Matt 26:26-28

kingdom in and as and through Jesus of Nazareth) , to the world, with them being the eschatological community promised in the scriptures, inviting others to join them.[157]

A crucial aspect in this is the make-up of this group, which was composed of figures that were held in disdain by the elites, including "tax-collectors," women, individuals healed of disease (e.g. lepers), and those from whom Jesus had reputedly cast out demons. Similarly, the suspicion and hostility expressed towards Jesus for his association with such parties, his pronouncement of the "forgiveness of sins/restoration from Exile"- - - a privilege accorded only to God- - - as well as the reality of his shameful death on the cross hardly comported with the usual messianic expectations.

As I have hinted above, and to which the previous statement points, the characteristics of Jesus' followers, leads us to consider the group-identification in Matthew 25, and how these parties would have been regarded by those who had first heard Jesus' prophetic parable. Moreover, Jesus' own startling self-presentation has implications for understanding the figure of the "Son of Man" in these passages.

The Beatitudes and the Curses in the Book of Deuteronomy

The Beatitudes

Jesus' terminology in Matthew 25 strikes a chord for close readers of the gospel. The designation of the set-upon groups evokes earlier language from one of the most prominent discourses in the book, the Sermon on the Mount. Located towards the beginning of the Gospel, the aim of Jesus' instruction was to reveal" the ethics of the

[157] Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 444; Jer 31:31-34

Kingdom," by which disciples of Jesus were supposed to live.[158] While sometimes regarded as simply guidelines to a humble and righteous life, Jesus' teaching is eschatological in its aim and scope: this is the community of "the End Times," who recognize that "God was becoming king," as Jesus was now proclaiming. The eschatological blessings that are found within Matthew 5:1-12 further use phrasing from a passage in the prophet Isaiah, that was seen as having both Restoration and messianic overtones.[159]

> The Spirit of the Lord GOD *is* upon Me,
> Because the LORD has anointed Me
> To preach good tidings to the poor;
> He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,
> To proclaim liberty to the captives,
> And the opening of the prison to *those who are* bound.[160]

> And they shall rebuild the old ruins,
> They shall raise up the former desolations,
> And they shall repair the ruined cities,
> The desolations of many generations.[161]

These eschatological blessings promise salvation at the disclosure of God's Judgement.[162] Those who respond correctly to the Will of God/kingdom announcement will receive reward, those who ignore what Jesus had preached will be condemned; with the identity of these parties not restricted to one's ethnic background (although the audience is overwhelming depicted as contemporary Jews), but ethical behavior.[163]

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[158] "The Beatitudes of Jesus." *The Biblical World* 22, no. 2 (1903): 83-87, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3140896 (Accessed December 26, 2020.)
[159] Isa 61
[160] Isa 61:1
[161] Isa 61:4
[162] Jeffery A. Gibbs, *Jerusalem and Parousia: Jesus' Eschatological Discourse in Matthew's Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Pub. House, 2001), 53
[163] Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 371

Jesus' "kingdom-announcement"- - - elsewhere captured in the term, "the gospel"- - - provides the context for the Sermon on the Mount.[164] Importantly, the Beatitudes immediately follow Jesus' programmatic declaration, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."[165] It is clear, that for Matthew, the Beatitudes are a continuation of Jesus' announcement, and redefine for his followers what this Kingdom of Heaven is.[166] In effect, the Beatitudes are a guideline to the "true heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven,"[167] providing the attributes and characteristics of the members of the Community of Restoration, which Jesus was gathering around him.[168]

In significant ways, the ethics taught by Jesus were different from traditional viewpoints of the time, especially in his radical heightening of Torah.[169] Moreover, the Kingdom of Heaven in the Gospel of Matthew is something of a "future reality,"[170] with its eschatological stress. As the Sermon on the Mount progresses, there are warnings against false prophets who will arise, culminating with the pronouncement of the Final Judgement in Matthew 7:21, anticipating similar dynamics in Matthew 25.[171] "Not

[164] Gibbs, *Jerusalem and Parousia: Jesus' Eschatological Discourse in Matthew's Gospel,* 56
[165] Matt 4:17
[166] Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew – A Commentary on the Greek Text* , 196
[167] Günther Bornkamm, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (London: Scm Press, 1982), 60
[168] Dan Lion, "A Comparative Analysis of Psalm 1 and the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-12." *Conspectus: The Journal of the South African Theological Seminary*, vol. 22, no. 9, pp. 141–182, September 1, 2016), 159
[169] Ibid., 160
[170] David Wenham, "Eschatology in the Making. Mark, Matthew and the Didache." *Journal of Theological Studies* 49, no. 2 (10, 1998): 746-749. http://ezproxy.rowan.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Feschatology-making-mark-matthew-didache%2Fdocview%2F203276732%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D13605 (Accessed January 17, 2020)
[171] Ibid

everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."[172]

Importantly, one can detect real parallels between The Beatitudes and some of the features of the Judgement scene in Matthew 25:31-46. There, the Final Judgement is based upon charity to "the least of these," an act which clearly represents the "doing of the Father in heaven's will." Those that had shown mercy are eternally blessed, while those who failed to render benevolence suffer in the torments of eternal fire.[173] In the Sermon on the Mount, the same sentiments are evident. Those who are merciful "shall obtain mercy,"[174] while those who are merciless "shall have no reward from your Father who is in heaven."[175]

Table 3

Matthew's Final Judgement and the Beatitudes

The Final Judgement (Matt 25:31-46)	**The Beatitudes (Matt 5-6)**
"Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord when did we thee hungry and feed thee…"	"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven."
"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink"	"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied"
Come, O Blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for from the foundation of the world"	"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy"

[172] Matt 7:21
[173] Matt 25:31-46
[174] Matt 5:7
[175] Matt 6:1

The Final Judgement (Matt 25:31-46)	The Beatitudes (Matt 5-6)
"Then they also will answer, "Lord when did we nor see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or in prison, and did not minister to thee?"	"Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven."

Ironically, Matthew 6:25-26 provides a clearer understanding of the position of "the least of these" that is seen in Matthew 25:31-46.

> Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?[176]

This passage does not explicitly link Jesus to the sufferings of "the least of these," but rather it clarifies that the heavenly Father's patronage is extended to those humble members of the Restored Community.

I would make two brief observations, the second of which I will address more extensively below. Matthew 5-6 and Matthew 25:31-46 prize the giving of charity. The exhibition of mercy towards others is a prime marker of belonging to Jesus' group. The second point is that we should note the terminology of the members of this eschatological community, e.g. the hungry, thirsty, the persecuted. While undoubtedly taken literally at times in the later church, as we shall see, the phrasing was loaded: these are categories of people regarded as alienated and rejected. These conditions would be more associated with "cursing" than a state of "blessedness." Jesus' benediction to these parties was

[176] Matt 6:25-26

jolting, even as we should draw the inference that it is these looked down upon groups that made up the Restoration community. This leads me to examine other parallels in Old Testament covenantal materials.

The Curses in the Book of Deuteronomy

Scholars have noticed that there are linkages between the Sermon on the Mount and descriptions of the Mosaic covenants in the Pentateuch. The Beatitudes evoke the blessings of Deuteronomy 28 for maintaining God's covenant (28:1-14), which ranged from prosperity in the city to the protection from one's enemies. However, Deuteronomy then lists typical covenantal curses (28:15-68) that would visit those who would break the pact. It is astounding to see the enormous difference in the length of blessings as compared to the curses.[177] What needs to be stressed is the resemblance of the Old Testament curses to the description of the needy parties in Matthew 25:31-46. Importantly, the maladies- - - and those suffering therefrom- - - in Deuteronomy, are the results of divine disfavor. That is, if Israel were to break its covenantal obligation, it would be overwhelmed by the calamities listed by Moses. Therefore, the curses in Deuteronomy have a negative connotation as compared to the seemingly positive title, "the least of these" in Matthew 25:31-46, who are nevertheless described in similar language.

[177] *The Navarre Bible, Pentateuch.* edited by James Gavigan et al. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999), 767

Table 4

Matthew's unfortunates and the Curses in Deuteronomy

Gospel of Matthew	The Book of Deuteronomy
I was sick and you visited me. (25:36)	The Lord will smite you with consumption, and with fever, inflammation, and fiery heat, and with drought, and with blasting, and with mildew; they shall pursue you until you perish. (28:22)
I was thirsty and you gave me drink (25:35)	The Lord will smite you with the boils of Egypt, and with the ulcers and the scurvy and the itch, of which you cannot be healed. The Lord will smite you with madness and blindness and confusion of mind; (28:27-28)
	The Lord will smite you on the knees and on the legs with grievous boils of which you cannot be healed, from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head. (28:35)
	And he will bring upon you again all the diseases of Egypt, which you were afraid of; and they shall cleave to you. Every sickness also, and every affliction which is not recorded in the book of this law, the LORD will bring upon you, until you are destroyed. (28:60-61)
	You shall plant vineyards and dress them, but you shall neither drink of the wine nor gather the grapes; for the worm shall eat them. (28:39)

Gospel of Matthew	The Book of Deuteronomy
I was hungry and you gave me food (25:35)	Your ox shall be slain before your eyes, and you shall not eat of it; your ass shall be violently taken away before your face, and shall not be restored to you; your sheep shall be given to your enemies, and there shall be no one to help you. (28:31)
	A nation which you have not known shall eat up the fruit of your ground and of all your labors; and you shall be only oppressed and crushed continually (28:33)
	You shall carry much seed into the field and shall gather little in; for the locust shall consume it. (28:38)
I was a stranger and you welcomed me (25:35)	"The Lord will bring you, and your king whom you set over you, to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known; and there you shall serve other gods, of wood and stone. (28:36)

The acts of charity in Matthew 25 would seem to reverse the curses in the Book of Deuteronomy**.** That is, despite the condition of the suffering parties, the "sheep" acted to alleviate their distress, even though such a state would seem to demonstrate the recipients of such care had been rejected by God, e.g. they were those living under curse.

By contrast, in Matthew 25:41-46 individuals who showed no mercy to those who were "hungry, thirsty, naked and sick"- - - **i**.e. those whom they regarded as deserving divine disfavor- - - are relegated to the "eternal fire that was prepared for the Devil and his angels."[178]

What are we to make of this, that the Old Testament curses are similar to the sufferings of "the least of these" in Matthew 25:31-46**?**

[178] Matt 25:41

On the one hand, there is little question that in Deuteronomy, the conditions are due to Israel's covenantal breach. But importantly, the terrible language is directed not just to individuals: to hunger, thirst, suffer exposure, alienation, captivity, are indicative of being in a *corporate state of Exile*. We see the same sort of language in the prophets, who declared that this condition of being under curse would be reversed when the promised Restoration is finally revealed. This is the very heart of Jesus' kingdom announcement. These groups are not just "the universally economically dispossessed," but refer to those longing for the fulfillment of eschatological hope. These are people who had been "in Exile," but had gathered around Jesus and his message.

In anticipation of my comments below, the goats had dismissed them without second thought. The startling aspect is that *from their point of view* they were justified in their attitude: such lowly and rejected parties could not be part of any Restoration; they could not be among the "forgiven," "welcomed."

The startling nature of this scene for a contemporary audience is further supported by the description of the Son of Man, and the expectations that surrounded this figure in Second Temple thought, along with the identification of the other characters in the parable.

Chapter 4

Examining the Identities of Matthew 25

Clearly, the Son of Man is the main "character" in Jesus' parable of judgement, and I have already looked at scholarly interpretations of his role. Now, I want to examine in more detail how this figure was regarded, and the expectations Second Temple Jews had about him.

The Son of Man

Jesus often associated himself with the title "the Son of Man." But the origin and meaning of the phrase are debated. Prior to the "appearance" of the "Son of Man" tradition within the synoptic Gospels, I have noted that the terminology existed in Jewish apocalyptic sayings and literature,[179] e.g. Daniel 7:13, 1 Enoch and IV Ezra 13.[180] According to Heinz Eduard Todt, it is obvious that there is a connection between the synoptic and the Jewish apocalyptic traditions, with most New Testament scholars believing that Daniel 7:13 is a crucial link between the two.[181]

Another source, the *Similitudes of Enoch*, is also fundamental to understanding the "Son of Man" in first century Judaism. Generally, in Jewish eschatological belief "the Son of Man" was not associated with the messianic title, "the Son of David."[182] By contrast, two major characteristics of "the Son of Man" in the *Similitudes* are much more exalted, where this figure is described as a pre-existent, supernatural being. In Second

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[179] Heinz Eduard Todt, *The Son of Man in the Synoptic Tradition* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Westminster Press, 1965), 222

[180] Ibid.,222

[181] Dan 7:13 "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence."

[182] Howard Teeple, "The Origin of the Son of Man Christology." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84, no. 3 (1965): 213-50. doi:10.2307/3265025. (Accessed December 26, 2020)

Temple Jewish tradition, "the Son of David" was to have been a descendant of the Israelite king, implying that the two titles were incompatible. However, there are royal overtones to the Enochian "the Son of Man": he was to end the Gentile rule of the world, proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of God, assume his place as the King of all Nations, and then guide the subject Gentiles.[183]

Maurice Casey argues that the way the *Similitudes* refer to the "Son of Man" reflects Jewish usage,[184] and Todt further suggested that Matthew's own "Son of Man" references are dependent on Enochian literature. There is no question that Matthew uses the term "Son of Man" as an apocalyptic title that refers to the heavenly, eschatological judge appointed by God, a role that is central to the Final Judgement in Matthew 25:31-46,[185] which as Todt also notes, parallels Enoch-material.[186]

By the same token, Matthew's usage of the "Son of Man" is comparable to Daniel 7:13, another passage central to the Gospel's reference. In contrast to Enoch, two divine figures are prominent in Daniel 7, the "one like the Son of Man" and "the Ancient of Days," with a close relationship between the two.

Later patristic commentators tended to make an explicit connection between the Gospel citation of "the Son of Man" and Daniel 7:13. However, within their Christian framework, they interpreted the latter as a prophetic sign of the "Parousia" or what is often regarded as "the Second Coming" of Christ.[187] Some modern commentators

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[183] Ibid.

[184] Maurice Casey. "The Use of the Term 'Son of Man' in the Similitudes of Enoch." *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 7, no. 1 (1976): 11-29. http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.rowan.edu/stable/24656698 (Accessed May 21, 2020)

[185] Walck, *The Son of Man Parables in Enoch and in Matthew*, 50

[186] As related to Similitudes of Enoch (1 Enoch 37-71)

downplay the Christological interpretation, arguing instead that the Danielic "Son of Man" was intended to be a symbol, not of an individual, but of the Jewish people as a whole, vindicated at the Final Judgment.[188]

There is little question that the "Son of Man" depicted in Daniel 7 is that of a transcendent and eschatological redeemer.[189] In Daniel 7:13 this figure is claimed to be "one like the Son of Man." While the origins of the "Son of Man" within Daniel 7:13 are unknown, he is shown as coming in both a marvelous way and a mysterious manner.[190] "The Ancient of Days" bestows the office of ruler to the "Son of Man," with a central vision in the chapter being that the Kingdom of God will dominate earthly kingdoms, although the location of this divine rulership is not stated.[191] One can easily see how this language fits into Second Temple Restoration thought.

The usage of the term "one like the Son of Man" is provocative. While it does seem to portray an image of a human being, it also provides, as Todt states, a more "mysterious dissimilarity."[192] It is clearly not simply a man that is appearing, but rather "one like a man." Moreover, the supposed human nature of the "Son of Man" in Daniel 7 is contrasted with beasts that are representative of the pagan kingdoms.[193] In the face of these inhuman realms, the "Ancient of Days" bestows upon the "Son of Man" kingdom and glory, which are meant to symbolize true rule and authority**.** However, the punishments declared against these counterfeit kingdoms appear to be carried out by the

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[187] Mogen Muller, Quotation, Concept, or? The Expression "Son of Man" in the Gospel in *Judaism, Jewish Identities, and the Gospel Traditions: Essay in Honour of Maurice Casey* (London: Equinox Pub, 2010), 82
[188] Maurice Casey, *Son of Man: The Interpretation and the Influence of Daniel 7*, (London: SPCK, 1979)
[189] Todt, *The Son of Man in the Synoptic Tradition*, 22
[190] Ibid.
[191] Ibid., 23
[192] Ibid., 23
[193] Ibid., 23

"Ancient of Days" rather than the "Son of Man," **i**ndicating some sort of relationship of the latter to the former as a kind of deputy.[194]

As crucial as Daniel 7 is in comprehending the role of the central figure in the Gospel of Matthew, another source is vital, IV Ezra 13. However, the arrival of the "one like the Son of Man" in this work is unique.

Table 5

"The Son of Man" Tradition

Daniel 7:13	**IV Ezra 13:1-3**	**Matthew 25:31**
In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.	After seven days I dreamed a dream in the night; and behold, a wind arose from the sea and stirred up all its waves. And I looked, and behold, this wind made something like the figure of a man come up out of the heart of the sea. And I looked, and behold, that man flew with the clouds of heaven;	When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne.

In Daniel's vision of the "one like the Son of Man," he is depicted as riding on the clouds of heaven. By contrast, in the equally visionary image of IV Ezra 13:1-3, the one who is "something like the figure of a Man" first arises from the ocean in the middle of a storm. Once again, he is revealed as a transcendent being, but here in IV Ezra the origin is a mysterious distant place- - - the imagery suggests primordial chaos- - - and not on earth.[195] His movements are not overseen by the "Ancient of Days," but he is

[194] Ibid., 24
[195] Ibid., 27

undertaking his activity on his own. Likewise, "kingship, power and authority" are inherent within the "Son of Man," and not relayed by grant.[196] According to IV Ezra earth, water, air and fire- - - the elements of Creation- - - are at his command.

The "Son of Man" material helps us to grasp something of how a contemporary audience might have considered the similarly named figure in Matthew. Combining elements from other sources, he is clearly a transcendent royal figure of heavenly origin, with ultimate divine authority, who functions as The Eschatological Judge.[197] Indeed, the *Similitudes of Enoch* portrays the "Son of Man**"** as clearly pre-existent and the "revealer of all the treasure of the hidden world."[198] This "Son of Man" will judge the righteous and the unrighteous based upon their deeds and actions. According to Enoch, the "Son of Man" will slay all the unrighteous merely by the word of his mouth.[199] Not surprisingly, the Enochian "Son of Man" is the one who will give salvation to the community of the righteous.

[196] Ibid., 27
[197] Ibid., 27
[198] Ibid., 28
[199] Ibid., 29

Table 6

Characteristics of the Son of Man Tradition

Daniel 7:13	**Sixth Vision of IV Ezra 13**	**Similitudes of Enoch**	**Matthew 25:31**
The "Son of Man" as ruler of God's Kingdom	The "Son of Man" comes out of the ocean, defeats the evil powers and delivers the righteous	The "Son of Man" and his kingship are formed around the final judgement and its implementation.	When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne.
Transcendent and pre-existent			

An important aspect to the Enochian "Son of Man" is "righteousness." Righteousness lives within the Enochian "Son of Man," and qualifies him to render his judgement over the kingdoms on earth.[200] Notably, the explicit characteristic of "righteousness" is not attributed to the Matthean "Son of Man." Rather, in the latter, it is implied in terms of patterns of relationship, specified by mercy and charity- - - but to surprising groups.[201]

Clearly, Enoch's portrait is helpful for understanding the expectations surrounding the "Son of Man" in the Matthean Final Judgement scene. However, the phrasing of Matthew 26:64 at Jesus' trial, recording his reply to the High Priest's question about his own identity, is significant in this regard: "But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."[202] The "Son of Man" depicted "coming on the clouds"

[200] Walck, *The Son of Man Parables in Enoch and in Matthew,* 229
[201] Ibid.
[202] Matt 26:64

clearly evokes Daniel 7, with perhaps some phrasing derived from the messianic Psalm 110:1. There can be little question, that Jesus linked himself to this figure, even as once again, the eschatological and supernatural associations of the "Son of Man" are crucial in grasping how an audience would have processed Matthew 25:31-46.

Matthew uses the term "Son of Man" about thirty times within his gospel. Most of these can be traced to either earlier sources, e.g. the Gospel of Mark or "Q material" (oral and/or written traditions found in Matthew and Luke). However, nine of the usages in Matthew are of a future apocalyptic nature. Likewise, some of these demonstrate similarities to Enoch's version of the "Son of Man."[203] But it is crucial to mention that the "Son of Man" in Matthew is closely connected to suffering, a trait lacking in the *Similitudes*. Moreover, this individual's caring for the impoverished and alienated in Matthew 25:31-46 is striking**;** bringing in an unexpected element to the traditional image of the Son of Man as an exalted, aloof figure.

Due to the uniqueness of Matthew 25:31-46, questions arise concerning the possibility of Matthean redaction- - - did the scene originate as a prophecy/parable of Jesus or does it represent the evangelist's contribution?[204] Leslie Walck, for example, noted that Matthew 25:31-46 refers not just to the "Son of Man," but he is also identified as "King," "Shepherd," and "Lord." For Walck, this suggested a possible "redactional seam" at verse 31, with different strands about the Son of Man being brought into a coherent whole.[205] In support, other scholars suggest that through these other epithets, the evangelist was trying to mold the "Son of Man' into an explicitly royal term.

[203] Matt 16:27, 16:28; 17:9, 17:12, 17:22; 19:28, 20:18, 20:28; 24:7; 25:31; 26:64
[204] Walck, *The Son of Man Parables in Enoch and in Matthew*, 95
[205] Ibid., 196

Douglas Hare, too, assigned Matthew 25:31 to the work of the gospel-writer, with the evangelist using the "Son of Man" to show that it was Jesus who was in fact the eschatological judge.[206] Yet, he conceded that it is impossible to prove if pre-Matthean material also portrayed Jesus "the Son of Man" in the starling guise of one who was needy and poor.[207]

Todt [208] and Casey[209] agreed that that the "name change" between the eschatological judge and king was a case of "Matthean stylization."[210] However, Jeremias suggested that this may have been due to the fact that Matthew 25:31 is closely related to Matthew 16:27 and Matthew 19:28:

Table 7

The Connection between Eschatological Judge and King

Matthew 16:27	**Matthew 19:28**	**Matthew 25:31**
For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.	Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.	When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne.

[206] Douglas R.A. Hare, *The Son of Man Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1900), 176
[207] Ibid., 175-176
[208] Todt, *The Son of Man in the Synoptic,* 73
[209] Matt 25:34
[210] Casey, *Son of Man: The Interpretation and the Influence of Daniel 7*, 190; Todt, *The Son of Man in the Synoptic Tradition*), 73-74

By extension, D.R. Catchpole claimed that the usage of "Son of Man" within verse 31 is not only pre-Matthean but also non-Matthean.[211] Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, "Son of Man" was used as Jesus' earthly self-identification, but here in Matthew 25, it portrays a heavenly figure akin to the "never-incarnate" Son of Man from the *Similitude*s."[212] To Catchpole, Jesus was differentiating himself from this transcendent "Son of Man," because Jesus was" incarnate." It has to be said, that Catchpole's position has been continuously challenged by other New Testament scholars.

However, it should be added that the Gospel of Matthew uses the "Son of Man" as not only an elevated title, but also a term to point to the "mystery of Jesus' destiny."[213] Clearly**,** the "Son of Man" passages in Matthew often were related to Jesus' Christological vocation.[214] Regardless of modern scholars' reconstruction of pre-Gospel traditions, there are no indications that Jesus was referring to anyone but himself when he used the phrase "Son of Man." In Matthew's allusions to the "Son of Man," it is clear that he is not pointing to another future figure separate from Himself. Consequently, one must conclude that in Matthew 25, Jesus, without a doubt, was/is the "Son of Man," who will oversee the Final Judgement, even though the imagery he will use, departs from normal type.

As I have noted, one of Matthew's sources was the Gospel of Mark, which also contains language relating to the "Son of Man." However, there are only three references to the coming of the "Son of Man" in Mark. These sayings are generally related to

[211] Hare, *The Son of Man Tradition*, 177
[212] Ibid., 177
[213] Ibid., 182
[214] Ibid., 181

Daniel 7.[215] As in Matthew and Jewish apocalyptic, Mark attributes to the "Son of Man" a transcendent quality, and whose appearing has ultimate meaning, signifying the "end of the age."[216]

Let me now summarize my findings, even as I will attempt to link them to how a first century audience would have heard Jesus' prophetic parable. Three points should be made:

1) In apocalyptic literature, the "Son of Man" was to conduct the final judgement of the world. Envisioned as a transcendent agent of God, or even identified as the latter, the Son of Man was a figure of unquestioned authority, whose presence aroused the greatest awe. He was especially looked to render the divine (negative) verdict upon the Gentiles.
2) Whatever modern speculation about the Son of Man traditions, in Matthew it is certain that Jesus is equated with his individual. With that identification, would come all the expectations surrounding his exalted nature. That is, he is a being far and above the groups gathered before him in judgement. This is expressed in the parable by the "sheep" and "goats" acknowledging him as "Lord."
3) That the Son of Man reveals that he had in some way associated himself with the "hungry, thirsty, naked, stranger, prisoner," and that the various groups' treatment of these set-upon parties was the basis for their own Final Judgement, would have been extraordinary. The surprised reaction would have surrounded the reversal of the Son of Man into a figure of scorn, as well as having elements of shame in his solidarity with the oppressed parties. As I noted above, these groups would have

[215] Todt, *The Son of Man in the Synoptic Tradition*, 46
[216] Todt, *The Son of Man in the Synoptic Tradition*, 47

been regarded as having deserved of divine punishment: righteousness warranted their rejection. Instead, the Son of Man reveals that they were the "Restoration" community; they were part of the "kingdom."

Even though scholars speculate about the gospel writer's redaction or even his own creation of the parable, the "twist" or shift in perspective surrounding the Son of Man in Matthew 25, is typical of Jesus' parables, e.g. the "Good Samaritan," the "Unjust Steward." This same feature is evident in the roles the other "characters" in the story assume.

The Identities of the Sheep and the Goats, "the Least of These" and "All the Nations"

Not surprisingly, questions have been posed about the identity of the individuals in Matthew 25:31-46. Who are the sheep? Who are the goats? Who are the "least of these?" Who is included in the term "all nations?"

The Sheep and Goats

Some scholars claim that the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats is comparable **t**o Ezekiel 34:17, which was often linked to Kingdom/Restoration expectations. "As for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats."[217] Moreover, the mention of "inheritance" in the Son of Man's blessing upon the sheep, recalls the benediction of the first discourse of the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are those poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven."[218] In literary terms, Matthew shows a focus on the inheritance of the Kingdom

[217] Ezekiel 34:17
[218] Matt 5:3

of Heaven at the beginning of Jesus' teaching and at its conclusion. Moreover, there is a linkage between the Old Testamant prophecy of Restoration and Jesus' identification of the members of this community, with the sheep and the goats sent to their prepared destiny- - - the outcome of Judgement- - - on the basis of their relations to the latter.[219]

The image of the sheep and the goats has been studied for centuries. During the Middle Ages, Saint Thomas Aquinas detailed the importance of the imagery of the sheep and the goats, claiming that the former were representatives of true discipleship: "*Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly*, and because they are ready to go even to death in imitation of Christ, *who was led as a sheep to the slaughter*."[220] Aquinas further sought to justify the positive image of the sheep, by observing that they are often viewed as fruitful animals because they can provide fleece, milk and lambs.[221] More importantly, the sheep are portrayed in the scriptures as innocent.

By contrast- - - and largely on the basis of this parable- - - goats were regarded as being salacious. However, in Jewish traditions goats were often offered as a sacrifice for sins, which seems to indicate their importance in the notion of "forgiveness." Consequently, that the sheep will live in glory and the goats will suffer in torment for eternity is not really born out simply by appealing to the inherent qualities of the animals and would likely not have been the case with the original audience.

[219] Edward Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Final Punishment*, (Fallbrook, CA: Verdict Publications, 1982), 135-147
[220] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: The Gospel of Matthew* (London: Baronius Press, 2013),862
[221] Ibid.

The traditionally accepted interpretation was established by one of the earliest Church Fathers, Saint Jerome, for whom the sheep are all the righteous of the world.[222] Jerome included "the Gentiles" among their number, claiming that they "shall gaze on what the Jews had deserted."[223] The goats, by contrast, were representative of the Jews as well as Christian sinners.[224]

Augustine of Hippo expanded upon this interpretation. He equated the sheep as "the body of Christ," which encompassed good Christians, Orthodox Christians, those who converted to Christianity, Gentiles who are Christian, Saints of Christ, the baptized, the just and righteous, the people who are redeemed by Christ's blood.[225] In other words, those who believe in Christ. Not surprisingly, Saint Augustine regarded the goats as being Christian heretics, Jews and Pagans. However, Augustine nuanced this view, claiming that the goats were those who converted to Christianity to please man, or the men who do not keep God's Commandments, along with the wealthy who do not share with the poor.[226] Augustine put an important on stress on ethical practice. Nominal Christians will also be among those who suffer in the eternal flames.

Sadly, as Jerome and Augustine indicate, during the fourth and fifth centuries, there was a growing anti-Jewish lens through which the parable was viewed. By that time, to most of the Christian writers, the Jews were to be placed within the category of the condemned goats,[227] due to the fact that not only had they refused to recognize Jesus as

[222] Sherman Gray and the Society of Biblical Literature, *The Least of my Brothers: Matthew 25:31-46: A History of Interpretatio*n (Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press, 1989), 65
[223] Ibid., 66
[224] Ibid., 65-66
[225] Ibid., 69-70
[226] Ibid., 70
[227] Ibid., 334

the Messiah, but also failed to recognize the needs of the "least of these."[228] This anti-Jewish reading is especially apparent in the works of Cyril of Alexandria,[229] for whom the Gentiles are simply enough the sheep, and the Jews the goats.[230] Caesarius of Arles and Prosper of Aquitaine went so far as to declare that that the Jews will not even be included into the Final Judgement, because they have already been found guilty due to their rejection of the Messiah.[231]

To some extent, the interpretation of the Church Fathers can be seen in Ben Witherington's recent identification of the sheep as "believers", while the goats are not. However, Witherington does make a different, but crucial point: these groups will be judged not necessarily on the basis of their religious designation, but as to how they treated the followers of Jesus ("the least of these"). Basically, the Gentiles will be judged on how they treated Israel.[232]

N. T. Wright goes further, asserting that even those who have not followed the Messiah will be judged according to how they treated the people whom Jesus claims to be his family (Followers and Christians).[233] Wright adds that the verdict will be on the basis of how they treated "the renewed Israel."[234] This is important, because Wright has attempted to set the parable up, not on the later basis of Christians vs. Jews in the manner of the Church Fathers, but rather within a contemporary first century Jewish context, which is the setting for the parable.

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[228] Ibid., 334
[229] Ibid., 336
[230] Ibid., 76
[231] Ibid., 336
[232] Ben Witherington, *Matthew*, 466
[233] Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Part 2 – Chapters 16-28*, 142
[234] Ibid., 143

Craig Evans will appeal to intertextual evidence, citing Jesus' command earlier in Matthew that the Kingdom of Heaven was only to be proclaimed to the lost sheep- - - **a** blatantly Exile/Restoration image: "Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near,[235] and "He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."[236] However, in Matthew 25, Evans sees an expansion that the announcement is for everyone, including the Gentiles, on the basis of the concluding "Great Commission" from the Resurrected Christ: "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."[237] Likely reflecting the evangelism of the later first century church, Evans asserts that the parable would have been understood to include the righteous Gentiles as members of the sheep that are headed for eternal salvation.

A contrary view is presented by Dan Via. He argues that the disciples were so closely connected with each other that it would have been hard to believe that someone would not have known that they met the Christ.[238] Yet Matthew 25:31-46 claims that the sheep did not know that they had encountered Jesus, leading Via to conclude that they had never seen a disciple or known members of the early church. Via insists, if you had met a disciple you would have clearly known that they were a follower of Jesus. Indeed, disciples, like Jesus, not only preached about the Kingdom, they also healed and baptized in his name.[239] If the sheep are so surprised that they had "cared" for Jesus, then it is

[235] Matt 10:6-7
[236] Matt 15:24
[237] Matt 28:19
[238] Dan O. Via,. "Ethical Responsibility and Human Wholeness in Matthew 25:31-46." *The Harvard Theological Review* 80, no. 1 (1987): 79-100. http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.rowan.edu/stable/1509656 (Accessed April 21, 2020)
[239] Ibid.

obvious that they had never come in contact with a disciple or even a member of the church.

J.M. Court challenges Via's reading, offering that that the sheep simply did not know that those whom they had helped were disciples of Jesus, due to the disorganization of the early church, as well as the existence of "false prophets" that sometimes were found in their midst.[240] He reasons, that ideally, "one would know a disciple of Jesus if one met one." However, he adds, "And yet one might not because disciples can be guilty of little faith."[241]

Having briefly reviewed some interpretations of the passage, I will expand on the comments of N. T. Wright and examine the possible identities of the "sheep" and "goats" within a First Century/Second Temple setting.

Are Sheep Inherently Good and Goats Inherently Evil?

Shepherding was prominent in the Middle East and the surrounding areas. In economic terms wealth and power were often measured by the size of flocks, whether of sheep or other animals.[242] Thus, initially the imagery of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25:31-46 points to valuable commodities. The Final Judgement scene, however, shows the eschatological judge separating them on the basis of their moral qualities. Given the echoes of the Old Testament throughout this parable, does the Bible elsewhere point to the sheep as symbolic of good and the goats as evil?

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[240] Ibid.
[241] Ibid.
[242] Jack W. Vancil, "Sheep, Shepherd," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1187-1190

The most abundant and useful animal in Israelite husbandry was indeed the sheep. Unfortunately, shepherds often had to protect their flocks from robbers and other animals, and accordingly, sheep came to symbolize helplessness and vulnerability. Yet, despite their frailties, sheep were clearly a sign of blessing as attested in Genesis 24:35: "The Lord has blessed my master abundantly, and he has become wealthy. He has given him sheep and cattle, silver and gold, male and female servants, and camels and donkeys."[243] In cultic terms, sheep and lambs were essential to Temple worship. In 1 King 8:5, Solomon's sacrifices are demonstrations of his great piety. "King Solomon and the entire assembly of Israel that had gathered about him were before the ark, sacrificing so many sheep and cattle that they could not be recorded or counted."[244]

One can easily see how sheep have a positive function in the parable. But what about the negative role of the goats? An explanation has been sought in the fact that goats can cause damage to cultivated areas; but actually, so do sheep. More surprisingly, goats were considered as much of a blessing as sheep and were commonly regarded as being included in the term, "flocks." Goats, too, were frequently used in sacrifices, as the example from Leviticus shows: "You shall also offer one male goat for a sin offering and two male lambs one year old for a sacrifice of peace offerings."[245] In this case, the function of the former was as the "scapegoat," which bore the transgressions of the community. Yet, in Exodus 12:5-6 both sheep and goats are acceptable animals for the Passover, one of the holiest feasts in Israel:

> The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. Take care of them until the fourteenth day of

[243] Gen 24:35
[244] 1 Kgs 8:5
[245] Lev 23:19

> the month, when all the members of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight[246]

However, goats are naturally more aggressive, and shepherds would need to ensure that they would not harm the sheep, leading to them becoming metaphorical for power, strength, and leadership, cf. Jeremiah 50:8. “Flee from the midst of Babylon and go out of the land of the Chaldeans and be as he-goats before the flock.”[247] In fact, the army of Israel was favorably compared to goats. “And the people of Israel were mustered, and were provisioned, and went against them; the people of Israel encamped before them like two little flocks of goats."[248]

Ironically, the traditional interpretation of the sheep being “characteristically righteous” and the goats as “inherently unrighteous” cannot be supported by evidence from the Old Testament. The Bible suggests that both species could be taken as positive symbols. If anything, the “goats” would seem to be more appealing. While sheep could indicate vulnerability- - - and perhaps humility- - - goats were images of strength, leadership, even self-sacrifice. It is Matthew 25:31-46 which provides the unique imagery of “good sheep/bad goats,” which would hardly have been apparent to a first century audience. As we have seen, the basis for the ethical distinction is not in the respective creature’s “being,” it is instead their treatment of “the least of these.”

[246] Exod 12:5-6
[247] Jer 50:8
[248] 1 Kgs 20:27

The "Least of These"

The generally accepted identifications of "the least of these" can be shown in the following chart, along with some representative adherents, to which I will add further comment:

Table 8

Who are "the Least of These?

Theologian or Scholar	Who are "the Least of These"
Origen, Ben Witherington, JR Michaels, Dan Via	The Disciples of Jesus
Saint John Chrysostom	The poor, meek and the outcasts
Saint Jerome, Daniel Harrington	Christians
NT Wright	"Those who hear and obey the Kingdom Announcement"
Saint Augustine	The Christian Poor

Was Matthew referring to the Christians, the poor, the meek, or the disadvantaged within all of humanity, as some scholars and commentators would hold?[249] It's intriguing that it is in the Third Century that Christian writers actually began to investigate the identities of the "least of these," which coincides with the Church's attempt to fight "heretical Christological doctrines."[250] On the one hand, it points to the polemical use of the text to attack ecclesiastical opponents. On the other, this earlier inattention suggests that their identity had been of little concern to preachers in the first

[249] Fletcher, *Eschatology,* 621-652

[250] Sherman Gray, *The Least of my Brothers: Matthew 25:31-46: A History of Interpretatio*n, 331

three centuries of Christianity. However, I shall now expand on my earlier comments in Chapter 2.

Clement of Alexandria (150-215 AD) was the first of the eastern Christian theologians to equate the "least of these" in a blanket fashion with Christians.[251] Origen (184-253 AD), who wrote a commentary on the Gospel of Matthew including an important exegesis of Matthew 25:31-46,[252] supported Clement's viewpoint. Origen himself used what was known as the "allegorical method" in his interpretation of Matthew,[253] putting forward the explanation that any deeds that are done to the disciples of Christ are done to Christ himself.[254] In effect, for Origen, the disciples were "stand-ins" for their leader.

Significantly, during the Fourth Century numerous Christian scholars would assert the much more sweeping socio-economic claim that the "least of these" were the poor and needy in general.[255] One of the foremost adherents of this view was (St.) John Chrysostom. He believed that the "least of these" were the poor, meek and outcasts of universal humanity,[256] thereby incorporating non-Christians into the category of the "least of these." To John Chrysostom even the non-believer deserved to receive the charity of Christians. Note the reversal: Chrysostom now makes Christians the object of divine judgement; they are respectively the sheep or goats depending on their treatment of the poor.

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[251] Ibid., 332
[252] Ibid., 332
[253] Ibid., 332
[254] Ibid., 20
[255] Ibid., 333
[256] Ibid., 51

Saint Jerome, by contrast, continued to express Clement's opinion that the "least of these" was restricted to Christians.[257] In fact, Augustine of Hippo never explicitly states that the poor in general are the "least of these."[258] In the majority of his works, it is apparent that if anything, it is the Christian poor that fit into this category.

Other Christian scholars would accept what would become the consensus viewpoint that "the least of these" were the Christian poor and materially needy. Again, it is also obvious that one of the factors in this interpretation was growing anti-Judaism. To an increasingly hostile church, it was only plausible that those for whom the king showed preference were Christians aiding their fellow-Christians, and Jews the goats.

Medieval Christian writers were greatly influenced by the Church Fathers, and basically echoed these earlier theologians.[259] For the most part, medieval scholars accepted the traditional viewpoint that the "least of these" were the Christians in general.[260] This interpretation will continue into the Renaissance and Reformation and subsequent centuries.[261] However, there were some who challenged this position. One group identified "the least of these" with the apostles themselves, i.e. the contemporary followers of Jesus.[262] Daniel von Breen's was even more particularistic: the Matthean judgement would be for the "Christians who will be alive" at the appearance of the Son of Man.[263] However, there was an equally tiny number of scholars supporting Chrysostom's universalistic position of "all the poor."

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[257] Ibid., 333
[258] Ibid., 69
[259] Ibid., 339
[260] Ibid., 340
[261] Ibid., 346
[262] Ibid., 340
[263] Ibid., 343

Although it is well beyond the scope of the present study, during the nineteenth century a striking "Premillennialist" perspective emerges,[264] with Jewish missionaries being identified with the "least of these."[265]

To pick up with modern biblical scholarship, John Meier, who is one of the foremost participants in the so-called "Historical Jesus Search," took a much more pastoral and universalist stance, reiterating Chrysostom that the "least of these" are the poor, needy and the outcasts of all of humanity.[266]

Daniel Harrington nuanced that the "least of these" are Christians, by explaining that they were missionaries or disciples, with the Son of Man identifying himself with his evangelists, and judging the Gentiles (sheep and goats) according to how they treat these preachers of the gospel.[267] Once again, N. T. Wright cites as evidence, Jesus' definition of his "brothers and sisters" as being "whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."[268] Consequently, for Wright, the "least of these" are "those who hear and obey the (contemporary) Kingdom announcement."[269] Ben Witherington likewise, matched the "least of these" with the followers of Jesus.[270]

Inasmuch as Wright sought support in Jesus' radical redefinition of the family, other commentators claim that there is a link between Matthew 25:31-46 and Matthew 10:42: "And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is

[264] Ibid., 346
[265] Ibid., 346
[266] Meier, *The Vision of Matthew,* 178
[267] Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 357
[268] Matthew 12:50; Wright*, Matthew for Everyone: Part 2 – Chapters 16-28*, 142
[269] Ibid., 142
[270] Ben Witherington III*, Matthew*, 466

my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward."[271] J. Ramsey Michaels argues that the "least of these" is essentially the same as the "little ones."[272] Notably, Michaels further connects the doing of "good deeds" in the respective passages, i.e. "giving water to the thirsty". Consequently, in Matthew 10:42 the "little ones" are undoubtedly disciples of Jesus, who are treated with compassion by those giving them comfort, lending to the later identification of such parties respectively with "the least of these" and "the sheep."

Yet scholars point out that "the least of these" is a common Matthean ecclesiological term,[273] referring to the dynamics of evangelistic activity. In Matthew 10 Jesus' "sends out the disciples" to spread the word of the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven, and to call for the "lost sheep" to repent.[274] Matthew 10:40-42 presents Jesus as offering "blessings" upon those who receive these preachers favorably:

> Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.[275]

The image of the welcoming of the disciples/"little ones" is not only comparable to the positive treatment of "the least of these" in Matthew 25, but we see the further equation between their treatment and one's attitude towards Jesus/the Son of Man.

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[271] Matt 10:42
[272] J Ramsey Michaels, "Apostolic Hardships and Righteous Gentiles: A Study of Matthew 25:31-46." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84, no. 1 (1965): 27-37, doi:10.2307/3264070. (Accessed December 21, 2020)
[273] H. Van Zyl, Discernment as "not knowing" and "knowing": A perspective from Matthew 25:31-46. *Acta Theologica, 33*, (2013), 110-131
[274] Matt 10:5-15
[275] Matt 10:40-42

It also leads to the issue of who formed the parties under judgement, reacting to Jesus' followers (i.e. "little ones/least of these")? The answer will depend upon whether one places the commission of Matthew 10 in a Palestinian setting during Jesus' lifetime (late 20's-early 30's), or whether it is referring to later Christian evangelism of c. 60-90 AD/CE throughout the Mediterranean. If the latter, one would likely conclude that "all the nations" in Matthew 25 designated Gentile unbelievers, who are evaluated on how they treated Christian missionaries ("disciples/little ones/least of these") as the movement spread beyond the confines of Israel.[276]

Yet, Matthew has a great concern for the "lost sheep" of Israel- - - an image of Exile/Restoration. Jesus's ministry in this Gospel of Matthew (unlike the other Synoptic Gospels) prior to the concluding "Great Commission," is more about dealing with his fellow Jews, rather than preaching to Gentiles. In fact, Matthew 10 strongly points to a setting in Israel/Palestine, not the Diaspora or the Hellenistic world, and the reaction of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries to the "Kingdom" message and its messengers.

I think it is highly probable that Wright and Michaels' identification of "the least of these" (as well as the "little ones") is correct, in a basic sense. They are the followers of Jesus during his lifetime. It includes not only the technical "disciples" of Jesus, but the broader number of those who had accepted Jesus' announcement of the kingdom/restoration. More specifically, they had been among those groups longing for the "End of Exile." Following prophetic terminology, they had been "hungry, thirsty, naked, prisoners," who had been brought out of their terrible state of covenantal curse

[276] H. Van Zyl, Discernment as "not knowing" and "knowing": A perspective from Matthew 25:31-46. *Acta Theologica, 33*, (2013), 110-131

("Exile") into the "Renewed/Restored Community," under God's in-breaking rule as Jesus was showing. Whereas groups would treat them with compassion or tolerance, others would not. Both parties were now to be envisioned as being "among all the nations gathered before the Son of Man."

"All the Nations"

"All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats."[277]

Origen was the first of the Church Fathers to see a problem with the term "all the nations," which continues up to this day. Origen questioned if "all the nations" meant "all the people" who have ever existed, or those who are alive at the final judgement.[278] On the one hand, Origen sought to explain the term as referring to the eschatological moment when there will be no one ignorant of who Christ is, and both the sinner and the just will come to recognize their deeds.[279] However, the theologian is forced to admit that it is not truly clear who was meant by the term "all the nations."[280]

J. Ramsey Michaels wrestled with the difficulty of reconciling the apparent contradiction of identifying the "least of these" with the poor in general, and then separating them from the populations of "all the nations." If "all the nations" are the

[277] Matt 25:32
[278] Gray, *The Least of my Brothers: Matthew 25:31-46: A History of Interpretatio*n, 18
[279] Origen, *The Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of St Matthew*. translated by Ronald E Heine (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2018), 667
[280] Gray, *The Least of my Brothers: Matthew 25:31-46: A History of Interpretatio*n, 18

Christian global community, then who is being judged?[281] - - - extending his inquiry into the make-up of the "sheep."

He compares the prophetic parable with the language of the eschatological warnings of Matthew 24 and the "Great Commission" in Matthew 28, and comes to the conclusion that the "all the nations" in Matthew 25 would be the same as the "all the nations" in Matthew 24 and 28.

Table 9

"All the Nations" in Matthew's Gospel

Matthew 24:30	**Matthew 28:19**
Then a sign will appear in the sky. And there will be the Son of Man. All nations on earth will weep when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.	Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit…

Michaels surmises that the term "all the nations" refers to the people before the Son of Man, who have received the proclamation of the Gospel.[282] The individuals are judged according to how they have reacted to not only the message but also the messengers (Jesus' disciples).[283] According to Michaels, there is nothing that is specifically referencing the Gentiles, here. Rather, this is the judgement upon the people who have

[281] J Ramsey Michaels, "Apostolic Hardships and Righteous Gentiles: A Study of Matthew 25:31-46." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84, no. 1 (1965): 27-37
[282] Ibid.
[283] Ibid.

heard and reacted to the Gospel and its preachers ("the least of these") either with mercy or disinterest.[284] Michaels expands the definition of "all the nations" to include those who had received the message of the kingdom firsthand from Jesus' own disciples, as well as later catechumens and baptized believers.[285] Consequently, Michaels challenges those strands of interpretation that held that the scene presents a gathering of Christian vs. non-Christians; rather, he seems to set up the dichotomy between "Christian teachers" and those whom they had instructed.

In a somewhat related fashion, Dan Via stresses that throughout Matthew, Jesus provides his disciples with instructions. One of the most important of these scenes is the apocalyptic teaching in Matthew 24:1-4 concerning the destruction of the Temple; a section that contains a series of woes referring to the "end of the age" (sometimes translated as "end of the world"):

> Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; everyone will be thrown down." As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you."[286]

Via holds that these, and the immediately following passages, are crucial to understanding the term "all the nations." In Jesus' eschatological discourse, for Via, it is apparent that the church and the disciples of Jesus are included among "all the

[284] Ibid.
[285] Ibid.
[286] Matt 24:1-4

nations,"[287] with Jesus warning them they would not be exempt from the final, universal judgement.

A similar related theme of a "mixed and indeterminate multitude" appears in Matthew 13:36-43 ("the parable of the wheat the tares") and Matthew 22:1-14 ("the parable of the wedding feast") where Jesus also addresses the topic of judgement. Although these parables can be interpreted in different ways, Via concludes that the message was that the church must face a final judgement,[288] which is then depicted in Matthew 25:31-46. If one subscribes to Via's view, Jesus' prophetic parable was primarily addressed to the constituency of his followers, who were "all the nations," which in subsequent generations would be linked to the increasingly Gentile "church."

However, Via notes that the term "the nations," while often referring to Gentiles, can at times, refer to Israel/the Jews. Via concedes that one has to understand that Israel is contained in the designation, too: Matthew 25 is a scene of universal judgement, although for the scholar, Jesus' followers are the focus of the Son of Man's scrutiny. Via further adds that there was a strong belief that the Final Judgement would not occur until the gospel was preached to "all the nations,"[289] with the phrase meaning "those who are evangelized." Consequently, Via concludes that for Matthew, ethnic markers are of little difference: believers are indistinguishable outwardly from all the other peoples.

[287] Dan O. Via,. "Ethical Responsibility and Human Wholeness in Matthew 25:31-46." *The Harvard Theological Review* 80, no. 1 (1987): 79-100. http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.rowan.edu/stable/1509656 (Accessed April 21, 2020)
[288] Ibid.
[289] Ibid.

In this regard, Via cites New Testament scholars, Victor Furnish and J.M. Court, who upheld the notion that even the "pagan"- - - the "barbarian rustics"- - - was to be included as being among "all the nations." Therefore, the "unbelievers" will be judged alongside the "believers," with no distinction because they will both be subjected to the same standard. The pagan, likewise, will be evaluated according to how they treated the individuals proclaiming the Gospel.[290]

Thus, the representative positions surrounding "all the nations" fall into basic categories, with some nuancing: 1) Gentiles/non-Jews; 2) everybody, including Jews and Gentiles; 3) the Christian community; 4) The world-wide recipients of the Gospel, including its proclaimers and those whom they evangelized, regardless of ethnicity.

I would agree that the preceding apocalyptic warnings have some bearing on the identification of "all the nations" in Matthew 25. Jesus' parable actually closes off the eschatological discourse, which begins in Matthew 24. Again, in Matthew 24, Jesus warns the disciples about the coming "end of the age," and the "appearance" of the Son of Man. A crucial element of his description, is Jesus' prediction that his disciples will be persecuted, being "hated by all the nations," for their preaching "to all the nations" (Matthew 24:9-14). While not specific, it seems to indict the rulers and leaders of different groups throughout the world, likely of Gentile background. This calls to mind Daniel 7:14 where the "Son of Man's" rule would be over "all people, nations, and languages."

[290] Ibid.

But there are also references to the disciples suffering at the hands of more local authorities, with an allusion that some of the calamities are to take place in Judea, i.e. Israel. This strongly suggests that Jewish authorities are included "all the nations," too. That Israelites could be part of the category of "nations," while unusual, is not unattested (Jeremiah 1:10).

So, the more universal interpretation of "all the nations" in Matthew 25 is more likely. In the prophetic parable, the Son of Man reviews how humanity as a whole reacted to those who made up Jesus' eschatological community. Did they offer them basic mercies - - as did the sheep- -- or did they neglect them without any second thought due to their seemingly rejected status, as did the goats. The goats cannot accept that these groups would be part of the Restoration/the coming Kingdom. So, while "all the nations" might be inclusive of a wide variety of people, there does seem to be an implied stress on parties in Israel.

What is important is that the treatment of "the least of these," is to be understood in its original First Century context with its eschatological expectations and notions of ritual cleanliness. While Matthew 25 will certainly be reinterpreted in terms of the later evangelical activities of the church, the original backdrop is Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom message within Israel, and his focus on how his band of Palestinian Jewish followers were received. The "least of these" should be thought of here, not primarily in the socio-economic categories of poverty, but as the people emerging from the curse of Exile- - - i.e. "the hungry, thirsty, naked, stranger, prisoner"- - - whom Jesus of Nazareth had welcomed to the Promised Restoration, which he had been proclaiming.

Consequently, there are five twists that the parable presents.

1) The first is that the designation of the "least of these" in terms of their deprivation and alienation, is considered by the "goats" as indicating a rejected status. As far as this party is concerned, they were beneath its notice. However, the "least of these" were, as Wright pointed out, those who had responded to Jesus' kingdom announcement and invitation. They were the "forgiven/restored" community, released from their exile by Jesus of Nazareth.

2) Given the expectations surrounding the "Son of Man" in terms of his Majesty as cosmic judge, the identification of this exalted figure with those groups held in disdain would have been highly provocative.

3) The Son of Man's verdict in terms of the treatment of the "least of these" by fulfilling their needs, is in sharp contrast to how the Final Judgement was envisioned in texts such as Daniel 7. In Matthew 25, all other criteria is to be set aside in favor of the most simple and basic charity. There are no allusions to Temple piety. There are no indications of "nationalism," whereby Israel is to be vindicated in the face of oppression by the "beastly kingdoms."

4) If "all the nations" indicates "the whole world," ethnicity is swept aside in terms of ethical conduct. All other markers of identity disappear, to be replaced by charity (to the Restoration community). Again, it is striking that the "sheep" and "goats" could indicate Gentiles and Jews. We should recall that in the speculation surrounding the Son of Man, the Gentiles are often depicted as the objects of his justice.

5) Finally, while the Judgement scene conforms to ideas about the Son of Man's jurisdiction over the eschatological court, the notion that the verdict ("What you did to the least of these") had already been pronounced during the lifetime of the

groups “on trial,” is striking. Judgment is not postponed: all that remains is the sentencing.

Chapter 5

Matthew 25 and *the Didache*

As Christianity would develop in the post-apostolic period, there is a clear emphasis on morality, with a focus on the belief in free choice in "the ways of life and death."[291] By the time we get to the Middle Ages, "the way of life" was through acts of charity, as well as loving your enemy. Christians were encouraged to help and care for the poor, weak and disadvantaged.[292]

Undoubtedly, this had a basis in the earliest Christian teaching in the New Testament. However, such sentiments can be found in *The Didache*, or "The Lord's Instruction to the Gentiles through the Twelve Apostles."[293] Scholars agree that the *Didache* was written at the end of the First Century AD, as the original apostolic generation was waning. While the author is anonymous, it remains one of the most important texts for early ecclesiastical law and is considered to be one of the oldest Christian texts (besides the New Testament).

The Didache lays out the expectations of a virtuous life. The first section, known as the "Two Ways," contains instructions for choosing between "the way of God" and "the way of the devil."[294] The ethical admonitions recall the Scriptures, and it is suggested that *the Didache* was a Jewish (-Christian) text used to teach morality to Gentiles.[295]

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[291] Servais Pinckaers, "*The Sources of Christian Ethics: Translated from the Third Edition*, Translated by Sister Mary Thomas Noble (Washington, D.C:, The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 195-215
[292] Ibid.
[293] Johannes Quasten, *Patrology: The Beginnings of Patristic Literature from the Apostles Creed to Irenaeus*, Vol I, (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1995), 29
[294] *The Fathers of the Church: The Apostolic Fathers.* Translated by Francis X Glimm et al, vol I (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America, 1947), 167-184
[295] Ibid.

However, the *Didache* also contains material that seems to hearken back to the prophetic parable in Matthew 25. In effect, it presents us with something of an early interpretation of the gospel scene. There are some similarities between Matthew 25:31-33 and *Didache* 16:6-9:

Table 10

Matthew 25:31-32 and the Didache

Matthew 25:31-32	**Didache 16:6-9 (8-9 reconstructed)**
When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.	And then shall appear the signs of the truth: first, the sign of an outspreading in heaven, then the sign of the sound of the trumpet. And third, the resurrection of the dead -- yet not of all, but as it is said: "The Lord shall come and all His saints with Him." Then shall the world see the Lord coming upon the clouds of heaven.

However, there are noticeable differences: in Matthew "the nations" are gathered before the Son of Man; in *the Didache*, it references the Lord "coming upon the clouds of heaven," and the "resurrection of the Holy Ones."[296] The more "Jewish" rendering in Matthew 25 is expressed in terms of Christian eschatology in the *Didache*, marked by a partial resurrection of "the saints."

[296] John Kloppenborg, "The Use of the Synoptics or Q in Did. 1:3b-2:1." Didache: Two Documents from the Same Jewish-Christian Milieu, edited by Huub Van de Sandtt, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 211

More striking is that in *Didache* 16:5 it is the "world deceiver" that will punish the unrighteous:[297] "Then shall the creation of men come into the fire of trial, and many shall be made to stumble and shall perish; but those who endure in their faith shall be saved from under the curse itself."[298] Unfortunately, the ending of the *Didache* is abrupt, and some scholars believe that the Jerusalem manuscript of chapter 16 of the *Didache* is incomplete.[299]

Notably, *Didache* 16:6-9 seems also to have combined elements of Matthew 25:31-46 as well as Mark 8:38:

Table 11

The Didache and the Gospels of Matthew and Mark

Matthew 25:31	**Mark 8:38**	**Didache 16:8**
When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne.	If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels	And third, the resurrection of the dead -- yet not of all, but as it is said: "The Lord shall come and all His saints with Him." Then shall the world see the Lord coming upon the clouds of heaven.

[297] AJP Garrow, *The Gospel of Matthew's Dependence on the Didache*, (London: Bloomsberg Academic, 2012), 39
[298] Didache 16:5
[299] AJP Garrow, *The Gospel of Matthew's Dependence on the Didache, 211*

Some scholars would in fact hold that Matthew 25:31 itself was dependent upon both Mark 8:38 and *Didache* 16:8.[300] Garrow would argue that Matthew's Final Judgment is an "imaginative expansion" of the belief of repayment for sin and the imagery of the virtuous sheep. However, the *Didache* presents the lurid scenario of the world being turned upside down by a kind of "anti-Christ" figure, whose jurisdiction over Creation is false and malevolent:

> For in the last days false prophets and corrupters shall be multiplied, and the sheep shall be turned into wolves, and love shall be turned into hate; for when lawlessness increases, they shall hate and persecute and betray one another, and then shall appear the world-deceiver as Son of God, and shall do signs and wonders, and the earth shall be delivered into his hands, and he shall do iniquitous things which have never yet come to pass since the beginning.[301]

Certainly, both the *Didache* and the Gospel of Matthew are concerned with educating their readers about the final judgement and the end times. *Yet the shocking ethics of Matthew 25 are missing, as are the contemporary dynamics surrounding Jesus' original movement.* Despite the vivid eschatological portrait of Creation suffering at the hands of a false and evil "world-deceiver," it is asserted that the final chapter of the *Didache* should not be labeled as an "apocalyptic text," in contrast to that designation for Matthew 25. Finally, the *Didache* does not mention Jesus as the transmitter of the scene of judgement, unlike in the Gospel of Matthew, although it is very likely he is to be understood in this role.

[300] AJP Garrow, *The Gospel of Matthew's Dependence on the Didache*, 211
[301] Didache 16:3-4

Chapter 6

The Usage of Matthew's Final Judgement in the Patristic Era

Introduction

The Patristic Era encompasses the end of the apostolic generation up until the death of Pope Gregory I, i.e. the 2nd century through the Seventh.[302] During the Patristic Era, some of the early Church Fathers broadly alluded to Matthew 25 in terms of moral exhortation. This can be clearly seen in Saint Irenaeus' "Against the Heresies," where he extols the increase in faith with the arrival of the "Son of God,"[303] which allowed man to become a partaker of God.[304] With the appearance of Christ, men will be more apt to live more pious and diligent lives, leading Irenaeus to admonish his readers to refrain from evil deeds and evil thoughts.[305] The theologian closes out his instruction by citing the judgement scene in Matthew 25, where those who do not have faith in the Word of God will be punished in everlasting fire, while those who do respond to the Word of God will receive life everlasting. Irenaeus replaces the parable's shocking, and very specific ethic with a more general call for evangelical belief.

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[302] "The Patristic Age: Salvation by Incarnation, " *Journal of Women and Religion* 15: 19-40,124-126, Volume 15, (1997) http://ezproxy.rowan.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fpatristic-age-salvation-incarnation%2Fdocview%2F2314342492%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D13605(Accessed June 12, 2020)

[303] William Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*. Vol. 1 (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1970), 97

[304] Ibid., 97

[305] Ibid., 97

Sacrificial Almsgiving

Irenaeus of Lyons also creatively combined Matthew 25:31-46 with Proverbs 19:17 in a plea for charity, which became a standard theme in church preaching:[306] "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done." Irenaeus uses Proverbs 19:17 to expand on Matthew 25's equivalence, "Whatever you do to the least of these, you do it to me." We now see that there is a significant shift onto the materially deprived, with the nuances of the Matthean parable becoming muted. This will become the pattern in Patristic Period, where concern for the poor becomes dominant in moral preaching, even as it will be the lens through which Matthew 25 becomes interpreted. This will be further reflected in the increasing importance in "almsgiving."

Many of the early Church Fathers saw almsgiving as "answering the call from God."[307] The early Church Fathers would go so far as to relate almsgivings to the sacrament of the Eucharist, explaining both as "acts of mercy." For the lay person, almsgiving was a way for him/her to partake in Christ's sacrifice.[308] This becomes central to the notion that charity itself was a sacramental act, elevating it to the highest theological and ethical importance.

This belief was not carried into the Reformation, when Martin Luther and John Calvin challenged the nature of the Mass, Eucharist and acts of charity as sacraments, claiming no biblical authorization.[309] John Calvin put it bluntly: "It is foolish for monks

[306] Gary A Anderson*, Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 151
[307] Daniel Finn, *Christian Economic Ethics: History and Implications* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press*),* 84
[308] Anderson, *Charity: The Place of the poor in the Biblical Tradition,* 8
[309]Ibid., 8

and pinhead disputants of that sort to invent six works of mercy."[310] In the Protestant Church, the sacramental use of Matthew 25 to support the poor began to wither away.

Property and Ownership

It is most evident that the Early Church Fathers wrestled seriously with the issue of wealth and poverty. Patristic theology held that God had granted the things of the world to mankind so that they can share with the unfortunate.[311] They firmly held onto the biblical position that it was the responsibility of the rich to share with the poor.[312] However, throughout Late Antiquity, the issue of ownership and property was controlled by the Roman Government, which had no legal provisions for "helping the poor."[313] The Church Fathers would proclaim that the Roman Laws were imperfect, and had gone against the teachings of Jesus as seen in the Beatitudes, as well as the Old Testament. The idea of ownership was a human system that should not hinder God's intent for the world. Private ownership itself would be subject to Divine Judgement.[314]

> If I have more than I need and you have less than you need, I am obliged to share my surplus with you, because God has given the earth to humanity, and my wealth to me, to meet the needs of all. [315]

Scathing criticism of the poor's neglect is captured in the work of Bishop Ambrose of Milan:

> You clothe your walls and you strip human beings. A naked man cries out in front of your house and you ignore him; a naked man cries out and you are worried about what marbles you should use for your floor. A poor man looks for money and has none. A man begs for bread, and your horse champs on the gold bit under his teeth. Precious ornaments delight you, while others have no grain.[316]

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[310] Ibid., 8
[311] Finn, *Christian Economic Ethics: History and Implications*, 88
[312] Ibid., 87
[313] Ibid., 88
[314] Ibid., 89
[315] Ibid., 89
[316] Ibid., 87-90

Saint Augustine

Saint Augustine produced numerous sermons and homilies concerning the Final Judgement, based on his reading of Matthew 25. Much of his use of the prophetic parable reflects his beliefs about the importance of the church, as well as his speculation upon the consequences of disbelief. For Augustine there was no salvation or eternal life outside the Kingdom of Heaven:[317] "Whatever does not belong to the Kingdom of God, undoubtedly belongs to damnation."[318]

Based on the actions of the Son of Man in Matthew 25, Augustine maintained the imagery of "the Lord" separating the quick and dead on the left and the right, where some will receive salvation and others eternal damnation. The divine decision was clear-cut to Augustine there was no "in between."

Indeed, Augustine speculated on the "extent" of divine punishment. His argument challenged an early Christian belief that while salvation was eternal, paradoxically, the eternal fire of punishment would be temporary.[319] Augustine, on the basis of Matthew 25:31-46, asserted it would be illogical to believe that punishment would be temporary while salvation would be eternal.[320] Importantly, however, Augustine concluded that the punishment of the unjust was not because they had failed to believe in Son of Man, but because they had failed to show mercy to those who were in need.[321] Augustine maintains the fiery imagery of Matthew,[322] even as he upholds the

[317] William Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*. Vol. 3 (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1979), 32
[318] Ibid., 32
[319] Ibid., 106
[320] Ibid., 106; 114
[321] Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Seventeen Short Treatises of Saint Augustine,* (Tulsa: Gardners Books), 61
[322] Saint Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1948), 370

now standard position that the charitable treatment of the poor is decisive for either reward or punishment.[323] In support, Augustine paraphrased a passage from James: Faith is "dead" without good works of mercy.[324]

Augustine's Preaching on the Final Judgement in Matthew

"For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment"[325]

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy"[326]

In terms of his interpretative approach, Augustine would often depend upon two biblical sources, 1 Timothy 6 or Matthew 25:31-46, to support his preaching concerning the final judgement, poverty, charity and the rich.[327] Although the texts could appear to be in conflict at points, Augustine often links them together in the same sermon. One of his favorite themes is the "encounter of Christ in the poor."[328] The other is the separation of the nations by "the Son of Man" "in glory" according to their acts of mercy.

It is clear that Augustine paid a lot of attention to Matthew 25, warning his congregants: "I'm asking you to think hard about what our Lord Jesus Christ will say at the end of the world when he comes to judgement."[329] Admittedly though, Augustine was bewildered that the "final judgement" would be based upon charity: "When that day

[323] Saint Augustine, *City of God*, 449
[324] Augustine, *Seventeen Short Treatises of Saint Augustine,* 61
[325] James 2:13
[326] Matthew 5:7
[327] Eric Knibbs, et al., *The End of the World in Medieval Thought and Spiritually*, (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillian, 2019), 93-133
[328] Ibid.
[329] Ibid.

comes the Lord is going to impute nothing but their acts of mercy."[330] Therefore, he concluded that generosity to the poor was of the greatest essence, not just as a way of improving their lot, but to save your own soul. He stressed this point in three sermons pertaining to the Final Judgement (85, 86, 345),[331] wherein he proclaimed: "There is no other remedy to deliver us from death but acts of charity."[332]

However, Augustine was aware that his attempts to rouse his congregants was a difficult task at times. On one occasion, he wondered whether his appeals to generosity amounted to failure:

> So give to the poor, I'm begging you, I'm warning you, I'm commanding you, I'm ordering you. Give to the poor whatever you like. You see, I won't conceal from your graces why I thought it necessary to preach this sermon to you. Ever since I got back here, every time I come to the church and go back again, the poor plead with me and tell me to tell you, that they need something from you. They have urged me to speak to you: and when they see that are not getting anything from you, they come to the conclusion that I am laboring among you to no purpose.[333]

Saint John Chrysostom

As alluded to above, Saint John Chrysostom likewise presented numerous homilies and sermons surrounding the necessity to aid the less fortunate. While passionate in his effort to move people to this task, Chrysostom sometimes compared almsgiving to a

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[330] Ibid.
[331] Ibid.
[332] Saint Augustine of Hippo, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A New Translation for the 21st Century: Sermons 341-400 on Various Subjects*, translated by Edmund Hill, edited by John Rotelle, (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995), 414
[333] Saint Augustine of Hippo, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A New Translation for the 21st Century: Sermons II (51-94)I*, translated by Edmund Hill, edited by John Rotelle, (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991), 148-149

banking transaction,[334] where charity was a payment for the return of eternal life from God.

Chrysostom's preaching often highlighted the differences between the wealthy and poor. He juxtaposed the condition of "outsiders," such as the disfigured or those suffering from incurable diseases,[335] to the rich who are dressed in expensive clothing. While they proudly stride around the marketplace, they turn a blind eye to the poor who wander the streets hungry, cold and injured.[336] Surprisingly, it is likely that Chrysostom's critique was directed towards members of his own congregation, which included the prosperous and privileged. He implored the elites to help and care for the poor instead of staring at their misfortunes. More pointedly, he reprimanded them for failing "to see Jesus" within these particular members of society,[337] and instead blamed them for idleness. At one memorable juncture, he draws a remarkable comparison:

> When you see a poor believer, think that you see an altar. When you see such a one as a beggar, not only do not insult him, but even reverence him, and if you see another insulting him, prevent it, repel it.[338]

Here, Chrysostom creatively uses the imagery of Matthew 25: the "poor believer" is to be equated with the most sacred area of a church. By so doing, Chrysostom "sanctifies" charity to the impoverished as the equivalent of celebrating the Eucharist, even as insulting the poor becomes an act of sacrilege. His appropriation of Matthew's parable,

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[334] Silke Sitzler, "Identity: The Indigent and the Wealthy in the Homilies of John Chrysostom," *Vigiliae Christianae* 63, no. 5 (2009), 468-79. http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.rowan.edu/stable/20700337 (Accessed June 20, 2020)

[335] Leprosy skin, diseases or other illnesses

[336] Silke Sitzler, "Identity: The Indigent and the Wealthy in the Homilies of John Chrysostom"

[337] Ibid.

[338] Ibid.

by this time, demonstrates that the identity of the put-upon groups, is now interpreted almost entirely in socio-economic terms.

Moreover, Chrysostom will declare that it is the poor and unfortunate who are the path to salvation, by presenting the opportunity for almsgiving:[339]

> The poor person is the benefactor of the Christian who shows him mercy "for it is impossible to enter the portals of the Kingdom without almsgiving." It is the poor person who will stand by an almsgiver on the day of judgment and deliver him/her from eternal death by opening the gates of heaven.[340]

The imagery employs well-known dynamics surrounding the Roman patronage system,[341] with a notable reversal: it is the poor who assume the role of patron and protector, with the wealthy their "clients" in need of help. The poor and unfortunate have an "elevated" status within the society,[342] in their task of reminding the rich that they cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven without almsgivings.[343] For Chrysostom, almsgiving is one of the most important virtues of Christianity, even as it provides the practitioner with the great rewards of the forgiveness of sins and repentance.[344]

Patristic Interpretation of Matthew 25

Inasmuch as the Patristic writers used Matthew 25 as support in their appeals to aid the poor, as well to warn of the dire consequences of not doing so, they elsewhere provided theological commentary on individual passages in connection with other doctrinal issues.

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[339] Ibid.
[340] Ibid.
[341] Ibid.
[342] Ibid.
[343] Ibid.
[344] Elsewhere, the Church Fathers will use Matthew 25's description of eternal punishment to warn against disbelief. For example, Saint Fulgence simply claims any individual that "ends his life" outside of the Catholic Church will suffer in the eternal fire that was created for the Devil and his angels. (Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, 29). On the other hand, Tertullian used Matthew 25 to support the theological claim that that Christ was both divine and human: Christ had to take on human form to ensure human salvation and to "restore humankind." (Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, 146).

Verses 31-33

Origen, who had a great interest in eschatology, speculated at length about the appearance of the "Son of Man" mentioned in Matthew 25, interpreting the event through 1 John 3:2:

> "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."[345]

Significantly, Origen held that at that final revelation, no one will be ignorant of Christ "according to what he is":[346] sinners will see their faults, and the just will see how their deeds of mercy are fruitful.[347] Origen describes the ensuing judgement in terms of Matthew 25: "all the nations" will stand before the Lord and his authority over the Kingdom of Heaven, with the "Son of Man" separating the good (sheep)[348] and the bad (goats). The sheep will be invited by the "Son of Man" to be united with Christ for their deeds of mercy. The wicked or the goats will be placed at the left side of the Lord for their "left-handed" works.[349]

Chrysostom held that these verses provided the model for the "two portions of humanity: the obedient and the disobedient.[350] However, he was struck by the stark nature of Jesus' language. There are no comparisons to the Kingdom of Heaven, typical

[345] 1 John 3:2; Origen, *The Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of St Matthew*, 667
[346] 1 John 3:2; Origen, *The Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of St Matthew*, 667
[347] Origen, *The Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of St Matthew*, 667
[348] Matthew 11:29
[349] Origen, *The Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of St Matthew*, 668
[350] St John Chrysostom, *Saint John Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*, Translated by Philip Schaff (Whitefish, MT, Kessinger Publishing, 2006),475; Thomas Oden, *Matthew 14-28: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 230

of parables.[351] Instead, Jesus openly declares that he is the "Son of Man," who will not only come in his glory but will "sit on the throne of glory." The hearer is confronted with the awesome scenario of being "raised" and brought before the "throne" and the "eschatological judge,"[352] with his angels bearing witness.[353]

For Chrysostom, "all the nations" are "the races" of humanity,[354] who live amongst each other- - - the righteous and unrighteous- - - until the Final Judgement. On that day, the "Son of Man" will distinguish the good from the evil, which Chrysostom defines as the separation of the sheep (profitable) from the goats (unfruitful, or destitute).[355] Given his concern for the poor, Chrysostom's designations are a little surprising. This suggest that he meant that "profitability" be understood as generosity in charity, and "destitution/being unfruitful" the failure to act ethically.

Saint Epiphanius used Matthew 25 to address the theological issue about nature of Christ: "How can he be the Son of Man when he is God?" Epiphanius declared that Jesus is the "Son of Man" because he came to earth as man and was persecuted as man,[356] making it obvious that the same "Son of Man" (who is now equated with God) will come to judge the living and the dead according to their deeds. All the peoples (from Adam and Eve to the end of time) shall be present before the Lord on the Day of Judgement.[357]

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[351] St John Chrysostom, *Saint John Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*, 475; Oden, *Matthew 14-28: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament*, 230-231
[352] St John Chrysostom, *Saint John Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*, 475; Oden, *Matthew 14-28: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament,* 231
[353] Oden, *Matthew 14-28: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament*, 231
[354] St John Chrysostom, *Saint John Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*, 475; Oden, *Matthew 14-28: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament*, 231
[355] St John Chrysostom, *Saint John Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*, 475; Oden, *Matthew 14-28: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament,* 231
[356] Oden, *Matthew 14-28: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament*, 231
[357] Ibid., 231

Saint Jerome wondered about the "Son of Man" placing the righteous on his right-hand, creatively combining Ecclesiastes 10:2 and Matthew 6:3 to explain the action:[358] "The heart of a wise man is on his right, and the heart of a fool is on his left,"[359] and "do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing."[360] Accordingly, this accounts for the sheep being placed to stand at the right side of the Lord[361] while the goats will sit on the left-hand side. He speculates that the sinners are called "goats" because they were traditionally offered for sins.[362]

In his "Commentary on the Apostle's Creed," Saint Rufinus referred to Matthew 25 to instill a sense of anxiety about the Coming of the World Judge.[363] Using Platonic imagery, individuals would be evaluated in terms of their souls (living) and their physical bodies (dead) according to their deeds of mercy. [364]

Addressing the same issue of the adjudication of the "living" and the "dead," Augustine would explain that the "living" are those who are physically alive at the time of the Final Judgement.[365] However, he also expanded the usage arguing that the living can be considered the righteous, and the dead, the unrighteous. He further envisioned the process of judgement in terms of the exhortation in the Letter of James: "Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment

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[358] Saint Jerome, *The Fathers of the Church, St Jerome, Commentary on Matthew*, translated by Thomas Scheck (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 289
[359] Ecclesiastes 10:2
[360] Matthew 6:3
[361] Saint Jerome, *The Fathers of the Church, St Jerome, Commentary on Matthew*, 290
[362] Ibid., 290
[363] Rufinus of Aquileila. *A Commentary on the Apostle's Creed*, Translated by J N D Kelly (Westminster, MD., Newman Press, 1954), 67
[364] Ibid.
[365] Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Augustine: Confessions and Enchiridion*, Edited by Albert C Outler, (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2006), 371

without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment."[366]

Verse 34

Matthew 25:34 provided Origen with an opportunity to engage in textual criticism, as he decided that the Greek version of the passage was of greater clarity than the Latin. The Latin version states: "from the foundation of the world," while the Greek version states: "from the casting down of the world."[367] Origen compared all the other biblical passages using the phrase "casting down," and compared them to Matthew 25:34, to gain a more nuanced understanding of the expression.

By contrast, Chrysostom focused on another aspect of the passage, stating that it showed that Christ had revealed that the love he had for his people was from the foundation of the world. He further emphasized that the expression "to inherit the Kingdom" was not to be understood in a forceful sense: the Kingdom of Heaven was intended for its people and was made ready for them.[368] Jerome similarly took this verse (Matthew 25:34) to indicate the foreknowledge of God.[369] Origen glossed the passage to indicate that "the Kingdom of Heaven has not been created according to what human righteousness deserves but according to what God's power can prepare."[370]

Other Church Fathers addressed the protocol of the judgement scene where the "Son of Man" speaks to the just first, which was taken as an indication that he is more

[366] James 2:13
[367] Origen, *The Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of St Matthew*, 669
[368] St John Chrysostom, *Saint John Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*, 476; Oden, *Matthew 14-28: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament*, 232
[369] Saint Jerome, *The Fathers of the Church, St Jerome, Commentary on Matthew*, 290
[370] Oden, *Matthew 14-28: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament*, 232

willing to praise than to punish.[371] In fact, even the condemnation of the unjust will be undertaken reluctantly.[372] The "Son of Man" is not pleased by the punishment of sinner; if he was, he would not have given himself willingly for his people.[373]

Verses 35-41

Although Origen asserted that one is not "righteous" by a "single act of kindness,"[374] nevertheless everyone should attempt to "clothe" Christ in a garment, in "the viscera of mercy, purity, gentleness, humility."[375] When one has shown mercy to "the least of these," they had shown mercy to the Lord, ensuring that the Word of God (i.e. Christ) is not "unclothed" in the world. Through the perpetuation of virtuous deeds, one honors Christ, who is hidden in his weakness, in the way the Matthean parable commands.

This leads Origen to comment at length on the "Son of Man's" nature: he is weak just as his people are weak.[376] However, it is not sacrilegious to call the Lord weak,[377] since Christ was crucified for his "weakness and compassion."[378] Indeed, Christ, through his sacrifice, now bears the weakness of his people: "For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him in our dealing with you."[379]

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[371] Ibid., 232
[372] Ibid., 232
[373] Ibid., 232
[374] Origen, *The Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of St Matthew*, 669
[375] Col 3:12; Origen, *The Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of St Matthew*, 670
[376] Origen, *The Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of St Matthew*, 671
[377] Ibid., 671
[378] Ibid., 671
[379] 2 Cor 13:4

Concerning the vexing question as to why the just/sheep question their actions, Origen took it as a sign of their humility, indicating that they did not consider themselves worthy of praise from the "Son of Man."[380]

Origen, too, wondered about the physical state of both parties, following their judgement. Those who are saved shall become equal to the angels.[381] The goats, by contrast, are sent to the "eternal fire."[382] This conflagration is not the same as "human fire," since no human fire is eternal.[383] However, Origen stresses that their punishment is for a lack of faith: they had disobeyed God's commands by not doing acts of mercy.[384] The theologian also notes that the Son of Man's punishment is not formulated in the same manner as the blessing of the sheep. The passage does not call the goats, "cursed of my Father" in parallel to the sheep's designation "blessed of my Father." For Origen, this indicates that it was not the Son of Man who had condemned them, but their own guilty actions, citing the prophet Isaiah as support:

> And they will go out and look on the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; the worms that eat them will not die, the fire that burns them will not be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind[385]

Origen warns that anyone who does not do the will of God will suffer enteral damnation, in the fire prepared for the devil and his angels:[386] "Terrors will come over him; total darkness lies in wait for his treasures. A fire unfanned will consume him and devour what

[380] Origen, *The Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of St Matthew*, 671
[381] Luke 20:35-36
[382] Origen, *The Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of St Matthew*, 671-672
[383] Ibid., 671-672
[384] Ibid., 671-672
[385] Isa 66:24
[386] Origen, *The Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of St Matthew*, 672

is left in his tent."[387] And if the just become like angels, Origen logically concludes that those who perish to the eternal fire shall become identical to the devil and his angels.[388]

Likewise, Chrysostom emphasized the "Son of Man's" praise of those who have followed the will of God,[389] since He is more willing to praise than to condemn.[390] Again, those whose are cursed, are not "cursed by the Father:" it is their actions that testified against them. Tragically, the Kingdom of Heaven had been prepared for them, but their neglect sent them to the eternal fire.[391]

Verses 42-46

The curt nature of the dialogue in verses 35-41 attracted Patristic attention. Characterizing the replies of the unjust as "hasty," this indicated their lack of humility, further pointing to their lack of mercy. Rather than responding with sincerity, the goats make an "excuse" for their evil deeds.[392] According to Augustine, when the unjust ask "when have they seen and not helped him," the theologian states that this indicates that they had been "dead" in faith, even as they had gone so far as to "corrupt" the Temple of God.[393]

"Epistola Apostolorum"

Patristic writings are our most important source for examining the interpretation and usage of Matthew 25, but there are other documents from this period. One of the

[387] Job 20:26
[388] Origen, *The Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of St Matthew*, 672
[389] Oden, *Matthew 14-28: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament*, 232
[390] St John Chrysostom, *Saint John Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*, 475
[391] Ibid., 476
[392] Oden, *Matthew 14-28: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament*, 235
[393] Augustine, *Seventeen Short Treatises of Saint Augustine*, 61

most important is a text known as the *"Epistola Apostolorum,"* which may have been written c. 130-170 AD. Unfortunately, the original Greek version has not survived. The only preserved copy was found in Cairo, Egypt in 1895, written in Coptic.[394] The *"Epistola Apostolorum"* exhibits both Gnostic and anti-Gnostic tendencies,[395] with a particular emphasis on eschatology. The text portrays the Final Judgment in a fashion quite similar to Matthew 25:31-46. The body and the soul are judged together, mankind is separated, with some resting in heaven, and others punished for eternity.[396]

Sermon 158 by Saint Caesarius of Arles

"On What is Said in the Gospel"
"Come, Blessed; Also on Almsgiving"

Saint Caesarius of Arles presented a homily on Matthew 25, calling the biblical text both "dreadful" and "desirable."[397] To hear the words, "Depart from me into the everlasting fire," is to fill the hearer with terror. Yet, this Bible passage is desirable because it promises "life everlasting" to those who obey the commands of God.[398] Therefore, Caesarius cautioned congregants to "listen. . . with an attentive heart. . . [399] for if a man carefully heeds this lesson, even if he cannot read the rest of the Scriptures, this lesson alone can suffice for him to perform every good act and to avoid all evil."[400]

[394] Quasten, *Patrology: The Beginnings of Patristic Literature from the Apostles Creed to Irenaeus*, 150
[395] Ibid., 152
[396] Ibid., 152
[397] Saint Caesarius of Arles, Saint Caesarius of Arles Sermons, Volume II (81-186), (Washington D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 359
[398] Ibid., 359
[399] Ibid., 359
[400] Ibid., 359

Although Caesarius warned about the gruesome fate that awaited sinners, he exhorted his listeners to hear what the Lord had promised to those at his right hand.[401]

In accordance with other Church Fathers, Caesarius noted that the goats are cursed not for crimes of theft, murder or adultery, but because they had not committed good deeds.[402] Caesarius concluded that it was avarice alone that condemned the goats to the left hand of the Lord, thereby elevating charity to the rank of the highest virtue. In fact, the theologian holds that sinners can redeem themselves with the Lord's help,[403] by undertaking works of mercy and following the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-12. Almsgiving and merciful deeds deliver those from death to life everlasting in a dynamic of reciprocity: "Give, Lord, because I have given; have mercy because I have shown mercy. I did what you commanded: you pay what you promised."[404]

Matthew 25:31-46 in Popular Religion

Cyprian, in his treatise, "On Works and Almsgiving," was one of the first theologians to study the parable "as a whole unit." Here in this text, Cyprian was heavily concerned with Jesus' self-identification.[405] Numerous early Church Fathers were also fascinated with this theme, which led Bishop Gaudentius to conclude: "a person who says that he loves Christ but does not love the poor is a liar: Christ has affirmed that in them he is either taken care of or neglected."[406]

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[401] Ibid., 360
[402] Ibid., 360
[403] Ibid., 360
[404] Ibid., 363
[405] Boniface Ramsey, "Almsgiving in the Latin Church: The Late Fourth and Early Fifth Centuries," *Theological Studies* 43, no. 2 (June 1982): 226-259 https://doi.org/10.1177/004056398204300202 (Accessed April 21, 2020)
[406] Ibid.

However, we can see the impact of Matthew 25, not just in the theological treatises, sermons, and commentaries of the Patristic Period, but it is evident in what has been called "popular religion." Jesus' self-identification with the poor and the unfortunate would itself be a main theme of hagiographies- - - stories of saints- - - even though ironically, Matthew 25:31-46 is the only passage where Jesus declares this association.

One of the earliest known applications of this imagery appears in the "Life of Saint Martin." Sulpicius Severus memorably records that when Saint Martin was at the gates of Amiens, he came across a naked man in the middle of winter. Upon seeing the selfishness of the men surrounding him, Martin by contrast, decided to remove his cloak and cut it in half. Martin gave the poor man one half, and he clothed himself in the other half. During the middle of that night, Martin was visited by Jesus Christ himself:

> The Lord, in declaring that it was He who had been clothed in the person of the pauper, was truly mindful of his own words he uttered long ago: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."[407]

One of the best-known accounts surrounds the legendary figure of Saint Christopher. Originally called Reprobus, he was re-named "Christopher" (Christ-bearer) at this baptism into Christianity.[408] Christopher's notoriety is based on a story which related, how one day, he heard a child asking him to carry him across the river. Christopher hoisted the boy onto his shoulders and began to transport him through the water. After a short while, the river grew dangerous, putting Christopher at risk of

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[407] *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation. Vol 7. Niceta of Remesiana, Sulpicius Serverus, Vincent of Lerins, Prosper of Aquitaine.* Translated by Gerald G Walsh et all., (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1970), 107-108

[408] Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints.* Translated by Williams Granger Ryan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 396-400

drowning. In anger, Christopher reprimanded the child, but the little boy responded, "Don't be surprised, Christopher! You were not only carrying the weight of the whole world, you had him who created the world upon your shoulders! I am Christ your King, to whom you render service by doing the work you did here."[409]

Such memorable episodes drove home the point of Matthew 25 in an easily graspable way and would be revered over the millennia; often becoming the subject of devotional art and popular piety.

[409] Ibid.

Chapter 7

Medieval Europe and Matthew 25

Introduction

The Church Fathers would explore different aspects of Matthew 25 concerning the nature of divine judgement, speculation over eschatology, as well as some of the practical applications of the parable to Christian devotion. In the Middle Ages, however, we now see an even greater focus upon charity. Matthew 25 was unquestionably the most influential biblical text for the Medieval Church. Continuing the theological insights of the Patristic Period, Medieval Catholicism stressed that charity, almsgiving, and mercy would save one from eternal damnation.[410] Most pointedly, it was held that charity and mercy would bring the almsgiver in the presence of the Lord: through the company of the poor one can encounter God.[411] In a real way, almsgiving and charity was viewed as an actual sacrament, with almsgivings often associated with the Eucharist, whose celebration symbolized Christ's love for the world.[412] To engage in almsgiving and charity was a way to be a part of Jesus' divine act of mercy.[413]

By extension, it is also crucial to grasp attitudes regarding the Last Judgement, to which medieval thoughts were relentlessly directed. The vast majority of people believed that the earthly kingdom was about to be destroyed, and the heavenly kingdom established during their lifetime.[414] At that momentous- - - and imminent- - - event, the

[410] Gary A. Anderson, *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 6
[411] Anderson, 6
[412] Anderson, 8
[413] Anderson, 8
[414] *The Last Judgement in Medieval Preaching*, edited by Thom Mertens et al., (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2013), xxi

righteous and the unrighteous would be separated according to their acts of mercy, with the blessed being granted eternal life, while the cursed would suffer eternal damnation. In the back of people's mind hovered Jesus' words in Matthew 25. Interestingly, based on the writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas, by the High and Late Middle Ages, most believed that there would be two judgements: the particular judgement (judgement of the recently departed) and the general judgement (final judgement).[415] This was later adopted into church doctrine.

The Final Judgement was a frequent theme of sermons of the Middle Ages, with speculation surrounding the nature of heaven and hell. Heaven was variously described in terms of the Garden of Eden, or as a heavenly banquet, or the heavenly Jerusalem.[416] Hell, and divine punishment was often based on Old Testament accounts of God's wrath shown in the expulsion of Adam and Eve, and the fiery destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.[417]

Not surprisingly, as the Day of Judgement was seemingly delayed, speculation abounded as to what would happen to the souls of the dead before the final resurrection, or that period Tertullian called "the interim."[418] Some believed that souls would be resting until the Second Coming, others held that only the martyrs would enjoy such a state with the Lord before the final judgement.[419] However, there was general agreement

[415] *The Last Judgement in Medieval Preaching*, xxi
[416] *The Last Judgement in Medieval Preaching*, xxi
[417] Genesis 3; Genesis 19
[418] *The Last Judgement in Medieval Preaching, xix*
[419] *The Last Judgement in Medieval Preaching, xix*

that when a person died, the soul would leave the body, and be rejoined at the Last Judgement.[420]

Charlemagne

The fear that the world would come to an end and everyone would face Divine Judgement was not just a matter of theological abstraction, but provided the motivation behind religious reform and social and political transformation in Medieval Europe.[421] A clear spur for societal change was anxiety over the belief that events were linked to a cosmic "time-table." Through an intense study of apocalyptic traditions, it was concluded that the "Final Judgement" and the "End of Times" would come at the Six Thousandth year of the earth's existence.[422] Depending upon the starting point for Creation, various dates were proposed for the consummation of the age: 500AD / 800/1AD and 1,000 AD.[423]

We can see the effects of such beliefs on major events during the Middle Ages, with the coronation of Charlemagne being a dramatic example.[424] Some claim that the crowning of Charlemagne in 800- - - which brought the "Dark Ages" to its close and ushered in the "Central Middles Ages"- - - was influenced by prophecies surrounding the "end of the world."

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[420] *The Last Judgement in Medieval Preaching, xix*

[421] James Palmer, "Calculating Time and the End of Time in the Carolingian World, C.740—820." *The English Historical Review* 126, no. 523 (2011): 1307-331. http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.rowan.edu/stable/41343243 (Accessed December 20, 2020)

[422] Ibid.

[423] Using different calculations in order to prevent severe fear of the end of the world: Fears of the Apocalypse AND Calculating Time and the End of Time in the Carolingian World

[424] Christmas Day 800AD

As part of this, the Carolingians were obsessed with calendars, managing to implement a "new chronology,"[425] which was marked by a shift from AM *(annus mundi)*- - - "the birthday of the world" to AD *(anno domini)*- - - "the birthday of the Lord/Christ." The adoption of the system may have been an effort to dodge the "impending" fears of judgement at the "year 6,000," which by some accounts, was swiftly approaching. The shifting of the timeline provided only momentary pause in eschatological fears. Some relief was provided by appealing to New Testament cautions that the time of the end was/is known only to the Lord. However, medieval scholars were so intrigued by the thought of the Second Coming that they continued in their attempts to calculate the exact date.[426] Most significantly, Charlemagne believed that the Final Judgement would take place during his lifetime, [427] with concerns becoming more visible in the latter years of his reign.[428]

This anxiety was reinforced by the conviction that heresy was on the rise, which Alcuin- - - Charlemagne's advisor and theologian- - - warned was a sign of the coming of "the end of times,"[429] with the added counsel that people were to be increasingly watchful and ready (Matthew 24).[430] Many Christians prepared themselves through intensified prayer.[431]

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[425] James Palmer, "Calculating Time and the End of Time in the Carolingian World, C.740—820."
[426] Johannes Fried, *The Middle Ages*. translated by Peter Lewis (Cambridge Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), 118
[427] Johannes Fried, *Charlemagne*, translated by Peter Lewis (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 33
[428] Fried, 374
[429] Fried, 374
[430] Matthew 24
[431] Johannes Fried, *Charlemagne*, 374

It needs to be understood that these eschatological concerns were shared by poor and rich alike. The laws and actions that Charlemagne imposed were undoubtedly intended to prepare his people for the coming of the Ultimate Judge. In 802, Charlemagne had taken unprecedented measures to control religious practices within his empire. First, Charlemagne demanded that all his subjects to keep and honor the Commandments of God.[432] Moreover, Charlemagne commanded that all his subjects recognize and accept his authority and protection over the Christian church:[433]

> And we command that no one in our entire kingdom shall dare to deny hospitality to rich, or poor, or pilgrims; that is, no one may deny shelter and a hearth and water to pilgrims crossing [our] land in God's name or to anyone traveling for the love of God and for the salvation of his soul. If, however, anyone wishes to give them more in the way of donations, he should know that he will have the greatest reward from God…[434]

As a Christian king, Charlemagne saw it as his duty to ensure that his subjects lived in accordance to the "Will of God."[435]

More than previous rulers, Charlemagne relied heavily on capitularies- - - officially issued decrees- - - to enforce his religious reforms. Most of the capitularies in this regard, developed through means of governmental assemblies or ecclesiastical synods.[436] "The General Admonition of 789" claimed that Charlemagne was the "source of God's right order on Earth," with the king demanding that all Christian people lived in "peace and order." Importantly, Charlemagne would extend special protections to the "poor and unfortunate." As a Christian king, Charlemagne believed his role required him

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[432] Matthias Becher, *Charlemagne*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003), 13299
[433] Ibid., 100
[434] Alfred J Andrea, *Medieval Record: Sources of Medieval History*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2020), 123-125
[435] François L. Ganshof, "Charlemagne." *Speculum* 24, no. 4 (1949): 520-28. doi:10.2307/2854638. (Accessed December 18, 2020)
[436] Warren C Brown, *Violence in Medieval Europe*, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 69-96

protect the Church, orphans, widows, the poor, women, and defenseless. This would be framed in the striking form that any crime or action committed against these groups were committed against Charlemagne himself. This is obviously intended to evoke to Jesus' self-identification to "the least of these" within Matthew 25.[437] Moreover, Charlemagne and his advisors asserted that only the King was to "avenge wrongs" that were committed to "the least of these." As the earthly representative of God, only the anointed monarch could take legal vengeance against wrong doers.

Royal suasion and the threat of the Final Judgement undergirded everyday religious practices during Charlemagne's reign.[438] Christians were expected not only to fear the Final Judgement, but were required to be able to recite sanctioned prayers,[439] in reverence to God, but also at the peril of eternal damnation.[440] Before the awesome day, Charlemagne was committed to ensuring that that the Gospels be proclaimed to everyone, that they might know all the mysteries of the Christian religion.[441] Charlemagne and his subjects were to live in a "state of watchfulness," according to the teachings of Matthew 24-25. Pray, be watchful, and be ready for the coming of the Lord, was the constant admonition.[442]

Charlemagne regarded his will drawn up in 811, as his final Christian duty, and concerned the distribution of his property. Within this testament, his belongings were divided into various parts. A quarter of his goods were bequeathed to Charlemagne's

[437] Matthew 25:40; Matthew 25:40
[438] Johannes Fried, *Charlemagne*, translated by Peter Lewis (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 30
[439] Fried, 30
[440] Fried, 33
[441] Fried,433
[442] Matthew 24

children. But the greater percentage was either divided equally among the metropolitan sees in the kingdom, being designated for of alms,[443] or distributed to paupers and servants.[444] As part of his arrangement, Charlemagne's library was to be sold, and the profits given to the poor.[445]

Charlemagne's last act of benevolence to those least in his kingdom was a testimony to his obedience to the precepts of Matthew 25, perhaps giving him comfort as he would face the Final Judge.

Medieval Texts: *Karlamagnús Saga* and *The Heliand*

The impact of Charlemagne's rule would echo throughout the medieval world in the ensuing centuries, not just in terms of developing politics, but in emerging literary traditions surrounding his character and conduct. The most famous is the *Song of Roland*, but there are two minor accounts that treat Charlemagne's piety of special interest.

Karlamagnús

The *Karlamagnús Saga* is a thirteenth century Norse text and represents one of the first attempts to assimilate Carolingian and Norse traditions.[446] The epic concerns Charlemagne's efforts to restore Christianity to Spain after centuries of Muslim rule. It should be noted that the account is somewhat critical of the Carolingian ruler. After Charlemagne's return to France, areas that had accepted Christianity in Spain were now

[443] Matthias Becher, *Charlemagne*, 132
[444] Charlemagne will
[445] Becher, *Charlemagne*, 132
[446] Alexsandra Jochymek, "Social Margins in Karlamagnus Saga: The Rejection of Poverty." *Social Norms in Medieval Scandinavia*, edited by Jakub Morawiec et all, (Leeds, Arc Humanities Press, 2019), 229-236

challenged by African invaders under the leadership of Agulandus. Charlemagne confronts the African leader, and requests that he convert to Christianity by accepting baptism.[447] However, Agulandus sharply questions Charlemagne about his treatment of his own "paladins" or "God's Messengers." Their rough appearance, impoverished condition, and lack of food leads Agulandus to doubt the validity of Charlemagne's Christian faith and leadership.[448]

Provided with very little food and inadequate clothing, the "paladins" were tangible symbols of "the poor and needy." Indignant at the king's seeming hypocrisy, Agulandus refused to accept Charlemagne's invitation for baptism. Shamed by his neglect of his "paladins, Charlemagne ponders, "What will happen to him on the day of the last judgement, who badly treated the poor?"[449] Penitent, Charlemagne begins to become more charitable towards his retainers,[450] providing his soldiers with food, water and clothing, thus fulfilling his Christian duty of caring for "the least of these" in Matthew 25.

The Heliand: The Saxon Gospel

We have noted that Charlemagne was concerned with Christian practice in his realm.[451] However, Latin was now the official vehicle for doctrine and prayer in an "empire" expanding into areas unfamiliar with this language. The question was how would the clergy reach the peoples in these far-off regions? In response to this problem,

[447] Ibid.
[448] Ibid.
[449] Ibid.
[450] Ibid.
[451] Johannes Fried, *Charlemagne*, translated by Peter Lewis (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 222

Charlemagne ordered the translation of *The Nicene Creed* and *The Lord's Prayer* into the vernacular.[452] And later in the ninth century, Jesus' life was rendered into Old Saxon in a paraphrase of the gospels called, *the Heliand*.

While it had been surmised that this was a work of "folk-tradition," recent studies strongly suggest that *the Heliand* was the work of an ecclesiastic, i.e. a missionary or priest.[453] *The Heliand* is the oldest known piece of Saxon literature. *The Heliand* portrays the first century Jewish Jesus and his disciples in a contemporary Saxon cultural context; the aim being to "ease the conversion" of the Saxons to Christianity. Due to the Carolingians' brutal campaigns against, and defeat of these people, there was an obvious discontent over Frankish incursion into Saxon territory, including the introduction of Christianity to a thoroughly pagan people. The "Saxon Gospel" was intended to minimize the differences between the conquerors and the conquered. In fact, scholars believe that *the Heliand* was recited in mead halls rather than in churches or monasteries,[454] even as the German epic intertwined Saxon wizardry and magic into the Christian Gospels.[455]

The narrative of *The Heliand* contains familiar gospel stories such as the Nativity, the raising of Lazarus, the Transfiguration, Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem and the Passion. There is also a depiction of the Final Judgement, which is largely parallel to Matthew 25:31-34, but re-imagined in Saxon guise.

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[452] Fried, 222

[453] E. C. Metzenthin. "The "Heliand": A New Approach." *Studies in Philology* 21, no. 3 (1924): 502-39. http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.rowan.edu/stable/4171893 (Accessed May 9, 2021)

[454] G Ronald Murphy, "The Old Saxon Heliand." *Early German Literature and Culture,* (New York, Camden House, 2004), 263-284

[455] Ronald Murphy S.J., *The Heliand: The Saxon Gospel* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), xiii

Table 12

Matthew's Judgement Scene compared to the Heliand

Matthew 25	***The Heliand***
When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. (25:31-34)	Whenever it does happen that Christ the Ruler, the famous Son of Man, comes with the strength of God, with the force of the most powerful kings, and with all the holy angels who are up there in heaven accompanying Him, to be seated in His own strength, at that moment all the sons of heroes, all the people of different clans, all people living, anyone ever raised by humans in this lights, will be summoned together to Him. There He, the great Chieftain, will judge the people, all of mankind, according to their actions. He will at that time separate out the wrongdoers, the warped human beings on the heart side, and He will put the fortunate on the stronger side. He will then address the good and speak to them directly. 'Come," He will say, 'you standing there are the chosen, and receive this powerful kingdom which has been prepared and constructed for the son of men for after the end of this world.

See Footnotes[456]

While it is important to note the resemblances, the differences between the two are striking. One of the most obvious is that in *the Heliand*, the "famous Son of Man" is called by the Saxon title, "chieftain," which refers to the relationship between a Germanic military leader and his subordinates.[457] However, the *Heliand*, as does Matthew 25, declares that the King/chieftain will judge the people according to their acts. But here

[456] Matthew 25:31-36; Ronald Murphy S.J., *The Heliand: The Saxon Gospel* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 143-144

[457] Murphy, "The Old Saxon Heliand." *Early German Literature and Culture,* 266

there is a sharp contrast. By the Middle Ages, it was accepted as doctrine, that Matthew 25 elevated caring for the lowly and poor as the main, if only, determinant of salvation. In the Heliand, this is at best implied. The "sons of heroes" are judged by the great chieftain, separating them into "the wrongdoers, and the warped" on the left ("the heart side"), and the "fortunate" on the "stronger side" who will inherit "this powerful kingdom after the end of the world"- - - seemingly more of a description of "Valhalla," than heaven. The warlike Saxon virtues of fame, honor, and heroism precluded caring "for the least of these," unless it was to come to the aid of the chieftain in battle. One has the suspicion that here, the "goats" had the upper hand.

Medieval Iconography: The Seven Acts of Mercy

If one questioned the importance of The Last Judgment in the medieval Thought world, any doubt would be wiped away by looking at church art and architecture. Matthew 25:31-46 was clearly an inspiration for depictions of the Last Judgment; a frequent image on numerous tympanums at the entrance to cathedrals, stained glass images, mosaics, and murals.

Although dated to the Sixteenth Century, one of the most interesting late medieval works alluding to Matthew 25, is the painting, *The Seven Acts of Mercy* by the Master of Alkmaar (1504: Rijksmuseum, Netherlands). Consisting of seven panels, each scene portrays the "acts of mercy" described in Matthew 25:31-46 along with a burial. The rendering of the poor and needy is noteworthy. Throughout Alkmaar's work, the unfortunate parties are depicted "harshly and roughly"[458] This is an effort to make them

[458] Michael Paul Gallagher. "The Quality of Mercy." *The Furrow* 66, no. 5 (2015): 247-54. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44738386 (Accessed May 9, 2021)

appear more deprived and penurious, *and to some extent, more unattractive*. As a visual representation of Matthew 25:31-46, the "acts of mercy" are very criteria by which the sheep and the goats will be separated for eternal life or damnation. Within each episode, Jesus himself is shown as being among "the least of these," dramatically illustrating Matthew 25:40: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."[459]

Crucially, while Jesus is visible to the viewers looking at the painting, Alkmaar shows that he is hidden from the person giving alms and other comforts to the sufferer, and unknowingly to Christ. In a deliberate effort to connect Jesus even further to the poor, the panels do not openly advertise his holiness and righteousness, a staple of devotional art. Often, Jesus is behind the crowd of people. In the first panel ("feeding the hungry"), Christ is "facing" the person giving charity, but his eyes are watching the viewer. This is an attempt to force the onlooker to "question" their own commitment to the poor, even as it reminds him/her that Jesus continues to be among "the least of these."[460]

By contrast, in the second and third panels ("giving a drink to the thirsty and clothing the naked") Jesus is positioned behind the crowd and peering directly at the donor.[461] This is central to understanding the dynamics of charity. It is apparent that those who are charitable already have "received grace" for their act. Inscriptions under the panels further stress that those who commit acts of mercy are rewarded in heaven for their actions. "Be charitable to the poor and God shall once again have mercy on you"

[459] Matthew 25:40
[460] Michael Paul Gallagher. "The Quality of Mercy."
[461] Ibid.

and "for the food and drink you offer in this life you shall be rewarded a thousand-fold."[462]

Saint Francis of Assisi and the Franciscans

The painting, *The Seven Acts of Mercy*, and its portrayal of daily charity among the indigent expressed the ideals of one of the most influential figures in late medieval religion, Saint Francis of Assisi, whose conversion became a model of popular piety.

As a young man, Francis lived a life of arrogance and wealth. He made his living as a cloth merchant until he experienced a series of visions, in which he claimed that Christ had called upon him. Francis regarded one of them as having great significance, when he watched a leper cross his path.[463] Francis confessed that he felt two emotions at being in the presence of such a social outcast: disgust and pity.[464] Out of remorse, Francis held the leper, only discover that the figure was Christ- - - a dramatic unveiling of Matthew 25. Francis recognized that Jesus, out of pity for humanity, had carried the weight of the alienated world on his shoulders and died on the cross on behalf of rejected humanity.

Devoting himself to the teachings of Jesus, Francis concluded that material poverty was the way to true riches. Francis willingly gave up his possessions to become a "crusader" for Jesus,[465] eventually founding the order named after him, which was later

[462] Ibid.
[463] Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints,* 606-607
[464] Ibid.
[465] Andre Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi*, translated by Michael Cusato, (New Haven, CT., Yale University Press, 2012), 46-47

given papal approval. The two major aspects of the Franciscan Order were poverty and charity. All members were prohibited from owning any form of possessions and were required to travel preaching and teaching the Gospel to the common people. Essential to their mission the care of the poor and sick. Forbidden to take money, the Franciscans begged for their food**,** publicly testifying to their solidarity with, and presence among "the least of these."

Saint Thomas Aquinas

Inasmuch as Augustine's work was crucial to the development of Christian thought in the early medieval period, Thomas Aquinas was the leading Medieval proponent of Scholastic theology in the High and Late Middle Ages. Aquinas held that Faith and Reason- - - represented by Aristotelianism- - - could be used together to understand God's purposes for the world. Aquinas expressed this position in one of his greatest works, the unfinished *Summa Theologica*: "It was necessary for man's salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God besides philosophical science built up by human reason."[466] I shall now take a look at the *Summa Theologica* and consider Aquinas' position on Matthew 25:31-46.

Verse 25:31

Aquinas combines Matthew 25:31 and John 5:22[467] to explore how Christ holds judiciary powers over worldly human affairs.[468] Bestowed by the authority of God,[469] Jesus who is "the Son of Man," has been given judgement over the world because he is

[466] Saint Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I. QI. AI.
[467] "Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son." John 5:22
[468] Aquinas, Summa Theologica, III. Q59.
[469] Matthew 25:31 and John 5:22

also "the Word of God."[470] Thus, it may be reasoned that "all the nations" will be judged by Christ according to the Beatitudes[471] and either be granted or denied entrance into the "Kingdom of Heaven." Aquinas summarizes what this process will look like, by accepting the parable of the narrative, that when "the Son of Man comes in his glory"[472] he will be accompanied by his angels. The angels will "gather all the nations" before Him, and He will judge them according their acts of mercy towards "the least of these." The theologian points out that "the Son of Man" shall not judge the angels on the basis of 1 Corinthians 6:4 that "Do you not know that we are to judge the angels?"[473] Therefore, the saints, not Christ, shall judge the angels for their service.

Verse 25:33

Here, Thomas attempts to explain why "the right" is a position of privilege, noting that there are numerous Biblical verses that claim that the "Right hand of God" is exalted and righteous.

The Lord says to my lord:
"Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet."[474]

"So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."[475]

[470] John 1:14
[471] Matthew 5
[472] Matthew 25:31
[473] 1 Corinthians 6:4
[474] Psalm 110:1
[475] Isaiah 41:10

This is further attested at the conclusion of Mark that: "After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God."[476] Aquinas claims that it is most appropriate and just for Christ to sit at the "Right hand of the Father."[477] The Gospel of Matthew further claims that the "righteous" will placed on "right" and shall receive the "Kingdom of Heaven." The biblical evidence shows that "the right hand" of the Father is a place of honor, righteousness and exaltation.

Verse 25:41

Aquinas' approach reflects medieval attitudes surrounding court protocol and dynamics of rule: what accounts for Christ's role of judge; how do spatial concerns express proper procedure?

He now turns to the nature of the verdict when the wicked will be cast into the "eternal fire that was prepared for the devil and his angels."[478] At first there would appear to be a contradiction: the separated soul cannot suffer from the corporeal fire because they are of two different elements. However, Aquinas argues that separated souls that are cast into the "eternal fire" within the bodies of the demons, can indeed suffer from the flames of the corporeal fire.[479] He concludes: "Now in sinning the soul subjected itself to the body by sinful concupiscence."[480]

Aquinas accepts that punishment for the damned and reward for the righteous will be everlasting, but concurs with the observation of Chrysostom, that Matthew 25:41 does not relay the verdict, "Cursed of my Father," because it was the actions of the wicked that

[476] Mark 16:19
[477] Aquinas, Summa Theologica, III. Q58.
[478] Matthew 25:41
[479] Aquinas, Summa Theologica, III. Q70
[480] Ibid.

account for their condition.[481] Thus it can said, that they (the wicked) had failed to be virtuous.[482]

Ethical Implications of the Acts of Charity and the Personification of the "Son of Man" as "The Least of These" within the Summa Theologica

Thomas sought to define and explain technical issues of "procedure" and the nature of "governance" in Matthew 25:31-46 in the *Summa*, but strangely, he neither commented on the acts of charity essential for the entrance into the eschatological "Kingdom," nor did he address Jesus' identification of the "Son of Man" and "the least of these." He simply acknowledges the "Lord's" judgement over humanity, accepting the church's belief that this is also "the Son of Man."

The "Son of Man" Interpretation by Thomas Aquinas According to his Commentary

The *Summa* is selective in its observations about Matthew 25, however, Aquinas' separate commentary on the biblical chapter is complex and thorough, and generally follows traditional interpretations of the passage. However, it would seem that the figure and nature, of the "Son of Man" attracted much of his attention.

According to Aquinas "the Son of Man" and "the Son of God" are synonymous, but he reasons that Jesus had to appear as "the Son of Man," citing John 5:27 in support: "And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man."[483] Nevertheless, Aquinas argues that if Jesus had appeared as "the Son of God," he would not have been visible to all people,[484] since this contradicts Revelation 1:7: "Look, he is

[481] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*. Translated by Jeremy Holmes, edited by The Aquinas Institute (Lander, Wyoming: Aquinas Institute For The Study Of Sacred Doctrine, 2013), 865
[482] Ibid., 867
[483] John 5:27
[484] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 346

coming with the clouds," and "every eye will see him, even those who pierced him"; and all peoples on earth "will mourn because of him." Aquinas concludes that if Jesus appeared as the divine "Son of God," he would have only been seen by those who lived the virtuous and righteous life. In order to be seen by all, good and evil, he had to appear in the form of a man.

But Thomas asks, what does it mean when it says that "the Son of Man" will come in his glory (or majesty)? Thomas Aquinas asserts- - - citing 1 Thessalonians 4:16[485], Acts 9 and Matthew 16:27 as support- - - [486] that this means Jesus will appear in human-form as "the Son of Man," but with the divinity of God himself.[487]

Aquinas then turns his attention as to why angels attend "the Son of Man." He forms an explanation based on Psalms 91:11, that the angels are appointed by God as the guardians of all men: "For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways."[488] Therefore, is only to be expected that angels will be sent as witnesses to the Lord's Judgement.[489]

Quite interesting is Aquinas' suggestion that the "glorious throne" is metaphorical, indicating that "the Son of Man" will exercise his judgement through the

[485] "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first."
[486] "For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done."

[487] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*.), 347
[488] Psalm 91:11
[489] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*.), 347

angels and the holy men. These men[490], according to Matthew 19:28: "will sit on the twelve glorious thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel."[491]

For Aquinas, it would seem that the complex nature of the divine and human natures of Christ attracted more of his intellectual efforts than anything else.

[490] The 12 Disciples of Jesus
[491] Matthew 19:28

Chapter 8

Conclusion

Throughout this study, I have examined Jesus' parabolic prophecy in Matthew 25:31-46 concerning the Son of Man and the Last Judgement. This concludes his instructions to his followers before his arrest, trial and crucifixion, and has a climatic quality to it. In a real way, the entirety of Matthew's gospel had led to this decisive moment, and it clearly closes off the eschatological discourse that begins in Matthew 24, even as it incorporates themes and images from earlier chapters.

I have tried to trace how the parable of "the Son of Man," "the sheep and the goats" and "the least of these" would have been understood by the original first century audience, within the religious, cultural, and social backdrop of Second Temple Judaism, and the movement of Restoration Eschatology. Rather than being a call for social action, as it indeed would become in the early church, Jesus' parable originally referred to how various groups reacted to his followers who had accepted his kingdom message. In first century Israel, the "hungry, thirsty, naked, stranger, sick, imprisoned," were Scriptural designations of people who had been in a "state of exile," but had been longing for Restoration- - - the heart of Jesus' proclamation. Shockingly, the treatment of these "coming out of Exile" groups, i.e. the members of Jesus' following, becomes the single criteria at the Last Judgment, and will form the ethical standard by which to separate the "sheep" from the "goats."

The exalted figure of the "Son of Man" and eschatological judge, is initially presented according to Second Temple expectations, but the image is turned on its head, when he reveals that he has identified wholly with the parties who had been yearning for

Restoration. That the "goats" had dismissed "the least of these," and by extension, had dishonored "the Son of Man" himself, was, from their viewpoint, reasonable: these "exiled" parties would have been regarded as having been rejected by God, due to their abject condition. The "sheep," by surprising contrast, do not accept the kingdom message, but they do treat its adherents with simple humanity. It is enough: they will inherit "the kingdom established from the foundation of the world." They had carried out the basic tasks given to human beings at Creation and are rewarded.

The prophetic parable in its original Palestinian setting, had to do with strengthening the group identity of the hard-pressed, core-followers of Jesus, who had accepted his message, in face of criticism and growing opposition. This is a theme found earlier in the eschatological discourse, and the parable offers reassurance to Jesus' disciples and supporters that the choice they had made would have ultimate consequences, not just for them, but any and all who had encountered them, and reacted with either basic charity ("the sheep"), or neglect ("the goats").

There might be some allusions to material poverty, but the parable really isn't a summons to help the needy. It must be quickly added, such admonitions and commands are easily found in Jesus' teaching and practice, and the language of deprivation and rejection would be adapted for charitable concerns. However, it's also striking that the word "poor," which was the usual designation for the materially deprived elsewhere in the gospels, isn't used here.

However, by the Patristic Period, the original situation of the parable had become muted, and it became transformed into a model for social action within Christianity. In many ways, it would be foundational for making almsgiving and charity a "sacrament" in

the medieval church. The eschatological setting reinforced the necessity of helping the poor and impoverished, even as the self-identification of the Son of Man with "the least of these," was crucial in "humanizing" and "sanctifying" parties that were regarded as outcast and forgotten in the Roman world. The parable's power and example was such, that it became a significant factor in instituting real social change in the Middle Ages, as Charlemagne's actions testified.

However, the parable's impact- - - however it is read and utilized- - - is still felt today. That is a topic for further exploration.

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