

LOOKING FOR THE LEAST: AN ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION  
OF INTERPRETIVE ISSUES WHICH HAVE INFLUENCED  
THE INTERPRETATION OF THE JUDGMENT  
OF THE SHEEP AND GOATS (MATTHEW 25:31-46)

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Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary  
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Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Gaylen P. Leverett  
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Student Name: Gaylen Leverett Student ID# 000208765

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This Dissertation has been approved.

Date of Defense: October 29, 2007

Major Professor: *Andreas J. Köstenberger*

Dr. Andreas J. Köstenberger

2<sup>nd</sup> Faculty Reader: *David R. Beck*

Dr. David Beck

External Reader: *David Turner*

Dr. David Turner

Ph.D. Director: *Andreas J. Köstenberger*

Dr. Andreas J. Köstenberger

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyses and evaluates the interpretive issues which have influenced the interpretation of Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats (Matt 25:31–46).

The first chapter summarizes 18 interpretations of Matt 25:31–46 drawn from the reading perspectives of scholars who represent distinct approaches to interpretation from ancient to post-modern times. This chapter demonstrates how these commentators' opinions about the locus of meaning affected their interpretations of Matt 25:31–46.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 list and discuss the many other interpretive issues that have influenced the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46. Chapter 2 explains the relevance of theories which have been adopted concerning the author's identity and life setting. Chapter 3 discusses the interpretive issues that are related to the wording of the text and its relation to other texts both inside and outside of Matthew's Gospel. Chapter 4 discusses the interpretive issues that are related to the proper identification of the genre of Matt 25:31–46 as well as those issues related to the rhetorical structure of the passage and its relation to the broader lines of argument in the balance of the Gospel.

Chapter 5 evaluates all of the interpretive issues listed in chapters 2, 3, and 4 from a reading perspective that recognizes the locus of meaning in the author's intention. This chapter opens with a "working" description of the author and his life setting. The balance of the chapter evaluates each interpretive issue in the light of this working description of the author. The chapter concludes that this author would have intended the passage

primarily to console the missionary disciples who were facing neglect and persecution in their obedience to the Great Commission (Matt 28:19–20). The “least” in 25:40 and 45 were therefore primarily intended to refer to the disciples, especially in their missionary capacity. A secondary intention may well have been a warning to other Christians to practice brotherly love.

The dissertation ends with a brief “Epilogue” which discusses the strengths and limitations of this method of interpretation.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION AND SELECTIVE REVIEW OF THE COMMENTARY TRADITION

Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats is an exceptionally fertile text which has in the past 1,900 years generated a wide range of interpretations. The broadest review of the interpretive tradition of Matt 25:31–46 in English today is Sherman Gray's, *The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25:31–46: A History of Tradition*.<sup>1</sup> Gray surveys and offers a basic analysis for over 1,400 commentators from antiquity to modern times. Gray's study is an excellent work both in breadth and analytical insight, but it is now twenty years old. In these twenty years, new issues in hermeneutics have raised new interpretive issues for the passage. The work of Louis-Jean Frahier, *Le Jugement Dernier*, offers a deeper and slightly more contemporary analysis of the factors that have influenced the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46.<sup>2</sup> Yet, in the 15 years since Frahier's work was published a few significantly distinct interpretations have come to light. This study will analyze the interpretive factors that have influenced commentaries regarding Matt 25:31–46 both before and after the reviews of Gray and Frahier. This study will conclude with a fresh

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<sup>1</sup> Sherman W. Gray, *The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25:31–46: A History of Interpretation* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) was originally written as Gray's Ph.D. dissertation at Catholic University of America in 1987 under the direction of Joseph F. Fitzmyer.

<sup>2</sup> Louis-Jean Frahier, *Le Jugement Dernier: Implications éthiques sur le Bonheur de l'homme Mt 25, 31–46* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1992).

evaluation of these interpretive issues based on a reading perspective which acknowledges the primary locus of meaning in the intention of Matthew the Evangelist.

### **Statement of Purpose**

This study of Matthew's "Judgment of the Sheep and Goats" (25:31–46) analyzes and evaluates the interpretive factors which have led to the wide variety of interpretations found among commentators who have treated this passage. Often the conclusions commentators achieve are greatly affected by their opinions regarding the locus of meaning. The concluding chapter of this study will adopt the author's intention as the primary locus of meaning. From this vantage point, this study will provide an analysis and evaluation of the significant interpretive issues which have been raised among commentators no matter what their perspective on the locus of meaning. The ultimate goal of this study is to offer a circumspect and self-critical interpretation of this passage which recognizes the priority of authorial intent. A significant byproduct of this study will be its demonstration of how the opinions of commentators about the locus of meaning and other interpretive issues have affected a wide variety of interpretations for this passage. Another byproduct of this study will be its concise review of the several methods of Bible study which have developed from ancient times to the present.

### **Methodology**

This study will accomplish two things in sequence. The first step will identify and analyze the critical data (interpretive issues) which have historically influenced interpretations of Matt 25:31–46 in the commentary tradition. The second step will evaluate this data and will offer an interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 from a perspective

which acknowledges authorial intention as the primary locus of meaning. A brief “Epilogue” will discuss the strengths and limitations of this interpretation as compared with other interpretations drawn from different perspectives.

### Clarifying the Interpretive Issues

After the current chapter’s selective review of commentators who have given distinct interpretations of Matt 25:31–46, chapters two through four will identify and analyze the critical interpretive issues over which commentators are still divided. This analysis will display the complex relationship these issues have to each other and how these issues are related to each other in the interpretive processes of commentators who have different interpretive goals and methods.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 will divide these interpretive issues into three groups. Chapter 2 will identify and discuss the interpretive issues related to questions regarding Matthew’s life circumstances and the life circumstances of his original audience. Chapter 3 will identify and discuss the issues related to textual questions which commentators have faced in their study of this passage. One textual question concerns whether the extant text is the primary focus of study or whether Matthew’s earlier sources for this passage should be reconstructed and studied as a more original and perhaps more authoritative description of the final judgment. Another series of textual questions touches upon the issue of intertextuality. At this point in the study, a brief review of the development and different perspectives on intertextuality will be given. The texts both inside and outside of Matthew’s Gospel which have been related to the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 will also be presented and discussed. Chapter 4 will discuss two literary issues related to the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46. The first of these concerns the

correct identification of the genre of the passage. Here, the evocative and predictive qualities of parabolic and apocalyptic discourse will be discussed. The second literary issue concerns the rhetorical structure of the passage (the way this passage appears to convey its line of thought). Since Matthew's lines of thought concerning this passage extend out beyond the passage itself, the rhetorical structure of both the immediate context (the Olivet Discourse) and of the entire Gospel will also be analyzed for their rhetorical relations to Matt 25:31–46.

At the end of Chapter 4, a few comments will conclude the analysis of the interpretive data by recognizing the most crucial questions regarding the interpretation of Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats. The identity of the "least" is the most broadly recognized *crux interpretum* for Matt 25:31–46. Two basic interpretations for the identity of the "least" exist, though there are many variations of these two interpretations. One group of commentators holds that the "least" represent all the disadvantaged people of the world. This group of commentators tends to conclude that the passage teaches that the criterion by which people will be judged is their practical display of a general ethic of humanitarian love. Another group of commentators holds that the "least" represent only Christians or a special subset of Christians who teach or preach the gospel. Commentators who hold this opinion tend to conclude that the passage teaches that the criterion of judgment has more to do with whether or not people display their faith in and agreement with the gospel by giving assistance to the Christians who proclaim it. A few commentators believe the ethics and criteria displayed in both of these interpretations were intended to be conveyed.

## A Selective Review of the Commentary Tradition for Matthew 25:31–46

### *Three Historical Phases of Biblical Interpretation*

Though the complex history of biblical commentaries prevents it from being crisply divided into mutually exclusive epochs, this study will categorize commentators into categories labeled “pre-modern,” “modern,” and “post-modern.”<sup>1</sup> The commentators in each group have distinct interests, emphases, and approaches to interpretation which differentiate them from the commentators in the other two groups. Distinctions also exist between commentators in the same group. All of these distinctions affect the interpretations which commentators give for Matt 25:31–46. A general description of each of these three groups will bring into better relief the distinctions between commentators who belong to the same group.

“Pre-modern” commentators see the text as inspired by God with the ability to speak to the need of God’s people with “oracular” authority. The Holy Spirit who originally inspired the text to be written was also expected to enlighten and guide the obedient reader in the process of reading and application. Under the conviction that the Holy Spirit who inspired the whole canon of Scripture would not have contradicted himself, pre-modern commentators also attempted to develop their interpretations in harmony with the balance of Scripture. Very early, a “rule of faith” was also developed and recognized as a guide and guard against false interpretations.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson places René Descartes as the pivotal figure between the pre-modern and modern periods. Twentieth-century authors such as Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Jacques Derrida are names that factor heavily in the transition from the modern period to the post-modern. D.A. Carson *Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 58, 68–77.

<sup>2</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 120–122.

Since the Enlightenment, “modern” commentaries have placed a heavier interest in many things beyond the intention of God. These include a heightened and more concentrated interest in the identity of the human author and in the human author’s intention for the original audience. Both the most original wording of the text or the text’s prehistory in the literary and oral traditions of early Christians have become more important for many modern commentators. Modern commentators also display a high interest in the contextual relation of Matt 25:31–46 to the balance of Matthew’s Gospel. Modern commentators are also interested in the intertextual allusions which Matthew’s Gospel makes to texts outside of the Gospel. Modern commentators analyze the genre of the Matt 25:31–46, not only against the modes of communication recognized by people in the ancient world, but also by applying modern theories of literary science to the passage. Modern discussions about the dynamics of composition and interpretation have led some commentators to recognize distinctions between the “historical author” and the “historical audience” on the one hand and the “implied author” and the “implied audience” on the other.<sup>3</sup> Modern commentators who use Matt 25:31–46 as a window into the author’s intention seek a locus of meaning “behind the text”. Some modern commentators use Matthew’s text as a starting point for speculating a more original form of the passage – one which goes back to Jesus. These commentators who are primarily interested in a more original form of this pericope recognize a locus of meaning further “behind the text” than its final author. For this group, the intention of Jesus appears to be more

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<sup>3</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 162–63; Mark Allan Powell, “Toward a Narrative-Critical Understanding of Matthew,” in *Gospel Interpretation: Narrative-Critical & Social-Scientific Approaches*, ed. Jack Dean Kingsbury (Harrisburg: Trinity, 1997), 9–15, 10–12.



normative for the meaning of Matt 25:31–46 than is the intention of the Evangelist.<sup>4</sup> This “distinction” between Jesus’ intention and the Evangelist’s has led some commentators to see truth in both.<sup>5</sup> Another group of modern commentators believe the text itself is the bearer of meaning. These commentators may simply be grouped together as commentators who seek the locus of meaning “within the text”.

Finally, there are the reader-centered commentators who believe the locus of meaning is neither within the text nor behind the text but “in front of the text”—in the reader(s). Some reader-centered commentators refuse to speculate about the intentions of people who lived 2,000 years ago because they think that human language can not accurately convey consistent messages from one person to another—especially across such broad gaps in time. Influences from the reader’s personal context are believed to be so different from those which affected the writer and so impossible to lay aside that all interpretations are believed to be necessarily personal and never really objective.<sup>6</sup> Other reader-centered commentators attempt to identify the biblical author’s intentions only to marginalize them as archaic and not identical with the meaning of the text for today. Some reader-centered commentators believe biblical texts—especially the sayings that descend from Jesus—should be treated as evocative works of art which do not convey objective meaning but which lead readers to fashion their own meaning in light of the

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<sup>4</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 8<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: Scribners, 1972), 206–214. J. A. T. Robinson, “The ‘Parable’ of the Sheep and Goats,” *NTS* 2 (1955–56): 231–32.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Lambrecht, *Once More Astonished: The Parables of Jesus*, (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 219–26; and “The Parousia Discourse: Composition and Content in Mt. XXIV–XXV,” in *L’Evangile selon Matthiew Rédaction et théologie*, ed. M. Didier (Gembloux: Duculot, 1972) 309–42.

<sup>6</sup> D.A. Carson concisely traces the development of this skepticism about languages ability to convey the intention of the author (the “New Hermeneutic”) in *The Gagging of God*, 65–72.

text's influence upon their imagination and values.<sup>7</sup> Some theorists maintain that an interpretation is valid as long as it is accepted by a "reading community."<sup>8</sup> Others argue that each individual's experience with the text is as valid as any other. The work of Jacques Derrida is often cited as a leading influence in this line of literary thought.<sup>9</sup> This shift of the locus of meaning from the author or his text to the reader or his community is the defining characteristic of what is now being called "post-modern" interpretation.<sup>10</sup> The most significant biblical commentators who have treated Matt 25:31-46, however, display a common reluctance to adopt the historical agnosticism that is part of the broader post-modern movement. Most reader-centered commentators confidently speculate a great deal of knowledge about the original setting and original intention of Matt 25:31-46 even though they choose to marginalize that intention as if the locus of meaning for the text today must be identified more heavily in the reader rather than in the author or objectively in the text itself.

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<sup>7</sup> Dan Otto Via, *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967). The following works speak approvingly of a trend toward allowing the "reader's response" to be the guiding light for interpreting parables: Warren S. Kissinger, *The Parables of Jesus: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1979); Norman Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom: Symbol and Metaphor in New Testament Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985, first printing 1976); and David B. Gowler, *What Are They Saying About Parables?* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1980), 14. Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 33–34.

<sup>9</sup> "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982); *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1976); *Writing and Difference*, ed. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> Carson, *Gagging of God*, 77; Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 168.

### ***Reading Perspectives Historically Used to Interpret Matthew 25:31–46***

Beyond the critical issue of the locus of meaning, other factors also influence how commentators have interpreted Matt 25:31–46. These factors include the commentators' perspectives regarding epistemology and hermeneutics as well as the often subtle influence of a commentator's life circumstances. Some commentators wrote very pointedly about these things, and others did not. The epistemology, hermeneutic, and life circumstances of each commentator are relevant, but the descriptions given for each commentator in the present review will not be comprehensive. The primary goal of this review is merely to show how a wide variety of reading perspectives has identified a growing number of interpretive issues as well as many different interpretations for Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats.

In order for the dissertation to compare a rich mix of interpretive perspectives on Matt 25:31–46, a careful selection of methodologically distinct commentators has been made from each of the pre-modern, modern, and post-modern groups. Each of these groups may be further divided, but the distinctions at the lowest levels are not always clean and neat. Commentators are often eclectic or synthetic in their methodology to one degree or another. Neither does any school of thought regarding hermeneutics disappear completely when a new perspective is introduced. The commentators reviewed here were chosen either because of their historical significance, their distinct reading strategies, or because of their distinct interpretive conclusions for Matt 25:31–46. The responsibility to limit this study to an appropriate length forces the selection of commentators to be narrower than it could be. Even so, the breadth of perspectives, methods, and conclusions which exists across the selected commentators is sufficient to show how a wide variety of

interpretive issues and conclusions has arisen regarding Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats.

#### Pre-modern commentators

For pre-modern commentators the locus of meaning appears to lie behind the text in the intention of God as mediated through the human authors. The goal of reading is to understand what God intended to say through the human authors. Even before the New Testament was completed and joined to the Old, the Person and work of Christ was believed to be a central subject about which God spoke in Scripture. Luke's Gospel shows that Jesus, during his public ministry (Luke 4:16–21) and after his resurrection, interpreted the Old Testament as a witness to himself and his saving work, "Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures" (Luke 24:25–27, NASB).<sup>11</sup> New converts were trained in "the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42) which often included citations of Old Testament texts in reference to Jesus.<sup>12</sup> Peter's summary characterizes the earliest Christian perspective of how the Old Testament points to Christ, "Moses said, 'The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren; to him you shall give heed to everything He says to you. And it will be that every soul that does not heed that

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<sup>11</sup> Unless otherwise noted or clear from the context, the Scripture quoted in this study will be taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. Usually, the punctuation of the NASB will be edited in order to eliminate the Arabic numbers that demark the verses in each chapter. This will mean that changes may also need to be made to reduce the quotation marks which are reintroduced in extended quotations at the beginning of every numbered verse in the NASB. In addition, the awkward appearance of capitalization to identify Old Testament quotations in the New Testament will sometimes be eliminated.

<sup>12</sup> Richard N. Longenecker lists only the clearest citations of the Old Testament in Acts and still achieves a total of 27 – almost one citation per chapter on average. These are scattered across the preaching of Peter (8), Stephen (9 in one sermon), Philip (1), James (1), Paul (7), and the church in general (1). *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 70–71.

prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.’ And likewise, all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and his successors onward, also announced these days” (Acts 3:22–24). By the time of Irenaeus, the body of doctrine which sprang from this interpretive tradition was called the “rule of faith.” Heretics, like Marcion, who added to or diminished this message were rejected.<sup>13</sup> Mani is another teacher who would be rejected because of his disregard to the rule of faith.

Mani (216–276), the founder of Manichaeism, is unique among the commentators reviewed in this study. He is the only one who claimed divine inspiration for his own teaching, and he is the only one who appropriated Matthew’s Judgment of the Sheep and Goats without directly citing it. Both of these peculiarities complicate our effort to determine Mani’s opinions regarding the identity of the least and of the locus of meaning for Matt 25:31–46.

As a self-acclaimed prophet, Mani did not interpret texts. He rather appropriated elements from them to be vehicles of his own teaching. These elements Mani blended with his own visions and revelations to produce the doctrines of his new religion. Mani, however, did not present his teaching as something new. He claimed an inspired ability to recognize the eternal truth in texts and to restore this truth to its original clarity before it was corrupted by the disciples of the earlier inspired messengers (Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, etc.).<sup>14</sup> His opinion, therefore, regarding the locus of meaning in texts which he believed to be fallible seems to be divided between the true meaning intended by the

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<sup>13</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, “Preface” to book 3; 3.3.1–2; 3.2.1; and 3.3. Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 148–67.

<sup>14</sup> Iain Gardner, “Introduction,” in *The Kephalaia of the Teacher: The Edited Coptic Manichaean Texts in Translation with Commentary*, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies, no. 27 (New York: Brill, 1995), xi–xxxvi, xi–xiv.

inspired messengers and the fallible traditions of their disciples. Mani's selective use of a variety of traditions, viewed from the outside, appears to be eclectic. This habit of assimilating traditions persisted among his followers. Therefore, attempts to universalize an eschatology for Manichaeism must proceed with caution.<sup>15</sup> Thankfully, the text which records Mani's appropriation of the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats, the *Šābuhragān*, is one of the oldest and most original of all the Manichean texts. Its witness to Mani's teaching is as direct as today's scholar may have. This work has been translated into English.<sup>16</sup> The following summary is influenced greatly by Manfred Hutter's analysis and interpretation.<sup>17</sup>

In the *Šābuhragān*, Mani mixes the images and scenes described in Matthew 24–25 with his own religious views to produce a Manichean version of the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats. In Mani's version, the Zoroastrian god Xradešahr ("the god of the world of wisdom") takes the role of Jesus in the Gospels. The substitution of Xradešahr for Jesus' name would have made the judgment scene more palatable to one of Mani's targeted audiences—the Iranian court which was still heavily influenced by Zoroastrianism.<sup>18</sup> That Mani equated this Persian god with Jesus is evident from the

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<sup>15</sup> Iain Gardner, "The Eschatology of Manichaeism as a Coherent Doctrine," *The Journal of Religious History* 17 (1993): 257–273, 269, 273.

<sup>16</sup> D. N. MacKenzie, in the preface to his translation of this text called it "one of the few texts directly attributable to Mani himself." "Mani's *Šābuhragān*," *BSOAS* 42 (1979): 500–34; and "Mani's *Šābuhragān* II," *BSOAS* 43 (1980): 288–310.

<sup>17</sup> Manfred Hutter, "Mt 25:31–46 in der Deutung Manis," *NT* 33 (1991): 276–82.

<sup>18</sup> Majella Franzmann, *Jesus in the Manichaean Writings* (New York: T & T Clark, 2003), 18–19.

superscription for the judgment scene in the *Šābuhragān* itself which reads “The Coming of the Son of Man.”<sup>19</sup>

The following summary places in parentheses the verses of Matthew from which Mani’s comments seem to be drawn. In Mani’s account, just prior to the coming of Xradešahr, “a great sign will appear” on earth, in heaven, on the sun and moon and among the stars (Matt 24:3, 29–30). Xradešahr will stand up in the heavens accompanied by the praises of all the gods of the cosmos (angels? Matt 25:31). Mani’s account adds elements to the judgment scene to assimilate his religion’s classification of people into three groups: the “religious” who fully separate themselves to practice the ascetic faith, the “auditors” (called here “helpers”) who retain their worldly employments to give material aid to the religious, and the “wicked ones” who do not adhere to Mani’s teaching.

Accordingly, Xradešahr will send his messengers to bring the “religious” with their “helpers” and the “wicked ones” before Xradešahr (Matt 24:31).<sup>20</sup> After some initial dialogue, Xradešahr places the religious on his right so that they will be blessed with the gods. The evildoers are placed on the left and cursed. The helpers of the religious on the right are given a blessing which is reminiscent of Matt 25:35–36, “And Xradešahr says to them [so], ‘That which you did [to] the religious that [service] you did for me. And I shall give you paradise as reward.’”<sup>21</sup> Clearly, Mani’s version of the judgment identified Matthew’s “least” as the “religious” —those who have so joined themselves to the Light

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<sup>19</sup> Hutter, “Mt 25:31–46 in der Deutung Manis,” 277– 78.

<sup>20</sup> References for the *Šābuhragān* are to the pages of MacKenzie’s English translation (1979). “Mani’s *Šābuhragān*,” 505.

<sup>21</sup> MacKenzie, “Mani’s *Šābuhragān*,” 506.

and so removed themselves from worldly pursuits that they depend on the charity of the catechumens for their support. To drive the point further home, Mani's text continues, "And you are sinners, for you have been deceitful enemies of the religious, and you have distressed (them) and had no mercy on them. And [towards] the gods you are sinful and guilty." Immediately, Xradešahr appoints angels to cast the evil-doers into hell (Matt 25:41).<sup>22</sup>

Concurrently with the heretical and inter-religious appropriations of Scripture, the Christian tradition of biblical interpretation developed. As it did, orthodox commentators became increasingly conscious of how they were hermeneutically distinct from each other. One of the deepest distinctions appeared between the Alexandrian scholars who used Hellenistic allegorical methods and the Antiochene scholars who followed a more literal approach. Today, this debate is sometimes described as a debate between the ahistorical use of any kind of symbolism (allegory) on the one hand and the figurative use of historical events (typology) on the other.<sup>23</sup>

Leonhard Goppelt defined allegory as a kind of exegesis which may either use or exclude the literal meaning in order to find another different and supposedly deeper meaning through the use of the symbolic representation of elements of the text, even though the context does not indicate the presence of figurative language. Typology, on

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<sup>22</sup> MacKenzie, "Mani's Šābuhragān," 509.

<sup>23</sup> This distinction was emphasized by Jean Daniélou in his work *Origène* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1948), ET by W. Mitchell (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955) and was promoted in English by G. W. H. Lampe and K. J. Wollcombe, *Essays in Typology*, Studies in Biblical Theology, no. 22 (London: SCM, 1957). John M. Court so simplifies the distinction between Alexandrian and Antiochene exegesis, "The Preacher with a Golden Tongue: John Chrysostom," in *Biblical Interpretation: The Meanings of Scripture. Past and Present* (New York: T & T Clark, 2003), 41–53, 41.



the other hand, is limited to the divinely ordered correspondences between God's actions in the Old Testament and the way God acts in the New.<sup>24</sup>

The issue, however, was in reality more complex than the acceptance of allegory on the one hand and its replacement by typology on the other. Neither side avoided allegories or typologies altogether. As will be shown, presently, the distinction actually had more to do with the role of authorial intention, context, and the locus of meaning, and the degree by which the historicity and coherence of biblical narratives should be considered part of the inspired message.<sup>25</sup>

The school of Alexandria recognized the potential for allegorical interpretations of nearly any element of Scripture including a single letter, word or object, action, place, person, or idea. The school of Antioch was more conservative about allegories and more regularly concentrated its figurative interpretations or "fuller sense" of Scripture to "typology" and the allegories which are more clearly implied either in the immediate text or in the extended biblical canon.<sup>26</sup> A third phase of pre-modern commentators combined the methods and fruit of these two schools of thought to synthesize and convey traditional interpretations for pastoral, theological, confessional, and edification purposes which

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<sup>24</sup> Leonhard Goppelt, *TYPOS: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New*, trans. Donald H. Madvig (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 16–18.

<sup>25</sup> Francis Young, "Alexandrian and Antiochene Exegesis," in Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson, eds., *A History of Biblical Interpretation: Volume I, The Ancient Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 334–354, 337–38, 341. Francis Young seems is anxious not to ascribe to the Antiochene's a simple equation of story and history. He believes that the narrative's coherence as part of "salvation history" was the main issue for the Antiochenes, not the historicity of the events in biblical narratives. The passages which Young quotes from the Antiochenes (pages 344–49), however, do not bear this out. The fact that Antiochenes recognized anthropomorphisms about God as figures of speech or that they recognized hyperbole in the Bible does not prove as Young implies that the Antiochenes were not committed to the historical verisimilitude of biblical narratives. They rather appear to support both the historicity of the events as well as the coherence of the stories as part of the meaning of the narratives.

<sup>26</sup> Young, "Alexandrian and Antiochene Exegesis," 342–44.

were valued throughout the medieval period. Three commentators from this early period—one from each of the three groups outlined above—have had a significant influence on later generations. These are Origen (school of Alexandria), John Chrysostom (School of Antioch), and Augustine of Hippo (traditional ecclesiastical interpretation).<sup>27</sup>

Origen (*circa* 185–253) is recognized by many to be the most influential adherent of the Alexandrian allegorical approach. Origen displays the influence of Hellenistic allegorical exegesis as seen in Philo the Jew (also of Alexandria), Heracleitus, and Plutarch. These commentators all used the allegorical method to draw philosophical and ethical lessons out of the narratives of texts which readers considered authoritative. Philo based his allegories in Jewish Scripture, Heracleitus allegorized Homer’s works, and Plutarch allegorized the legends of Isis and Osiris. R. C. P. Hanson is credited for calling attention to the fact that Hellenistic allegorists were not concerned about the historical verisimilitude of the texts which they interpreted and that Origen inherited from them this same disregard for the historicity of the biblical narratives.<sup>28</sup> Origen’s allegories of biblical passages were methodologically much like theirs, especially his allegories of those passages which seemed to him to be untrue if read only according to the letter.<sup>29</sup> In

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<sup>27</sup> David S. Dockery, “New Testament Interpretation: A Historical Survey,” in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Method and Issues*, ed. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 2001), 21–44, 24–25.

<sup>28</sup> R. C. P. Hanson, *Allegory & Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen’s Interpretation of Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster, 2002, orig. 1959), 63–64.

<sup>29</sup> One of the most famous of Origen’s explanations of his method is his comparison of Scripture to the basic elements of human beings, “For as man consists of body, and soul, and spirit, so in the same way does Scripture, which has been arranged to be given by God for the salvation of men.” In this way the simple can be edified by the “flesh” of Scripture, the more advanced by the “soul,” and those who are described by the apostle as “perfect” (1 Cor 2:6–7) may receive edification from the “spiritual law” (*de Principiis* 4.1.11, ANF, IV, 359). In his homily on Genesis Origen spoke of the historical, mystical, and allegorical meanings of Scripture (2.1) or of Scripture’s letter, spirit, and moral point (11.3). William G.

his running commentary on Matthew's Gospel, this method led Origen to disregard Matt 25:31–46 as a very literal description of a judgment to come.<sup>30</sup> In the opening lines of his direct treatment of Matt 25:31–46, Origen challenged both the logistics of this description of a final judgment and its apparent ethical basis. Origen thought the coming of Christ signified a subtler truth more clearly explained in Matt 24:27 which speaks about Christ coming as flashing across the sky, not as localized in one place. Furthermore, the criterion of judgment expressed in a literal reading does not appear to be equitable or just. Origen rhetorically asks whether people who are active in every other kind of vice will be accepted by Christ merely because they practiced charitable works.<sup>31</sup> If not, then the passage must speak allegorically, not of a crass assessment based on charitable works alone, but of the kinds of actions which bring strength to Christ's body the church. The acts of mercy primarily symbolize the comforting of believers, edification, admonition, teaching, and only secondarily does it imply caring for their physical needs as a necessary complement.<sup>32</sup> For Origen, the "least" were therefore primarily intended to represent believers who are being helped or neglected by other Christians. Out of the 25 references

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Rusch, "Preaching" in *The Westminster Handbook to Origen*, ed. John Anthony McGuckin (Louisville: John Knox, 2004), 177–78. In practice, however, Origen often only worked on two levels: the one literal and the other figurative in any number of ways. Francis Young, "Alexandrian and Antiochene Exegesis," 336.

<sup>30</sup> Origen, *Commentariorum series*, 70–73, GCS 38. Two excellent and concise reviews of Origen's interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 are found in Gray's, *The Least of My Brothers*, 17–22 and in Rudolf Brändles, "Zur Interpretation von Mt 25, 31–46 im Matthäuskommmentar des Origenes," TZ 36 (1980): 17–25. The summary given here is dependent on these works.

<sup>31</sup> Brändle, "Interpretation von Mt 25, 31–46," 18.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

to the “least” across Origen’s extant works, 24 portray the least undoubtedly as Christians.<sup>33</sup>

John Chrysostom (347–407) was formally trained in rhetoric, but abandoned that career to serve the church, first as a reader in the church at Antioch and then as a member of a rigorous monastic community in the mountains outside of the city. As a monk, John attempted to obey the biblical injunction to “be watchful” in so literal a fashion that he reportedly refused to lie down for two years. After nearly ruining his health with such practices, John returned to convalesce in Antioch where he received further training from two influential teachers of the Antiochene method, Miletius of Antioch and Diodore of Tarsus.<sup>34</sup> The school of Antioch considered the life setting and intention of the biblical authors as more relevant to interpretation than did the Alexandrians. John more readily accepted the historicity of the biblical narratives than did Origen.<sup>35</sup> In his *Homilies on Matthew*, John wrote that allegories should be recognized only where they were intended. Regarding the parables, John wrote, “[N]either is it right to inquire curiously into all things in parables word by word, but when we have learned the object for which it was composed, to reap this, and not busy one’s self about anything further.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Gray, *The Least of My Brothers*, 18.

<sup>34</sup> Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), 94. Robert Payne, *Fathers of the Eastern Church*, (New York: Dorset, 1989), 195. John M. Court, “The Preacher,” 45; Seán Kealy, *Matthew’s Gospel and the History of Biblical Interpretation*, 2 vols. (Lewiston: Mellen, 1997), I, 52.

<sup>35</sup> John supports the historicity of both Noah’s Ark and Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac in John’s *Hom. de Lazaro* as both historically true and typologically significant. John, did, however recognize that some of the inconsistencies between the Gospels may be due to innocent human errors. John’s description of the Synoptic problem is summarized by Court from John’s remarks in *Matt. hom.* 1.1 (PG LVII, 16). “The Preacher,” 48–49.

<sup>36</sup> *Matt. hom.* 64.3 as cited in Kelly, *Matthew’s Gospel*, I, 55.

The Gospel of Matthew appears in John's work more than any other Gospel and the Sermon on the Mount more than any other passage. After that, Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats appears the most in John's writing. Of the 60 citations John makes to the dialogue between the Son of Man and those being judged, 5 times John uses this dialogue to teach that charity must be given to unbelievers as well as believers. John is the first commentator known to explicitly say that Matt 25:31–46 teaches the obligation to help not only believers in need but unbelievers too. John's most explicit interpretation of this passage in this direction is from his *Homilies on Philippians* (1.5) where he teaches that whereas hungry unbelievers deserve to be fed because they are hungry, hungry believers doubly deserve to be fed because they are both hungry and brothers.<sup>37</sup> Rudolf Brändle's survey of John's allusions to this text led him to conclude that Christ's personal and continued suffering among the unfortunate people of the world is the central motif of John's ethic as well as the means by which John explained the current work of Christ who calls people to a life of mercy and charity.<sup>38</sup>

Augustine (354–430) is another classically trained rhetor who became an influential teacher of the Bible.<sup>39</sup> After some initial misgivings about the literal interpretation of the Bible, Augustine came to full faith in Christ, only after seeing in Ambrose of Milan an example of allegorical interpretation which made the Bible compatible with the philosopher's search for transcendent truths. Upon his baptism,

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<sup>37</sup> Gray, *The Least*, 50–52.

<sup>38</sup> Rudolf Brändle, "Jean Chrysostome: L'Importance de Matth. 25:31–46 pour son éthique," *VigChr* 31 (1977): 47–52, 48, 50.

<sup>39</sup> The details of Augustine's life reported here are described further in Maria Boulding's "Introduction" for her translation of Augustine's, *The Confessions* in John E. Rotelle, ed., *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Part I, vol. 1 (New York: New City Press, 1997), 9–36.

Augustine returned to his native Africa where he in succession founded a religious/philosophical community, was appointed to preach as a presbyter and finally, at the age of 45, was made Bishop of Hippo where he preached and wrote prolifically until his death from natural causes at the age of 76.

Augustine's most direct treatment of hermeneutics is his work entitled *De doctrina christiana* or *On Christian Teaching*.<sup>40</sup> The goal of reading for Augustine is best seen as an extension of his concept of the beatific goal of life. According to Augustine, only the beatific vision of God is to be enjoyed for itself. Other things may be enjoyed, but only as they are useful in the pursuit of this more important goal.<sup>41</sup> Neither Christian fellowship nor Catholic doctrine is the final goal, but both are necessary to the pursuit of the common enjoyment of God. Because of this, Augustine concludes that Scripture prescribes nothing but love (*caritas*), condemns nothing except lust (*cupiditas*), and affirms nothing except the catholic faith (*doc. chr.* 3.10.25). Interpretations of Scripture which lead along these paths are therefore acceptable.

Augustine's ideas on the locus of meaning may be distilled from comments he made in his *Confessions* and *De doctrina Christiana*. Augustine believed that readers

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<sup>40</sup> John A. Norris, Jr., "Augustine and the Close of the Ancient Period of Interpretation," in Hauser and Watson, eds., *A History of Biblical Interpretation, Volume 1*, 380–408. On page 393, Norris recommends three works by G. A. Press: "The Subject and Structure of Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*," *Aug Stud* 11 (1980): 99–124; "The Content and Argument of Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*," *Augustiniana* 31 (1981): 165–182; and "Doctrina in Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*," *Phil and Rhet* 17 (1984): 92–120; K. Pollmann, ed., *Doctrina Christiana. Untersuchungen zu den Anfängen der christlichen Hermeneutik unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Augustins "De Doctrina Christiana"* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1996); R. P. H. Green, "Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*: Some Clarifications," *Respub Litt* 15 (1992): 99–108; and D. Arnold and P. Bright, eds., "De Doctrina Christiana": *A Classic of Western Culture* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University, 1995). Regarding Augustine's view on "signs" Norris highly recommends R. A. Markus, "St. Augustine on Signs," *Phronesis* 2 (1957): 60–83 and B. D. Jackson, "The Theory of Signs in St. Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*," *Rev Étud Aug* 15 (1969): 9–49.

<sup>41</sup> An excellent explanation of this line of thought in Augustine is Oliver O'Donovan, "Usus and Fructus in Augustine *De Doctrina Christiana* I," *JTS* n.s. 33 (1982): 361–91.

may at times elicit from the words a meaning which the human author did not intend as long as the interpretation does not set aside the “right faith” (*recta fides*). Because the Bible is unified in the purpose and intention of God, interpretations of one passage which are based on other passages are “supported by the truth” whether or not the human author intended such connections (*doc. chr.* 3.27.38). In spite of its outward similarity to post-modern and reader-centered hermeneutics, Augustine’s approach must be classed as pre-modern because Augustine believed that God himself foresaw that his word would be read this way and actually intended that readers would adopt the very interpretations which foster love and catholic faith (*Conf.* 12.31.42; *Doc. chr.* 3.27.38).

After John Chrysostom, Augustine referred to Matthew’s Judgment of the Sheep and Goats more than any other writer in antiquity.<sup>42</sup> The passage is mentioned 144 times in 29 different writings. Of the 44 references to the Son of Man’s dialogue slightly more than a third clearly imply that the “least” are the Christian poor. The sheep are always Christians – always those who have Christian belief. The goats, however, include pagans, Jews, and Christians who do not do the will of God, or who converted to please men, or who do not keep the commandments. The goats especially include the wealthy who do not share their resources with poor believers. Augustine is most distinct from John Chrysostom in that he nowhere in his treatment of the dialogue passages implies that Christians should give alms to non-Christians. Gray speculates that Augustine’s habit of restricting the “least” to Christians extends from Augustine’s concept of baptism. According to Augustine, baptism produces not only Christians, but Christ (*Tract. on John* 21.7). To emphasize the union between Christ (the head) and Christians (the body),

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<sup>42</sup> This summary is adapted from Gray’s, *The Least of My Brothers*, 69–72.

Augustine frequently connects to Matt 25:35–40 passages like Acts 9:4–5 and others which identify Christ as still suffering with the church.<sup>43</sup> The foregoing analysis of Augustine’s hermeneutic may also suggest that Augustine allowed the “least” of Matt 25:40 and 45 to represent only Christians because of his interest in Christian fellowship as something useful in the pursuit of the ultimate goal of man, the beatific vision of God.

Thomas Aquinas (1224/5?–1274) abandoned the social advantages of a noble birth and spurned his family’s wishes to become a member of the Dominican “mendicant” (begging) order of preachers.<sup>44</sup> His studies at the university in Paris and in Cologne under the influence of Albert the Great (1206–1280) led Thomas to incorporate the philosophical perspectives of Aristotle whose works had only recently been translated into Latin. From this, Thomas developed a greater confidence in the epistemic ability to perceive transcendent truth as it is expressed and participates in the physical universe.<sup>45</sup>

Thomas’ view of Scripture and its interpretation are addressed in *Summa Theologiae* I.1.9–10. In agreement with Aristotle, Thomas acknowledges that man’s natural capacities allow him to attain intellectual truths through the senses. For this reason, the spiritual truths of God are communicated to us through figures taken from corporeal things so that even the simplest of believers may grasp their truth. In this way, the Bible may be seen to have a literal meaning as well as a metaphorical or spiritual

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<sup>43</sup> Gray, *The Least of My Brothers*, 72.

<sup>44</sup> This summary is largely taken from Joseph P. Wawrykow, ed., *The Westminster Handbook to Thomas Aquinas*, *The Westminster Handbooks to Christian Theology* (Louisville: John Knox, 2005), vii–xi.

<sup>45</sup> Colin Brown, *From the Ancient World to the Age of Enlightenment*, vol. 1 in, *Christianity & Western Thought: A History of Philosophers, Ideas & Movements*, 2 vols. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), vol. 1, 108–111.



meaning. The spiritual meaning may be divided into three interrelated senses: allegorical, moral, and anagogical. Allegory is the spiritual sense of Scripture which shows how the Old Law is a figure of the New Law of Christ (Heb 10:1.) The moral sense is learned when truths about Christ (the head) serve as types for what the church (the members of Christ) ought to do. Finally, the anagogical sense is grasped when the New Law is understood as a figure of future glory, the eschatological end of the members of Christ. (*Sum Theo* I.1.10). The extent of Thomas' devotion to the authority of church tradition is debated among those who review his work. Some press Thomas' claim that the Fathers are "reliable interpreters," or that they "preserved the Sacred Scripture unimpaired."<sup>46</sup> Others point out that Thomas equivocated about the nature of tradition and gave to it only a "probable" authority. "For our faith," says Thomas, "rests upon the revelation made to the apostles and prophets who wrote the canonical books, and not on the revelations (if any such there are) made to the doctors" (*Sum Theo* I.1.8).<sup>47</sup>

Thomas' view of charity and salvation also affected his hermeneutic. According to Thomas, the benevolence that friends share is related to something else which they love in common. Christian charity is rooted in a mutual love for God. Christians grow in this love for God by acting upon brotherly charity, and in the process they are united to God in the way that the beloved is in the lover. (Aristotle's metaphysics can be seen at work here.) The ultimate end of the Christian life is the delight of the beatific vision of the One so loved. Christian acts of charity, especially those related to the mutual love of

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<sup>46</sup> Aidan Nichols, "Introduction to the 1997 Republished Edition," in Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels Collected out of the Works of the Fathers*, trans. John Henry Newman (Southampton: Saint Austin, 1997), v–xvii, vii–viii. Nichols cites here G. Conticello, "San Tommaso ed I padri: la *Catena aurea* super Joannem," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* 65 (1990), 31–92, 32 and Thomas' own *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus Expositio*, II.1.

<sup>47</sup> Wawrykow, "Scripture," in *Thomas Aquinas*, 137–142, 137.

God between believers are therefore the means by which believers make progress toward the beatific vision.<sup>48</sup> This perspective on charity seems to be a factor in Thomas' interpretation of Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats.

Thomas compiled a list of traditional comments about Matt 25:31–46 made by respected Christian teachers, but his own thoughts about the passage are preserved only most directly in a lecture he gave on the passage that was transcribed by one of his students. Thomas believed Matt 25:31–46 speaks of a literal judgment, but that the process will occur in an instant—not in a literal gathering, but in a spiritual gathering, within the consciences of the ones being judged. Those who left everything else to follow Christ, and those who rejected Christ will not be part of the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats but will only receive their eternal verdicts. The sheep and goats, however, will be composed of secular Christians, the one group having made good use of their possessions and the other only selfishly using their possessions. The acts of charity depict both literal acts of charity done for other believers who are the true “brothers” of Christ, as well as other actions which help the believer himself to be fed, nourished, and protected spiritually. In this way the actions become a metaphor for all deeds which help the believer grow toward the beatific vision. The goats are those Christians who fail to do this.<sup>49</sup>

Martin Luther (1483–1546) developed his views on interpretation over the course of a very prolific lecturing, preaching, and writing career. Some of his earlier writings

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<sup>48</sup> Wawrykow, “Charity,” in *Thomas Aquinas*, 22–25.

<sup>49</sup> Gray, *The Least of My Brothers*, 78–80.

still bear the signs of the medieval practices he inherited as a young Augustinian monk.<sup>50</sup> Even as he posted the “95 Theses” at Wittenberg, Luther still took an interest in the “fourfold sense” of the schoolmen. After, 1521, however, Luther more clearly grasped the principles which would affect the Lutheran and Reformed churches for centuries. Frederic Farrar summarized these guiding principles of interpretation as six: (1) the supreme authority of Scripture over the church’s; (2) the sufficiency of Scriptures even apart from commentaries; (3) the literal sense as Scripture’s true meaning; (4) the subordination of allegory to the literal sense; (5) the perspicuity (sufficient clarity) of Scripture; and (6) the Holy Spirit’s aid to help believers understand Scripture.

Luther’s preface to his lectures on Isaiah (begun 1527) listed the things he claimed are necessary for explaining the prophet. Luther’s later commentaries, lectures, and sermons reflect the following same observations:<sup>51</sup> (1) the necessity of grammatical knowledge; (2) the importance of considering the circumstances and conditions of the times; (3) the need to recognize the rhetorical and dialectical movement of the argument including the figures of speech which these draw upon; (4) the recognition that all of the prophets carry the anticipation of Christ as their leading theme (Luther based this on 1 Pet 1:10, “The prophets ... searched and inquired about this salvation.”);<sup>52</sup> (5) the need to read the Scriptures to help the church anticipate the second coming of Christ; (6) the need

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<sup>50</sup> A most insightful review of the early Luther’s development from scholasticism is an analysis of Luther’s hermeneutic displayed in his lectures on the Psalms, 1513–1515 by James Samuel Preus, *From Shadow to Promise* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1969), 153–271.

<sup>51</sup> Frederic W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation: Eight Lectures Preached Before the University of Oxford in the Year MDCCCLXXXV* (London: MacMillan, 1886), 324–32.

<sup>52</sup> This point was made as early as Luther’s “Preface” to his lectures on the Psalms, “Every prophecy and every prophet must be understood as referring to Christ the Lord, except where it is clear from plain words that someone else is spoken of.” page 7

to recognize lessons which will lead each to a good life of faith and love; and (7) the building of confident faith in the light of prophecies which have been fulfilled.<sup>53</sup> The fourth (Christological) principle appeared in broader application in the preface to the Psalms which Luther and his students used for his early lectures on the Psalms (1513–1515), “Every prophecy and every prophet must be understood as referring to Christ the Lord, except where it is clear from plain words that someone else is spoken of.”<sup>54</sup>

While commenting on Isa 37: 31, Luther warned against “clumsy and commonplace allegories.” Luther stated the boundary thus: “This is the summary of Scripture: It is the work of the Law to humble according to history, externally and internally, physically and spiritually. It is the work of the Gospel to console, externally and internally, physically and spiritually. What our predecessors have experienced according to history externally and physically, this we experience according to our history internally and spiritually.”<sup>55</sup> Luther’s emphasis on the Gospel led him to recognize that those books in the canon which speak most directly and clearly about Christ and his salvation are the most important. Luther especially favored Paul’s letters (and Romans and Galatians in particular), John, and 1 Peter.<sup>56</sup>

As if under the influence of this principle, Luther sided with scholars in the train of Jerome who placed the books of the Apocrypha in a category inferior to the Scripture

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<sup>53</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Volume 16: Lectures on Isaiah Chapters 1–39*, ed. and trans. Jaroslav Pelikan and Hilton C. Oswald (St. Louis: Concordia, 1969), 3–4.

<sup>54</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Volume 10: First Lectures on the Psalms I: Psalms 1–75*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia: 1974), 6–7.

<sup>55</sup> Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah Chapters 1–39*, 327.

<sup>56</sup> Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, 335; Robert Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., rev. and enlarged (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 93–98.

of the Old and New Testaments. In his translation of the Bible, Luther grouped the Apocrypha between the Old and New Testament and introduced them with this caption, “Apocrypha: these books are not held equal to the Scriptures but are useful and good to read.”<sup>57</sup> This marginalization of the Apocrypha effectively reduced the need to read Matt 25:31–46 as compatible with passages in the Apocrypha which promote giving as a means of obtaining absolution (Tobit 12:9; 2 Macc 12:43–45). Luther’s interpretation of the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats is therefore guided by Luther’s understanding of the grace of God in Christ and his refusal to force Matt 25:31–46 to be compatible with texts which teach that forgiveness must be earned. Luther’s approach to the text may be called a Protestant Christological interpretation.

According to Luther’s only extant sermon on Matt 25:31–46, the judgment “will bring together by means of the resurrection all who have ever lived upon earth.”<sup>58</sup> These will receive a verdict “as a public testimony of the fruits of their faith or of their unbelief.”<sup>59</sup> Luther argued this is the case: “For, as I have said, he who does not have faith will not do works of mercy to Christians, but he who does them will do them because he believes that he has a faithful Savior and Redeemer in Christ who has reconciled him to God.”<sup>60</sup> This line alone implies that Luther restricted the “least” of

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<sup>57</sup> D. Martin Luther’s Werke: Die deutsche Bibel (Weimar: 1906) vol. 2, 547 quoted in Martin Luther, *Word and Sacrament I*, in *Luther’s Works*, vol 35, ed.E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 337.

<sup>58</sup> Martin Luther, “Luther’s Sermon on Matt 25:31–46, Nov. 26, 1537,” in *Sermons on Gospel Texts for the 13<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> Sundays after Trinity*, trans. John Nicholas Lenker, *Sermons of Martin Luther*, 8 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1905), vol. 5, 379–95. This translation divides Luther’s sermon into 36 sections which correspond roughly to paragraphs. The summary provided here cites the sections in parentheses with the page numbers of Lenker’s translation following – as for example, the current citation is (7) 382.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, (10) 384.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, (24) 390.

25:40, 45 to Christians. The balance of the sermon makes this undeniable. Luther variously describes them as “followers” of Christ,<sup>61</sup> “Christians,”<sup>62</sup> preachers and poor students,<sup>63</sup> those who suffered “especially for his and his Word’s sake,”<sup>64</sup> and “ministers and pastors.”<sup>65</sup> Luther clearly used the passage as an exhortation for Christians both to assist poor believers and to maintain those who have abandoned secular employment to enter the ministry. Sherman Gray’s summary of Luther’s broader work concurs. In 12 out of Luther’s other 18 references to this text, the “least” are definitely Christians alone.<sup>66</sup>

#### Modern commentators

The modern period of biblical hermeneutics arose in the context of what is now called “the quest for the historical Jesus.”<sup>67</sup> This quest’s original goal was to describe Jesus in a way that could be verified by modern historians who were skeptical of miracles. During this period, several ways to historically critique the biblical texts arose. Source criticism, form criticism, or redaction criticism, were all developed to help scholars understand the developing Christian tradition at different stages of its development. Initially, source critics sought to hear the very voice of Jesus as they

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., (2) 381.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., (5) 382, (24) 390.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., (14) 385.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., (17) 387.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., (30) 393.

<sup>66</sup> Gray, *The Least of My Brothers*, 204–206.

<sup>67</sup> The classic review of this movement from its beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> is Albert Schweitzer’s *von Reimarus zu Wrede: eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1906); ET, ed. John Bowden, *Quest for the Historical Jesus*, trans. W. Montgomery, J. R. Coates, Susan Cupitt, and John Bowden, 1<sup>st</sup> complete ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).

speculated the shape and message of the more pristine sources which were assumed to lie behind the Gospels we have today. A lack of confidence in the fruit gained from this process led to a greater interest in the individual sayings and deeds of Jesus which were believed to have developed as independent units and to have circulated in the “post-Easter church” in identifiable “forms.” In 1952, K.G. Kuhn claimed that the exegetical principle for the Synoptics should be that each piece of tradition be interpreted only in and from itself and not according to the context given it by the editors of the Gospels.<sup>68</sup> However, since Matt 25:31–46 is itself the most original literary source we have of this saying, this passage is not as easily analyzed by means of source criticism. Nor has form criticism been able to classify Matt 25:31–46 as one of the standard “forms” of the sayings which supposedly took shape in the primitive church.<sup>69</sup>

Joachim Jeremias (1900–1979) was a modern scholar who, in the absence of any other extant source lying behind Matt 25:31–46, proposed a reconstruction of the passage’s salient phrases by speculating their original form in Jesus’ native Aramaic. Jeremias argued that a better understanding of “the least of these my brothers” in 25:40 could be achieved by recognizing the use of the Semitic word for “brother” [אָרָם] in Lev 19:7 as a synonym for “neighbor” (as Jeremias translates, “Thou shalt not hate thine brother in thine heart: thou shalt surely rebuke thine neighbour”).<sup>70</sup> On this score, “the

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<sup>68</sup> “Hier muss der Grundsatz jeder Synoptikerexegese festgehalten werden, dass jedes Einzel-Überlieferungsstück nur in sich und aus sich selbst und nicht aus den redaktionellen Rahmen interpretiert werden darf.” K. G. Kuhn, “Peirasmos – harartia – sarx im Neuen Testament und die damit zusammenhängenden Vorstellungen,” *ZTK* 49 (1952): 221.

<sup>69</sup> Robinson, “The ‘Parable’ of the Sheep and the Goats,” *NTS* 2 (1955–56): 225–37, 225.

<sup>70</sup> Joachim Jeremias discusses the tendency of the evangelists to replace the “neighbor” connotation of “brother” with a connotation that only referred to fellow Christians, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, trans. S. H. Hooke from the 6<sup>th</sup> German ed. of *Die Gleichnisse Jesu* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963), 109.

least of these, my brethren” is a literal translation of a phrase Jesus used to designate anyone in need.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, Jeremias suggests that Jesus’ original word behind the Greek ἔθνη (“nations,” NASB) which designates the recipients of judgment (25:32) should be translated “heathen” in Semitic fashion. The judgment scene, then, was used by Jesus to describe the criterion by which the heathen, who have never met Christ, will be judged. According to Jeremias, the heathen can meet Christ in their encounters with the needy, because the needy are Jesus’ brethren. In support of this criterion, Jeremias quotes Johanan ben Zakkai, a fabled leader in the proposed consolidation of Judaism at Jamnia in the years following the Temple’s destruction in 70 A.D., “As the sin-offering atones for Israel, so almsgiving (*ṣ’ dhaqa*) atones for the Gentiles.”<sup>72</sup>

Redaction critics are more focused on the authorial intention of the Evangelists than are source and form critics. The goal of redaction critics is to discover the motivation and intention of the Evangelists who edited the sources and traditions together into the Gospels we have today.<sup>73</sup> Many redaction critics believe that the pericope is

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 209–10. The following sources have been recommended by Anthony J. Saldarini concerning the “myth” of Johanan ben Zakkai’s influence: Jacob Neusner, *Development of a Legend: Studies on the Traditions concerning Yohanan ben Zakkai*, SPB 16 (Leiden: Brill, 1970); Peter Schäfer, “Die Flucht Johanan b. Zakkai aus Jerusalem und die Gründung des ‘Lehrhauses’ in Jabne,” in H. Temporini and W. Haase, eds., *Aufstieg und Niedergang des Römischen Welt* (Berlin: deGruyter, 1979), 43–101; Anthony J. Saldarini, “Johanan ben Zakkai’s Escape from Jerusalem: Origin and Development of a Rabbinic Story,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 6 (1975): 189–204. For a critical review of the limited role of Jamnia, Saldarini recommends: Peter Schäfer, “Die Sogenannte Synode von Jabne: Zur Trennung von Juden und Christen im ersten/zweiten Jh. n. Chr.,” *Studien zur Geschichte und Theologie des Rabbinischen Judentums*, AGAJU (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 45–64; G. Stemmerger, “Die Sogenannte Synode von Jabne,” *Kairos* 19 (1977): 14–21; Shaye J. D. Cohen, “The Significance of Yavneh: Pharisees, Rabbis, and the End of Jewish Sectarianism,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 55 (1984): 27–53. These sources are listed as they appear here in Anthony J. Saldarini, *Matthew’s Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), 216, note 11.

<sup>73</sup> Concise histories and descriptions of source, form, and redaction criticism can be found in Black and Dockery’s *Interpreting the New Testament*. Scot McKnight, “Source Criticism,” 74–105; Darrell L. Bock, “Form Criticism,” 106–27; and Grant R. Osborne, “Redaction Criticism,” 128–49.



composite in nature and represents a combination of sayings – some of which go back to Jesus and some of which were added by the Evangelist. Since no written source from which the Evangelist may have crafted Matt 25:31–46 has come to light, redaction critics must determine which elements go back to Jesus and which elements were supplied by the Evangelist by comparing the passage’s vocabulary and themes against what may be learned elsewhere about the way Jesus spoke on the one hand and the way the Evangelist wrote on the other. Many of the arguments and conclusions used by redaction critics will be reviewed in chapters 2, 3, and 4 below. A brief summary of the interpretations of four redaction critics will illustrate the diversity of opinion this method of study has produced. According to Louis-Jean Frahier, redaction critics may ask the right historical questions, but their interpretive results seem to be heavily influenced by their methodologies and theological presuppositions. Under the supposition that theological and other presuppositions may affect a redaction critic’s conclusions, brief biographical notes are given for each of the four listed below so that their perspectives may be appropriately contextualized.<sup>74</sup>

Daniel Harrington (born 1940) is a Roman Catholic Professor of New Testament who received a Ph.D. in Oriental Languages from Harvard in 1970. Harrington has served as a Professor of New Testament at Weston Jesuit School of Theology and has been a visiting professor of Old Testament at Harvard University. Harrington believes Matthew retained a restrictive sense of the word “nations” in Matt 25:32 and that this judgment would therefore only review the deeds of non-Jews and non-Christians. According to Harrington, Matthew adopted and displays a Jewish idea that God will

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<sup>74</sup> Frahier, *Le Jugement*, 60, 70–71.

judge different groups at different times. Accordingly Christians and Jews will be judged in different settings.<sup>75</sup> Harrington also restricted the “least” to include only Christians.<sup>76</sup> John P. Meier (born 1942), like Harrington, has developed his opinions while teaching New Testament in predominantly Catholic schools.<sup>77</sup> Meier, unlike Harrington however, believes both phrases—“the nations” (25:32) and “the least” (25:40, 45) should be taken in an unrestrictive sense. The judgment will be a general judgment of all mankind, and the criterion will be the way each person has treated the poor and downtrodden.<sup>78</sup>

The interpretations of these two Roman Catholic redaction critics may be compared with two from Protestant circles. Robert Gundry (born 1932) received his Ph.D. from the University of Manchester in 1961 and has served Westmont College in Santa Barbara, CA both as a Professor of New Testament Greek and as chair of the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy. According to Gundry, Matt 25:31–46 is Matthew’s own interpretation (“targum”) of Isa 58:7 which describes the kind of fast that God accepts. Gundry thinks the same kind of community-centered ethic which is apparent in this passage underlies the judgment scene of Matt 25:31–46. Gundry quotes, “[I]s it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into the

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<sup>75</sup> D.R.E. Hare and D. J. Harrington, “‘Make Disciples of All the Gentiles’ (Matthew 28:19),” *CBQ* 37 (1975): 359–69, 364–65 and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*. Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 1 (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1991), 358–59

<sup>76</sup> Harrington, *Matthew*, 100–1; Hare and Harrington, “Make Disciples,” 363–66;

<sup>77</sup> Professor of New Testament at the following: St Joseph’s Seminary (1972–84); Catholic University of America (1984–98), and most recently the University of Notre Dame (beginning in 1998).

<sup>78</sup> Sherman Gray has traced a possible development in Meier’s opinion. In an earlier work, Meier appeared ambiguous about the identity of the “least.” On the one hand, Meier stated that the “least are “the humble members of the church,” and on the other hand that the “least” were the “suffering mankind. John P. Meier, *The Vision of Matthew* (New York: Paulist, 1979), 129, 178. Yet Meier more recently promotes the unrestrictive interpretation of both the “nations” and the “least” in *Matthew*, *New Testament Message*, no. 3 (Wilmington: Glazier, 1980), 302–304. This shift described in Gray, *Least of My Brothers*. 296.

house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?" According to Gundry the phrase "from your own flesh" [בְּבֶשֶׂרְךָ] in Isa 58:7 is a statement concerning kinship. The benevolence therefore that will be used as the criterion of judgment in Matthew 25:31–46 is not broadly humanitarian but restricted to Christian brothers. The "least" are therefore Christians.<sup>79</sup> Still, the judgment will be universal in scope.<sup>80</sup> Arland Hultgren (born 1939) is an ordained Lutheran minister with a Th.D. from Union Theological Seminary (1971). In addition to his ministries in several Lutheran congregations, Hultgren has been Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN since 1974. Hultgren believes that any narrow restriction of the "least" to Christians severely lessens the likelihood that the pericope reflects an authentic teaching of Jesus.<sup>81</sup> While Hultgren acknowledges that linguistic and comparative studies can be mounted to support the idea that Matthew restricted "the least" to mean only Christians, Hultgren finds a universal application more satisfying. Some of the stronger arguments Hultgren gives for this position includes its compatibility with the theme of Christian obedience seen in the Olivet Discourse, the apparent surprise among the sheep and goats arising from the fact that neither one knew the "least" were associated with Jesus, and the fact that righteousness elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel is equated with showing mercy (5:7; 18:33; 23:23; cf. 12:7).<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 513–14.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 511.

<sup>81</sup> Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 320–25.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 320–24. C.E.B. Cranfield agrees, "Who are Christ's Brothers (Matthew 25.40)?" *Metanoia* 4, nos. 1-2 (1994) 31-39. Frederick Dale Bruner achieved the same conclusion upon the following four reasons: (1) the apparent universality of the judgment suggests a common criterion for everyone, (2) the

Gustavo Gutiérrez (born 1928) offered an ethical/economic interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 which is at the same time spiritual and Christological. As a Peruvian-born Roman Catholic priest and founding voice of liberation theology, Gutiérrez blended a social conscience with his review of current biblical scholarship to provide an interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 in his now classic *A Theology of Liberation*. Gutiérrez's work has helped to popularize (and in some regions politicize) the universal call to universal care.<sup>83</sup> According to Gutiérrez, the call of God today is to participate in the expansion of human liberation on three levels: liberation from social institutions of oppression, personal liberation to inner freedom in the face of every kind of servitude, and liberation from sin which breaks fellowship with God and other human beings.<sup>84</sup> God's redemptive work of grace is understood by Gutiérrez to be demonstrated in a progressive fashion by God who increasingly made his presence known to mankind throughout biblical history until Christ's incarnation brought in a universal presence of God within all people.<sup>85</sup> Gutiérrez understands Matt 25:31–46 as the critical passage which explains how our fellowship with God in Christ is mediated through our loving actions to others, no matter what their national or religious status. Our aggressive efforts

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surprise of those being judged, (3) the four lists of merciful deeds are the strongest indicators of the identity of the least, (4) the previous parables all show that Christians are being judged, not consoled. *Matthew: A Commentary*, 2 vols. *The Christbook: Matthew 1–12* and *The Churchbook: Matthew 13–28* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987, 1990), II, 575. R. T. France acknowledges that verbal indications from 10: 42; 18:6, 10, and 14 suggest the "least" were probably Jesus' disciples but says the criterion of judgment must be works here and not faith inasmuch as both the righteous and wicked were surprised that the "least" were connected with the Son of Man. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 958–57, 964.

<sup>83</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, rev. ed. with new intro., trans. Sister Caridad Inda, John Eagleson, and Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Maryknoll, 2006).

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxviii.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 106–10.

to liberate others from poverty and oppression are the process by which we form the most intimate fellowship with God. Gutiérrez writes, “We find the Lord in our encounters with others, especially the poor, marginated [*sic*], and exploited ones. An act of love towards them is an act of love towards God.”<sup>86</sup> The political process by which Gutiérrez and his peers thought this liberation could be most easily carried out is the “surrender of private ownership of the means of production” and the abandonment of any “inhuman and anti-Christian system such as capitalism.”<sup>87</sup>

Dispensationalism is a school of theological thought that has developed concurrently with historical, critical exegesis but has historically marginalized source criticism, form criticism, and even redaction criticism from its consideration. Instead, dispensationalists focus chiefly on each biblical passage and its verbal correlation with the rest of the Bible. Like many other conservative Evangelicals, dispensationalists tend to read the Bible “literally” and attempt to recognize symbolism, allegory, or typology only in those passages where the biblical authors themselves clearly implied these kinds of figurative expressions. Like other conservative Evangelicals, dispensationalists also recognize the Bible as inspired and inerrant.<sup>88</sup> Along with these more broadly held tenets, dispensationalists also adopt a very literal interpretation both of God’s promises to Israel and of certain apocalyptic passages which have led them to a distinct (and still developing) understanding of salvation history and eschatology. Dispensational writers

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 66–67.

<sup>88</sup> C. Norman Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America: Its Rise and Development* (Richmond: John Knox, 1958); Vern Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1987); Craig A. Blaising, “Changing Patterns in American Dispensational Theology,” *WesTJ* 29 (1994): 149–64; Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995).

who follow either the classic, revised, or progressive forms of dispensational theology reserve a special place in God's eschatological plan for the literal descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, i.e., the Jews, as God's still chosen people.<sup>89</sup>

Dispensationalists also tend to take literally the Jewish identity of the 144,000 witnesses described in Rev 7:4–8 who will preach the gospel of the kingdom during a great time of tribulation prior to the glorious coming of Christ to reign on earth for 1,000 years (Rev 20:1–5). Inasmuch as Matt 25:31 opens the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats with Christ coming “in his glory,” dispensationalists place this judgment at the eve of the time of tribulation and the dawn of the millennial reign of Christ on earth. Dispensationalists usually believe the judgment will review only those who have lived through the tribulation. The criterion used to judge these people will be their treatment of the 144,000 Jewish witnesses as they preached during the tribulation.<sup>90</sup> This is at least the dominant view among dispensational premillennarians. The school of thought has never been monolithic, and it continues to produce diverse opinions on isolated issues such as the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46. Nearly twenty years ago, Gray noticed that out of 35 premillennarians who wrote on this subject 26 identified the “least” with the Jewish

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<sup>89</sup> These three forms of dispensationalism are concisely compared by Darrell L. Bock in “Charting Dispensationalism,” *Christianity Today* 38, no. 10 (1994): 26–29.

<sup>90</sup> C.I. Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1945), 1036, 1337, 1350–51; John R. Walvoord, “Christ’s Olivet Discourse on the End of the Age: The Judgment of the Gentiles,” *BibSac* 129 (1972): 307–15; Leon J. Wood, *The Bible & Future Events* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 152; John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody, 1974), 202; Dwight J. Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 418–19; and Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study in Matthew* (Portland: Multnomah, 1980), 288–89. Toussaint’s opinion is cited here indirectly from David L. Turner, “The Gospel of Matthew,” in *The Gospel of Matthew, The Gospel of Mark*, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, vol. 11, 1–389 (Carol Spring: Tyndale, 2005), 330.

witnesses, 3 said the “least” include everyone in the tribulation period, and 4 said the “least” include all Christians.<sup>91</sup>

At the dawn of post-modern developments, Daniel Patte (born 1939) promoted structural criticism as a text-centered effort to map the narrative elements and thematic lines of thought which underlie all literature according to a standard schema which was believed to be basic to the human experience. In 1976, Patte wrote a brief description of structural exegesis for the New Testament Series edited by Dan O. Via, Jr. Via wrote in his forward to this small volume that structural criticism may be contrasted to aesthetic literary criticism. According to Via, aesthetic literary criticism is concerned with the ways in which the form and content of a text may be grasped as a whole at the surface level of the text. Structural criticism is different. “It focuses rather on the relationship between the surface structure and the ‘deep’ structures which lie implicitly or unconsciously beneath, around, or alongside of the text.”<sup>92</sup> Eleven years later, Patte published his structural commentary on Matthew which incorporated a six step process of analysis and interpretation that he had developed in the intervening years.<sup>93</sup>

Patte’s commentary is not exclusively centered on the text. Patte acknowledges the need for understanding both the author’s intention and the author’s knowledge of his readers’ prior knowledge. Patte, however, limits his interest in these matters to the data

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<sup>91</sup> Gray, *Least of These My Brethren*, 270.

<sup>92</sup> Dan O. Via, Jr., “Editor’s Forward” in Daniel Patte, *What Is Structural Exegesis*, New Testament Series, ed. Dan O. Via, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), iii–iv, iv.

<sup>93</sup> Daniel Patte’s commentary, *The Gospel According to Matthew: A Structural Commentary on Matthew’s Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), uses these six steps but does not give an explanation of their literary and hermeneutical basis until his *Structural Exegesis for New Testament Critics* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1990), 2. In this book, Patte briefly lists the six steps on page 26, but the explanation and illustration of them extends for another 100 pages.

about these things which may be deduced from “the internal evidence” of the text itself. Patte also minimizes the relevance of redaction criticism. Patte assumes that Matthew’s incorporation of traditional texts may be understood without minutely comparing Matthew’s wording of those traditions with versions that appear in other places. For the most part, Patte assumes that Matthew intended to incorporate as part of his own discourse anything that is there. Any older or pre-existing texts or traditions in Matthew may therefore be understood in the context of Matthew’s Gospel alone.<sup>94</sup> In his structural commentary on Matt 25:31–46, Patte frequently leans on preceding passages from the Olivet Discourse which he believes Matthew used to set a context for the final judgment scene. The prior parables warn about the urgency of being ready for Christ’s return but do not specify the actions by which people will be judged. According to Patte, Matt 25:31–46 was written to clarify these criteria. Patte believes that the passage describes a judgment of the whole world and that the “least” are not limited to any religious or national group. The surprise expressed by both the sheep and the goats being judged implies for Patte that the proper motivation for charity must not be fear of punishment or desire for reward but must be simple mercy and compassion.<sup>95</sup>

#### Reader-centered commentators

As dissatisfaction with structuralism grew among scholars, methods of interpretation arose which identify the locus of meaning neither in the sources behind the gospels, nor in the Evangelists’ intentions, nor even in the Gospels as texts themselves.

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<sup>94</sup> Only occasionally did Patte make Synoptic comparisons when he felt this process could help elucidate Matthew’s point. Patte, *Matthew*, 11–13.

<sup>95</sup> Patte, *Matthew*, 347–52.



For post-structuralists, post-modernists, and other reader-centered commentators the locus of meaning is the reader who creates meaning in the act of reading. This move is consistent with post-modern philosophical perspectives that are either agnostic or dismissive concerning the quest for objective truth.<sup>96</sup> Few reader-centered biblical commentators, however, are as agnostic or dismissive about objective truth as are their post-modern counterparts whose literary interests are broader and include non-sacred literature. In fact, at the time of this writing, only one “postmodern” treatment of Matt 25:31–46 could be located through *New Testament Abstracts*, and it was written on an experimental basis by a commentator who expressed reservations about the method. Neither has his work offered anything particularly new concerning the interpretive issues that affect the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46.<sup>97</sup>

It would be not only difficult but also unfair to draw a hard and fast line between modern commentators and “reader-centered” commentators. The shift from one perspective to the other seems to be a difficult one. Many commentators who were trained in the classic skills of form, source, or redaction criticism have not abandoned these methods altogether, but have learned to synthesize into them the reader-centered perspectives that have arisen in current literary and philosophical circles. Many of the commentators listed here must therefore be seen as holding transitional or mediating positions between modernism’s interest in authorial intention and post-modernism’s affinity for “reader-response” interpretations.

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<sup>96</sup> Carson, *Gagging of God*, 77; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning?*, 168. Grant R. Osborne lists the new perspectives which led to the shift from structuralism to post-structuralism, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 73–74.

<sup>97</sup> P. Ignatius, “What Does the Savior Say of Our Salvation? An Exegetical Exercise in Postmodern Reading of Mt 25:31–46” *BibBhashyam* 30 (3, 2004) 213–225.

As literary criticism grew in its influence on biblical interpretation, insights from the study of world literature began to affect the perspectives of redaction critics. As literary criticism's influence intensified, the focus of some scholars turned from the editorial intentions of the Evangelists (which lie "behind the text") to the texts themselves as conveyors of meaning.<sup>98</sup> It may be useful to speak of literary critics as a wide-ranging spectrum of scholars. Jack Dean Kingsbury, at one end of the spectrum, blends an interest in authorial intent with insights gained from a literary and rhetorical analysis of the text.<sup>99</sup> Although Kingsbury appears to equivocate in places regarding the identity of the "nations" of Matt 25:32, Kingsbury generally portrays them as all people of the world. Kingsbury, however, adopts a narrower understanding of the "least" (25:40, 45) whom he thinks were intended to signify only Christians.<sup>100</sup>

Literary critics at the other end of the spectrum from Kingsbury study the Gospels as free standing works of art capable of conveying meaning to readers without recourse to speculative questions regarding authorial intent. The text itself is the subject of study for this latter group. Dan O. Via's work on Jesus' parables as independently readable "aesthetic works of art" has been influential in this shift toward the text as the focus of

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<sup>98</sup> William A. Beardsley encouraged this shift in *Literary Criticism of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969).

<sup>99</sup> Jack Dean Kingsbury, *The Parables of Jesus in Matthew 13* (London: S.P.C.K., 1969) even sought to describe Matthew's original audience. For more on Kingsbury's historical interest see his "Analysis of a Conversation" in David L. Balch, ed., *Social History of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 259–63.

<sup>100</sup> Gray, *The Least of My Brothers*, 310 faults Kingsbury for a lack of clarity. Kingsbury regularly portrays the "nations" quite universally, and consistently describes the "least" as either Christians, the church, or the righteous. *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 145, 156; *Matthew: A Commentary for Preachers and Others* (New York: Fortress, 1977), 95, 101; *Jesus Christ in Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, Proclamation Commentaries (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 73; and *Matthew As Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986). Gray cites the references in this last work as "14 n. 33, 98, 129 n. 20. However, in two of these works, Kingsbury leaves the impression that the "nations" are all non-Jews. *Matthew*, 76; *Matthew As Story*, 11.

study.<sup>101</sup> Regarding Matt 25:31–46, Via acknowledges that the original readers may well have taken the symbols of fiery judgment in a literal, cosmologically referential way. Yet, says Via, “Our situation is different. Apocalyptic language may still function imaginatively for us, but the reference can no longer be to the cosmos. It will have to be to an existential project, a way of being in the world.” From this perspective, Via uses the text to teach how people can experience “wholeness” (a context in which “well-being” consists) by lovingly caring for the poor. The eschatological blessings promised in the text to people who lovingly care for the unfortunate seem to become for Via a symbol of the blessings of grace and wholeness, i.e., “actualization of the best self,” for those people who perform non-calculating acts of love. According to Via, the passage teaches that “all people, in or out of the church, are responsible for all people, in or out of the church, and to the same standard of caring love.”<sup>102</sup>

Continued interaction with literary theories has led to further developments among biblical scholars who identify the locus of meaning neither in the intent of the author nor in the text itself but in the reader and the reader’s community. Though Via’s aesthetic method of interpretation treats hermeneutics more as an impressionistic art and less like an objective science, Via’s careful attention to the historical context of the passage distinguishes him from the more radical post-modernists who believe the historical context is either impossible to know or is irrelevant. Via’s influence may therefore be described as a transitional force that helped stimulate a move from modern to

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<sup>101</sup> Dan Otto Via, *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967).

<sup>102</sup> Dan O. Via, “Ethical Responsibility and Human Wholeness in Matthew 25:31–46,” *HTR* 80 (1987): 79–100, 93, 100.

reader-centered methods of interpreting the parables and apocalyptic texts. Don A. Carson has noticed that reader-centered commentators, especially those with strong post-modern sentiments, usually follow a syncretistic or pluralistic perspective which leads them to define the love of God in very broad terms.<sup>103</sup> This trend seems to lead reader-centered commentators to describe the “least” of Matt 25:40, 45 as including all the poor and deprived people of the world.

Ulrich Luz (born 1938) is a groundbreaking scholar, originally trained in redaction criticism, who has promoted an interest in the “history of influence” of texts as they are historically and differently interpreted by reading communities.<sup>104</sup> Luz has produced a four volume commentary on Matthew and a separate article on Matt 25:31–46, both of which are written from his “history of influence” perspective.<sup>105</sup> Luz’s willingness to look for the authorial intent of the Gospels prevents him from being labeled strictly as a post-modern critic, but the validity he recognizes in the evolving interpretive applications of biblical texts makes Luz another transitional figure between the modern and reader-centered schools of thought. In a separate work written from the perspective of biblical theology, Luz wrote that Matthew intended to exclude the Jews from the “nations” which are being judged in Matt 25:32 and that Matthew intended to

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<sup>103</sup> D. A. Carson, “On Distorting the Love of God,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (1999): 3-12, here 6.

<sup>104</sup> “History of Influence,” “history of reception,” and “effective history” are three attempts to render into English Luz’s German *Wirkungsgeschichte*. Ulrich Luz, “Wirkungsgeschichtliche Exegese: Ein programmatischer Arbeitsbericht mit Beispielen aus der Bergpredigtexegese.” *BTZ* 2 (1985): 18–32; Ulrich Luz, “A Response to Emerson B. Powery,” *JPT* 14 (1999): 19-26, here 19-20; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew in History: Interpretation, Influence and Effect* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

<sup>105</sup> Ulrich Luz, “Final Judgment (Matt 25:31–46): an Exercise in ‘History of Influence’ Exegesis.” In *Treasures New and Old: Recent Contributions to Matthean Studies*, ed. David R. Bauer and Mark Allan Powell (Atlanta: Scholars, 1996), 271–310; *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, 4 vols. (Zürich: Benzinger, 1985–2002); ET, Ulrich Luz and Helmut Koester, *Matthew: A Commentary*, 3 vols., vol. 1 trans. Wilhelm C. Linss, vols. 2–3, trans. James A. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992, 2001, 2005).

teach that the “least” in 25:40, 45 originally signified only Christian missionaries.<sup>106</sup> In his “history of influence” study of Matt 25:31–46, Luz carefully weighs the historical-grammatical evidence and concludes that Matthew intended to teach that Christians will be among the “nations” being judged for their treatment of “the least”.<sup>107</sup> Luz repeated his opinion that Matthew intended the “least” to signify only the suffering disciples of Jesus.<sup>108</sup> In spite of this historical observation, Luz recognizes validity in current interpretations which turn the “least” into a description of everyone oppressed. He explains, “The question is therefore: Is it theologically permissible to interpret a text against its original sense, if the sense which emerges is centrally gospel for today’s recipients and at the same time helpful to them in their own situation? I would like to answer this question in this instance—not always!—with a ‘yes’ and to point out, on the basis of the biblical text, the reasons and the limits of this ‘yes.’” Luz then gives the following three “biblical” reasons why he would support the modern universal reading of the “least” against Matthew’s historical intention.<sup>109</sup>

1. Jesus’ model of life and teaching would correspond to the universal interpretive model.
2. The judgment scene does make Christians as liable in the judgment as non-Christians. This points toward a “de-absolutizing” of the Christian church. “Accordingly, they [modern proponents of the universal interpretive model] do not work with the sense of the biblical text itself, but rather with the direction in which it points.”

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<sup>106</sup> Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson, New Testament Theology, ed. James D. G. Dunn (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2006, ET orig. pub. 1995), 130–31; orig. German published as Ulrich Luz, *Die Jesusgeschichte des Matthäus* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1993)

<sup>107</sup> Luz, “The Final Judgment,” 293–95.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 308–309.

3. The universal interpretive model produces love—the fundamental test by which interpretations should be weighed.

John Paul Heil (born 1947), like Luz, recognizes the value of redaction criticism as an aid for understanding the authorial intention lying behind the text.<sup>110</sup> Heil's contributions to New Testament studies, however, have turned often to a "readers-response" approach which adopts the first century Christian reader implied by the text as the reader through whom the meaning of the text may be seen.<sup>111</sup> Heil uses this method of interpretation to conclude that the "least" in Matt 25:40, 45 may be read on two levels, both of which would have been understood by the implied readers. On one level, Christians would identify with the sheep who help the needy wherever they find them. This implies that the "least" are the poor or oppressed all over the world. On another level, the Christians would realize that their willingness to be poor with Jesus aligns them more closely to Jesus as the "least" or his "brothers." Heil calls this a "narrative-critical, reader-response approach."<sup>112</sup> Heil's ability to equivocate on "the least" is related to his

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<sup>110</sup> Though Heil and his co-author Warren Carter refer frequently to redaction critical observations, David Bauer wishes they would use redaction criticism more thoroughly in their construction of the implied audience. David Bauer's review of John Paul Heil and Warren Carter, *Matthew's Parables: Audience-Oriented Perspectives*. Co-author: Warren Carter. Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series, no. 30 (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association, 1998) in *JBL* 119 (2000): 570–72, 572.

<sup>111</sup> John Paul Heil and Warren Carter, *Matthew's Parables*; John Paul Heil, *The Gospel of Mark as a Model for Action: A Reader-Response Commentary* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 1992; reprinted, Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001); *The Meal Scenes in Luke-Acts: An Audience-Oriented Approach*. Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series, no. 52 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999); "Reader-Response and the Irony of Jesus before the Sanhedrin in Luke 22:66–71," *CBQ* 51 (1989): 271–84; "Mark 14,1–52: Narrative Structure and Reader-Response," *Biblica* 71 (1990): 305–32; "Reader-Response and Interculturation in Paul's Letter to the Romans," *Église et Théologie* 21 (1990): 283–301; "Reader-Response and the Irony of the Trial of Jesus in Luke 23:1–25," *Science et Esprit* 43 (1991): 175–86; "Reader-Response and the Narrative Context of the Parables about Growing Seed in Mark 4:1–34," *CBQ* 54 (1992): 271–86; "The Double Meaning of the Narrative of Universal Judgment in Matthew 25.31–46" *JSNT* 69 (1998): 3–14.

<sup>112</sup> John Paul Heil, "The Double Meaning of the Narrative of Universal Judgment in Matthew 25:31–46," *JSNT* 69 (1998) 3–14.

recognition of the passage as a parable which evokes its meaning rather than as a predictive prophecy strictly speaking. Heil gives the following reasons for this point:<sup>113</sup>

(1) The metaphor of the sheep and goats is a parabolic comparison that extends all the way through the passage. It should not be seen as a metaphor limited only to the ease of separation mentioned in 25:32–33.

(2) The Judgment of the Sheep and Goats appears to be part of a string of Matthean parables of separation and comparison that are oriented to the final judgment (7.24–27; 13.24–30, 36–43, 47–50; 24. 45–51; 25.1–13, 14–30).

(3) “Like previous Matthean parables it gives its audience a surprising experience of the kingdom of heaven by calling them to help the neediest with whom Jesus identifies himself. By doing so they are already experiencing the kingdom present with Jesus as they are assured of entering the eternal life of the eschatological kingdom.”

Biblical scholarship has yet to be deeply affected by the most radical approaches to postmodern hermeneutics. Scholars who invest time and energy in language and historical studies may be reluctant to declare these disciplines irrelevant or to replace them with a reading perspective that is more completely “reader-centered.” The commentators reviewed here all display an interest in the author’s intention, the ancient meaning of the words and discourse. However, the interest which these commentators show in the ways that readers and reading communities affect interpretation are at least in sympathy with a prominent emphasis of post-modern hermeneutics.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 will list and discuss the interpretive issues which commentators have discussed concerning the author’s life setting, issues regarding the text itself and its relation to other texts both inside and outside of Matthew’s Gospel, as well as issues of interpretation which are related to the genre of the Matt 25:31–46 and its rhetorical structure. This analysis of the interpretive issues will be followed by Chapter 5

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<sup>113</sup> Heil, “The Double Meaning...”13.

which will revisit and evaluate each of these interpretive issues in the same order from a reading perspective that acknowledges the primary locus of meaning in the intention of the author.



## CHAPTER 2

### ISSUES REGARDING THE LIFE SETTING OF MATTHEW 25:31–46

New Testament commentators with different interests in the text think differently about the relevance of the life setting out of which Matthew's Gospel arose. Literary critics are interested in the "story world" of the "autonomous" text and are less interested in the original life setting that produced the text. Pre-modern commentators and others whose interpretive method leads them to coordinate each biblical passage with the entire canon of Scripture may also divert their attention away from the particular life settings of each biblical author. These commentators primarily seek a single message of the unified canon more than the isolated emphasis of each author. On the other hand, many commentators who practice historical-critical exegesis are very interested in the life setting of Matt 25:31–46 because they use the original life setting of texts in order to understand what each text meant to its original audience. Finally, commentators who practice sociological criticism are most directly interested in the life setting of the texts because these commentators use texts as windows into the social situation which gave rise to the texts.<sup>1</sup> Commentators who use differing reading strategies or who are interested in answering different questions will therefore exhibit different levels of interest in the issues regarding the life setting of Matt 25:31–46.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen C. Barton, "Early Christianity and the Sociology of the Sect" in *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies*, ed. Francis Watson (London : SCM Press, 1993), 150–51.

## Papias' Report<sup>1</sup>

The testimony of Papias of Hierapolis is the earliest witness and apparently the ultimate source to the traditional belief that the first Gospel was written by Matthew the tax collector whom Jesus called away from his tax collecting station (Matt 9:9) and appointed as one of his twelve disciples (10:3).<sup>2</sup> Papias wrote as early as AD 100, but certainly no later than 140.<sup>3</sup> This ancient tradition of Papias conferred both apostolic authority and “eyewitness” credibility on the first Gospel quite early and was broadly accepted until modern times. Richard Bauckham describes Papias’ report as an example of a general preference which ancient historians gave to eyewitness accounts. According to Bauckham, the events in all of the Gospels, Matthew’s included, should be given far more credibility as eyewitness reports than modern scholars often give them.<sup>4</sup> Modern scholars who question Papias’ remarks about Matthew depend on other pieces of evidence to surmise what kind of person wrote the Gospel of Matthew, when it was written, where and why it was written, and even how it was written and read by its

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the works cited below are discussed in the following helpful reviews of the history of research concerning Matthew’s Gospel: Edward P. Blair, *Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Abingdon, 1960); Graham Stanton, “The Origin and Purpose of Matthew’s Gospel: Matthean Scholarship from 1945 to 1980,” *ANRW II*, 25.3 (1983): 1889–1951 and “Introduction: Matthew’s Gospel in Recent Scholarship (1994),” in *The Interpretation of Matthew*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Graham Stanton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995,) 1–26; David R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew’s Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1988); and Donald Senior, *What Are They Saying about Matthew* (New York: Paulist, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> A. Meredith dissents and suggests that Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho* 106.3 and Clement of Alexandria (Eusebius, *Hist Eccl* 6.14.5) may be independent witnesses. “The Evidence of Papias for the Priority of Matthew,” in *Synoptic Studies: The Ampleforth Conferences of 1982 and 1983*, ed. C. M. Tuckett, JSNTSS, no. 7 (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1984), 187–96, here 188.

<sup>3</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988, 1997, 2004), I, 128–29.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Bauckham, “The Eyewitnesses and the Gospel Tradition,” *JSHJ* 1 (2003): 28–60, here 42.

originally intended audience. An exhaustive treatment of this issue would fill up an impressive monograph all by itself. The review presented here must not only be brief but must also demonstrate why this discussion has been thought to be relevant to the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46.

The tradition from Papias which identified Matthew as the author of the first Gospel was preserved by Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260–340) in his discussion of the books of the New Testament (*H. E.* 3.39). The English translation of this tradition is not without controversy. Several of its key phrases are open to interpretation. The tradition is given here in a translation with the troublesome Greek phrases inserted in brackets next to their English counterparts, “Now Matthew made an ordered arrangement of the oracles in the Hebrew (or Aramaic) language [Ἑβραϊδὶ διαλέκτῳ], and each one translated (or interpreted) [ἠρμήνευσεν] it as he was able.”<sup>5</sup>

In agreement with the first part of this statement, most modern commentators are satisfied that the Gospels, including Matthew’s, were compilations and arrangements of the traditional sayings and deeds of Jesus which circulated earlier in oral or written forms. Most commentators concede that the “ordered arrangement” each evangelist gave to these traditions included editorial colorings that helped the immediate reading audience contextualize the traditions of Jesus for their particular use. This detail about the way Matthew was composed is most significant for redaction critics who analyze the differences between Matthew and the other Gospels as clues to the specific emphases of each.

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<sup>5</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, I, 8. The wording above is slightly edited from Davies and Allison’s, “Now Matthew made an ordered arrangement of the oracles in the Hebrew (or: Aramaic) language, and each one translated (or: interpreted) it as he was able.”

The two phrases of Papias' tradition which are open to broader interpretation have spurred a modern challenge against the accuracy and relevance of Papias' report. If Matthew's Gospel is heavily dependent on the Greek Gospel of Mark, as many commentators believe, then it is certain that the entire Gospel of Matthew could not have been originally written in a Semitic language.<sup>6</sup> From this challenge arises the suggestion that Papias did not describe the origin of the canonical Gospel of Matthew but that Papias may have described a different Hebrew or Aramaic document produced by Matthew the tax collector. An extension of this idea supposes that the document Papias described may be the ultimate source, unknown to Mark, which textual critics speculate the authors of Luke and Matthew shared and individually adapted to their reading communities. If this is the case, then the canonical Gospel of Matthew is at least once removed from an eye-witness account of Jesus' words and deeds, though it may still be rooted in one.<sup>7</sup> This issue is significant for those who attempt to distill Jesus' original voice from the Gospel's application of Jesus' teaching.

Another explanation of the data suggests that Papias neither meant that Matthew wrote in a Semitic language nor that others had to translate him into Greek. Josef Kürzinger has argued that Papias was more learned than many have recognized and that his description of Matthew's text must be read with sensitivity to the technical meaning

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<sup>6</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, I, 9. Graham Stanton calls Markan priority "the single most assured result" after a century of study concerning the Synoptic problem. Graham Stanton, "Redaction Criticism: The End of an Era?" in *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), 23-53, here 51.

<sup>7</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, I, 17 list the following scholars who have argued for this theory: T.W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus: As Recorded in the Gospels according to St. Matthew and St. Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 15-20; T. W. Manson "The Gospel of St. Matthew," in *Studies in the Gospels and Epistles*, ed. M. Black (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 68-104; and B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins, Treating of the Manuscript Tradition, Sources, Authorship, & Dates* (New York, MacMillan, 1925), 501.

of words used by rhetoricians. Accordingly, the phrases Ἑβραϊδὶ διαλέκτῳ and ἡρμῆνευσεν should be taken to mean that Matthew wrote in a “Hebrew style” and that everyone else “explained” him as well as they could.<sup>8</sup> If this is the case, Matthew’s Gospel may well be rooted in an apostolic witness. Kürzinger’s argument should at least lead commentators to understand the Gospel of Matthew’s “Hebraic style” in light of other ancient texts which share this style. The distinct style of interpretation of the rabbis and the Essenes are prime candidates.<sup>9</sup> Graham Stanton, who admits that the specific identity of the Gospel of Matthew may remain an “unresolved puzzle,” nevertheless believes that its “Jewish forms of expression” must be recognized in the interpretive effort.<sup>10</sup>

### Other Clues to the Identity of the Author

Ancient testimony, rooted as it is in Papias’ report, generally supports the idea that the disciple of Jesus named Matthew wrote the first Gospel.<sup>11</sup> A few modern commentators accept the ancient attribution to Matthew as credible.<sup>12</sup> However, most

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<sup>8</sup> Josef Kürzinger, “Die Aussage des Papias von Hierapolis zur literarischen Form des Markusevangeliums,” *BZ* 21, no. 2 (1977): 245–64. Kürzinger’s idea is discussed in Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, I, 15–17 and Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 617–20.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Gundry calls Matt 25:31–46 a “targum” on Isa 58:7, Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 513–14. Krister Stendahl thinks Matthew developed his interpretive skills in a school similar to the one among the Essenes which produced the *pescharim*. Krister Stendahl, *The School of St. Matthew* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 31

<sup>10</sup> Graham Stanton, “Synagogue and Church,” in *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), 113–45, here 117.

<sup>11</sup> For a full discussion of early traditions of authorship Graham Stanton recommends P. Nepper-Christiansen, *Das Matthäusevangelium—ein judenchristliches Evangelium?* (Aarhus: Universitetsforlaget, 1958), 37–75. Graham Stanton, “Origin and Purpose,” 1910.

<sup>12</sup> W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr. list the following modern scholars who accept the apostolic authorship of Matthew’s Gospel: T. Zahn (1899), A. Wikenhauser (1953), E. J. Goodspeed

modern scholars believe that Matthew's Gospel was not likely written by one of Jesus' original disciples. Modern scholars base their opposition to the traditional view on the content or "internal evidence" of Matthew's Gospel. Some elements of this ongoing discussion must be highlighted so that the relevance of this issue to the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 may be clearly seen.

If Jesus' disciple Matthew wrote the first Gospel, several important interpretive issues could be more easily settled. The Gospel could be understood as a more direct witness to Jesus' teaching than it would if it had depended on intervening traditions. A relatively early date of composition would also be expected. The date of composition would most comfortably have been prior to the destruction of the Temple in AD 70—before the rift between Christians and Jews grew as wide as it would in the decades following the fall of Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup> On this score, anything in the Gospel that reflects a legalistic or law-abiding "Jewish" outlook may be seen as more relevant to its original audience composed largely of Christian Jews who were still in compliance with the Jewish policies maintained by the synagogues and Temple worship.

However, if the Gospel were not written by a disciple but was written after the destruction of the Temple, these interpretive issues may be seen in a different light. A date of composition long after AD 70 would suggest that the Jewish outlook which the

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(1959), N. B. Stonehouse (1963), W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann (1971), and R. H. Gundry. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, I, 10-11. To these may be added Leon Morris (1992), and R. T. France (2007), though both Morris and France acknowledge the issue is difficult to settle with certainty. Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 15. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 15, 18–19.

<sup>13</sup> Adolf Schlatter held this view, *Der Evangelist Matthäus: Seine Sprache, sein Ziel, sein Selbständigkeit*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1963), as did Paul Gaechter, *Das Matthäus-Evangelium* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 1963). Davies and Allison, *Matthew* I, 10–11 list the following authors who believe the Gospel was written by the disciple Matthew: Theodore Zahn; A. Widenhauser; E. J. Goodspeed; N. B. Stonehouse; W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann; and Robert H. Gundry.

Gospel displays should be read as merely descriptive of older ideas that Jesus preached to the Jews before their Temple had been judged by God. If the Gospel arose long after AD 70, its original readers may have understood that the Jews no longer had a privileged place in the kingdom of God but that the Gospel and the kingdom had been given to another “nation” (21:43). This shift of God’s purposes from a Jewish setting concerned with Jewish legal customs and Temple worship to a Gentile, or world-wide setting, is one of the issues discussed under the theological heading called “salvation history.” The kind of salvation history which commentators presuppose was operative in the composition of Matthew’s Gospel has a great deal of influence on what the commentators say about its original message concerning Christian mission, soteriology, and eschatology. These three issues, in turn, affect the commentators’ interpretations of the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats.

Most scholars believe the internal evidence inside Matthew’s Gospel suggests that Jesus’ disciple could not have written the Gospel we have today. Two reasons for this rejection of the traditional view of authorship appear frequently in the literature. The chief argument rests on a broadly accepted theory that Matthew’s Gospel incorporated much of Mark’s and that no original disciple of Jesus would have depended as heavily on Mark’s Gospel as Matthew’s Gospel seems to have depended on it.<sup>14</sup> Another line of argument is based on the evidence that Matthew’s Gospel appears to be written to a post-AD 70 audience which is trying to deal with tensions between law-abiding Christian Jews on the one hand and their more liberated Hellenistic Jewish and Gentile Christian brethren on the other. The broad recognition of this tension in the Gospel, however, is not

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<sup>14</sup> Ulrich Luz and Helmut Koester. *Matthew: A Commentary*, 3 vols., trans. James A. Crouch (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989, 2001, 2005), I, 94.

matched by scholarly unanimity concerning which side in the debate Matthew's Gospel originally took.

Most commentators recognize that the author was trained in the traditions of the Jewish people and was therefore at least Jewish by birth. Not only does Papias testify to the Semitic origin of Matthew's Gospel, but many scholars have recognized that Matthew's turns of phrase and relatively frequent use of the Jewish Scriptures argues that he was steeped in the culture and learning of the Jewish people.<sup>15</sup> While most scholars accept a Jewish authorship, differences of opinion exist over the more specific cultural/social/theological orientation of the author. Twenty-nine scholars are listed by W. D. Davies and Dale Allison who say the author was a "Jewish Christian." Fourteen of these add that he was probably "Hellenistic" and 4 maintain that he was "Palestinian."<sup>16</sup> The question of whether the author were a Palestinian or Hellenistic Jew is one more element in the broader debate over the position the Gospel takes concerning the obligation of Christians to keep Moses' law. This element, in turn, also affects what its author intended to convey about mission, soteriology, the mission of the church, eschatology, and eventually the intended meaning of Matt 25:31–46.

A significant minority of scholars have claimed that certain clues in Matthew's Gospel point to a Gentile author.<sup>17</sup> Chief among these clues is a warning in Matt 21:43 which is interpreted by some commentators to be a categorical rejection of the Jews by God and an opening of the kingdom to the Gentiles, "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom

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<sup>15</sup> Davies and Allison, I, 17–58.

<sup>16</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, I, 10–11.

<sup>17</sup> The list in Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, I, 10–11 names K. W. Clark, P. Nepper-Christiansen, W. Trilling, G. Strecker, R. Walker, W. van Tilborg, W. Pesch, H. Frankemölle, J. P. Meier, S. Brown, and M. J. Cook.



of God will be taken away from you, and be given to a nation producing the fruit of it.” This interpretation, more compatible with a Gentile authorship, is, however, often challenged on contextual grounds. The setting of the warning lists the chief priests and elders as its most direct recipients (21:23). The warning could therefore have been relayed by a law abiding Jew as a condemnation of the current Jewish leadership rather than as a categorical rejection of the Jewish nation to no longer be God’s chosen people. In any event, the ethnic identity of the author, whether he were Gentile or Jewish, Palestinian or Hellenistic is relevant as a clue to the perspective the author had concerning salvation history, soteriology, the church’s mission, and eschatology. And reciprocally, the positions which the Gospel promotes on these issues are clues to the identity of the author and the intended meaning of Matt 25:31–46. This “hermeneutical circle” naturally forces the whole discussion to take place in the context of self-authenticating hypotheses. The perspective which the author had on any of these issues, if it could be determined, would illumine his intended meaning for the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats. The controversy surrounding the author’s opinions on these issues is apparently one of the reasons that interpretations of the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats are so varied even among those interested in the author’s intended meaning.

Another relevant point which hinges upon the ethnicity of the author concerns the amount of knowledge the author had regarding Jewish Scriptures, other texts, and traditions. Some of the finer points of interpretation which appear in the commentaries of Matthew’s Gospel are rooted in the assumption that its author intentionally incorporated or reacted to the ideas which were alive in the literature and traditions of the Jewish people. Evidence for the author’s familiarity with Jewish literature is often based on his

relatively high number of quotations and allusions to the Old Testament. If the author were a well-read Jew, broadly exposed to the literature and traditions of the Jewish people, then his alleged allusions to Jewish texts and ideas which many commentators invoke become more credible tools for discovering the author's intended meaning.

As early as 1928, E. von Dobschütz suggested that Matthew was a rabbi of the school of Jochanan ben Zakkai.<sup>18</sup> Krister Stendahl thought the author developed his use of the Old Testament in the context of a "school" similar to the studious sect that produced the distinctly crafted commentaries (*pesharim*) discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>19</sup> Günther Bornkamm, Birger Gerhardsson, and Michael Goulder argued that the author was a Christian "scribe." Goulder explains that as a scribe the author was an "expert" on the text of scripture and was responsible for training disciples.<sup>20</sup> Some commentators say the Gospel's interpretations and applications of Scripture resemble the *midrashim* of the rabbis. Many commentators agree that the author's intended meaning may well be illumined by comparing his Gospel to the similar wording and themes that appear elsewhere in Jewish texts. This issue is highly significant to the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 because other Jewish texts use a similar vocabulary to discuss similar

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<sup>18</sup> E. von Dobschütz, "Matthäus als Rabbi und Katechet," *ZNW* 27 (1928): 338–48.

<sup>19</sup> Stendahl, *School of St. Matthew*, 31.

<sup>20</sup> Günther Bornkamm and Birger Gerhardsson also call Matthew a "scribe." Günther Bornkamm, "End Expectation and Church in Matthew," in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, ed. Günther Bornkamm, G. Barth and H. J. Held (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 15–51, here 49; Birger Gerhardsson, *The Testing of God's Son (Matt 4:1–11 & Par.): An Analysis of an Early Christian Midrash*, trans. John Toy Coniectanea biblica, New Testament 2, no. 1 (Lund: Gleerup, 1966), 79; Michael D. Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: S.P.C.K., 1974), 10.

themes. A list of Jewish “intertexts” and their relevance to the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 will be given below in Chapter 3.

On the other hand, a minority of scholars think that Matthew’s Gospel should be read with less attention to traditionally Jewish concerns and with more sensitivity to the interests of a Gentile Christian author. These scholars concede that the Gospel may have begun its compositional evolution in the hands of Jewish traditors, but they argue that the final edition bears the fingerprints of a Gentile. As stated above, some evidence suggests that the Gospel forecasts a transfer of the kingdom from the Jews (or from their leadership) to another “nation producing the fruit of it” (21:42). John Meier thinks the Gospel bears other clues that the author was a Gentile. Among these clues are the following: he mistakenly thought only some of the Sadducees denied the resurrection (22:23), he failed to recognize the Sadducees and Pharisees as distinct groups (16:12), he replaced many of Mark’s Aramaic words with their Greek counterparts, and he generally improved the highly Semitic Greek of Mark into a more acceptable Greek style. Meier’s conclusion is that either Matthew was a “liberated” Hellenistic Jewish Christian or something he thinks hardly distinguishable—a Gentile Christian.<sup>21</sup> In either case, if the first Gospel is read for the intention of the most recent editor who produced the Gospel’s final form, then the editor’s identity as a Gentile or a Jew (whether Palestinian or Hellenistic) is an issue that would significantly color interpretive conclusions. For convenience, without the intention to prejudice a conclusion, the balance of chapters 2, 3 and 4 will refer to the author/editor by the traditional designation as “Matthew.” In Chapter 5, a more detailed working description of the author will be proposed.

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<sup>21</sup> John P. Meier, *Law and History in Matthew’s Gospel* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1976), 19–21.

### When the Gospel of Matthew Was Written

The date of the Gospel of Matthew, if it could be established, would help commentators form opinions about its original readership which may lead to a better understanding of why the Gospel and Matt 25:31–46 was written. The date of Matthew's Gospel is usually reckoned in the balance of opinions regarding several key questions. Chief among these is whether Matthew alludes to or knew of the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D and whether Matthew used Mark's Gospel as a source for his own. Other important questions address the relation which Matthew's Gospel had to the anti-Christian "Curse of the *Minim*" which began to be recited in the synagogues sometime after the fall of Jerusalem, whether or not Ignatius of Antioch (d. AD 107) quoted Matthew's Gospel in his letters, and a host of other issues which suggest that the persecutions which Jesus forecast for the disciples were already being led by the Pharisees (who were not politically powerful in Jerusalem prior to AD 70).<sup>22</sup> Some commentators use this last line of argument to date the Gospel after the destruction of the Temple when the Pharisees displaced the Sadducees as the dominant religious party of the Jews. This question is complicated by a dispute over whether the Pharisees could have been Jesus' chief antagonists, as Matthew portrays, or whether Pharisaic opposition is anachronistically

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<sup>22</sup> Richard Bauckham bases his support of the first century origin of this curse of the *Minim* upon the following helpful works: P. Schäfer, "Die sogenannte Synod von Jabne: Zure Trennung von Juden und Christen im ersten/zweiten Jh. n. Chr.," *Judaica* 31(1975) 54–64; R. Kimelman, "Birkat Ha-Minim and the Lack of Evidence for an Anti-Christian Jewish Prayer in Late Antiquity," in E.P. Sanders and A.I. Baumgarten, eds., *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, vol. 2: *Aspects of Judaism in the Graeco-Roman Period* (London: SCM Press, 1981) 226–44; W. Horbury, "The Benediction of the Minim and the Early Jewish-Christian Controversy," *JTS* 33 (1982) 19–61; S. T. Katz, "Issues in the Separation of Judaism and Christianity after 70 C.E.: A Reconsideration," *JBL* 103 (1984) 43–76; R. A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity* (SPB 37; Jerusalem: Magnes Press/ Leiden: Brill, 1988) 102–107; P. S. Alexander, "The Parting of the Ways' from the Perspective of Rabbinic Judaism," in J. D. G. Dunn, ed., *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways A..D. 70 to 135* (WUNT 66; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1993) 1–25. Richard Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish & Christian Apocalypses*. Supplement to Novum Testament, no 93 (Boston: Brill, 1998), 236–39.

cast back into Jesus' context in order to present Jesus either as an ally or a model for Christians in their (later) struggles with the Pharisees. Another line of argument concludes that the persecutions which Matthew's readers were experiencing were actually prior to AD 70 and may well have been the ones to which the book of Acts points which occurred as early as the AD 50s and 60s.<sup>23</sup> Again, an earlier date would make the apparent devotion to Jewish traditions in Matthew's Gospel more relevant to earlier readers. A much later date would suggest that the apparent endorsement of the legal Jewish tradition should be seen only as an accurate description of an earlier phase in the development of salvation-history when an acceptance of Jewish tradition would have been appropriate. Graham Stanton thinks Matthew's Gospel represents a Christian perspective on the distinctions which grew between Christians and Jews after the destruction of Jerusalem. According to Stanton, by the time Matthew was written, the churches who originally read it considered themselves to be *extra muros* or "outside the walls" of Judaism though they still sought to win Jews to Christ.<sup>24</sup>

### **Where the Gospel of Matthew Was Written**

The place of composition is an interesting, though only slightly helpful issue. Most of the evidence used to establish the place of composition already presupposes a great deal about the characteristics of Matthew's original audience. Most commentators who write on this issue agree that the Gospel would have been most relevant to Christians caught in a conflict over loyalty to the synagogue's tradition on the one hand and

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<sup>23</sup> For a pre-70 date, see Gundry, *Matthew*, 599–609 and J. A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1976), 76–78. For a post-70 date, see Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, I, 127–38.

<sup>24</sup> Graham Stanton, "Synagogue and Church," 124, 145.

fellowship with the developing Gentile church on the other. For this reason, many locations which held a significant mixture of Jews and Gentiles together have been suggested including Antioch or Edessa in Syria, Alexandria (Egypt), Sepphoris or Tiberias in Galilee, and several cities on the Mediterranean coast of Phoenicia (Berytus, Tyre, or Sidon).<sup>25</sup> Antioch in Syria is the most frequently suggested place for several good reasons. The dispute outlined in Acts 15 which took place in Antioch mirrors the kind of conflict which Matthew's Gospel seems to pre-suppose. Antioch was also the home of Ignatius who may be one of the first known authors to quote Matthew. In addition to this, Syria is also broadly recognized as the place of origin for the *Didache*, an early teaching manual which possibly includes one of the earliest allusions to Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats (*Did.* 4).<sup>26</sup> The significance of the *Didache's* alleged allusion to Matt 25:31–46 will be discussed below in Chapter 3. For now it need only be recognized that if Matthew's Gospel originated in the same locality as the *Didache*, then the *Didache's* interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 becomes all the more significant for those interested in ancient interpretations.

Aaron M. Gale's support of Sepphoris as Matthew's place of origin is significant for a different reason. Sepphoris was a relatively prosperous city with a significant middle class. Gale argues that Matthew's Gospel evidences a social ethic that would have been more compatible with relatively affluent Christians than with the poor and outcast

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<sup>25</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 41–42; Meier, *Law and History*, 9.

<sup>26</sup> This connection between *Didache* 4 and Mt 25:31–46 was suggested by J. Ramsey Michaels, "Apostolic Hardships and Righteous Gentiles: A Study of Matthew 25:31–46" *BJRL* 84 (1965): 27–37, here 31.

Christians of other regions.<sup>27</sup> If Gale is correct, both the crafting and the original reading of Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats would have been affected by this relatively affluent perspective on social ethics. Affluent readers who fancied themselves among the "sheep" may have pitied rather than identified with the poor and hungry "least" of Jesus' "brothers." They may have felt more keenly responsible to help Jesus' "brothers" inasmuch as "to whom much is given, much is required" (Luke 12:48). However, this compulsion toward benevolence could have been experienced by affluent Christians whether they followed a community ethic which identified the "least" in Matthew's story as suffering Christian missionaries on the one hand or whether they followed a broadly philanthropic ethic which identified the "least" as the poor and outcast peoples of every race and religion. In the end, the relative affluence of Matthew or of his original readers would influence the attitude of the readers, but would not finally determine exactly how they would interpret the passage. Neither would Sepphoris need to be the place of origin for such an affluence to have affected the author of Matthew's Gospel. After all, Matthew could have written (perhaps awkwardly) *from* an affluent perspective but *for* an impoverished readership. For these reasons, the exact bearing which Matthew's origin in Sepphoris would have on the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 is difficult to determine.

### **Why the Gospel of Matthew Was Written**

More relevant to the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 is the question of why the Gospel of Matthew was written. There is no preamble in Matthew's Gospel to tell us

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<sup>27</sup> Aaron M. Gale, *Redefining Ancient Borders: The Jewish Scribal Framework of Matthew's Gospel* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 92–101.

why. Commentators must either depend on external sources such as the tradition of Papias or examine the internal evidence in the Gospel itself for clues. If the Gospel were written for a broad audience, its intended message, including the message of Matt 25:31–46, should be understood as something generally applicable. If it were written primarily for the concerns of a narrowly defined community, then its intended message may be understood to be most relevant to that community.

Craig Keener thinks that speculative theories about the immediate needs of the original readers can unnecessarily restrict the interpretation of Matthew. Keener agrees with those who argue that Matthew was intended for a broad readership, including perhaps all of ancient Mediterranean Christianity.<sup>28</sup> Richard A. Burridge likens the Gospels to ancient biographies which were not as tightly confined to the needs of one particular audience as were the epistles of the New Testament.<sup>29</sup> Loveday C. A. Alexander argues that earlier Gospel traditions in oral form would have naturally had a limited reach, but that the very act of putting these oral traditions into writing demonstrates an intention to reach audiences broader than those which originally recited the traditions from disjointed notes or memory.<sup>30</sup> If these scholars are correct, the attempt to isolate the immediate needs of the original audience may be an inappropriate narrowing of the original and broader intention. This would mean that descriptions of the

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<sup>28</sup> Keener, *Matthew*, 45.

<sup>29</sup> Richard A. Burridge, "About People, by People, for People: gospel Genre and Audiences," in *The Gospel for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard J. Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 113–46. Bauckham makes the same point in *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biographies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 248–49.

<sup>30</sup> Loveday C. A. Alexander, "Ancient Book Production and the Circulation of the Gospels," in *The Gospel for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard J. Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 71–112, here 90.



original audience should be based on the characteristics of the audience which the Gospel itself implies. A deep knowledge of traditions, literature, and conflicts which go unmentioned in the text should not be needed to grasp the literary intention of Matt 25:31–46 if it were intended to be read by a broad audience who could not have known about such peripheral issues.

On the other hand, many commentators believe that Matthew's Gospel was intended primarily to address the special concerns of an immediate local audience which shared the unmentioned, but very relevant, situations and traditions of its author. To many of these commentators, the most significant characteristic of that audience concerns its identification with or disassociation from the synagogue's observance of Jewish traditions. This issue is not easily resolved. Günther Bornkamm has distinguished himself for having sequentially supported three possible scenarios: "still bound to," "in close relation with," and "distinct from" the Jewish synagogues.<sup>31</sup> In addition to Jesus' pledge not to "destroy" but to "fulfill" the law and the prophets (5:17), Bornkamm supported his earliest belief in the fact that Matthew's Gospel endorsed the payment of the Temple tax

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<sup>31</sup> John P. Meier, *Law and History*, 9–12 cites as sources for Bornkamm's migrating position the following respectively: "Enderwartung und Kirche im Matthäusevangelium," in *Überlieferung und Auslegung im Matthäusevangelium* (Neukirchen: Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins, 1968), 13–47; English translation Günther Bornkamm, "End Expectation and Church in Matthew," in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, ed. Günther Bornkamm, G. Barth and H.J. Held (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 15–51; "Auferstandene und der Irdische," *ibid.*, 289–310; and "Die Binde- und Lösegewalt in der Kirche des Matthäus," in *Geschichte und Glaube II*, Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie: Theologische Abhandlungen 48 (Munich: Kaiser, 1971), 37–50. Meier lists the following as supporting the early Bornkamm: W. D. Davies, H. von Campenhausen, D. M. Smith. The work of Reinhart Hummel, *Die Auseinandersetzung zwischen Kirche und Judentum im Matthäusevangelium*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie 33 (München: Kaiser, 1966) is a thorough explication of Bornkamm's early position. Those who follow the later Bornkamm include Kilpatrick, Strecker, Trilling, E. Haenchen, R. Martin, K. Stendahl, and Frankenmölle. The most comprehensive treatment of this view is presented by D. Hare, *The Theme of the Jewish Persecution of Christians in the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1967).

(17:24–27) and commended loyalty to the “scribes and Pharisees” who sit “in the chair of Moses” (23:1–3).<sup>32</sup>

The supposition of this loyalty, however, can only illumine the debate over the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46. It can not determine the outcome. Jewish tradition is famous for its diverse and variegated perspectives. Joseph A. Grassi has argued that loyalty to synagogue traditions would have inclined Matthew’s congregation to read the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats in the light of Jewish texts which display God’s jealous care over the poor and outcast. One such text is Deut 10:17–20 which says, “For the LORD your God is the God of gods and the lord of lords, the great, the mighty and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe. He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing. So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.”<sup>33</sup> Under the influence of texts like this, the “least” in Matt 25:40, 45 may be understood to be all the oppressed and unfortunate people of the world. The ethic presupposed in this interpretation is generally philanthropic. On the other hand, Matthew’s congregation may have read the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats in the light of Jewish apocalyptic literature which often displays a different criterion of divine judgment. Many of the Jewish apocalypses which describe the final judgment portray God’s wrath against groups of people particularly because of their mistreatment of the Jews. The ethic in Jewish apocalyptic literature is often very nationalistic and favors God’s covenanted people, the Jews. Under the influence of texts like these, the “least” may have been

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<sup>32</sup> Bornkamm, “End Expectation,” 20–21.

<sup>33</sup> Joseph A. Grassi, “‘I Was Hungry and You Gave Me to Eat,’ The Divine Identification Ethic in Matthew,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 11 (1981): 81–84.

understood by Matthew and his readers to be the new “nation” (21:43) of Christians who replaced the Jews (or who replaced the scribes and elders, 21:23) and who were now experiencing persecution in their effort to preach the Gospel around the world.<sup>34</sup> For many commentators, the fact that Jewish traditions and literature influenced the ideas expressed in the Gospel of Matthew is not in question. The real question concerns the level and direction of that influence. The Jewish texts that have been suggested as parallels (“intertexts”) to Matt 25:31–46 will be listed and briefly described in Chapter 3 below. Before the relevance of these texts can be addressed, however, a brief discussion of the literary culture of Matthew’s readers is in order.

### **How Matthew’s Gospel Was Read: Its Literary Culture**

Because of the attention to reading and exposition that occurred in synagogues and churches, literacy was considerably higher among Jews and the first Christians than in other segments of the Greek and Latin speaking world. When the Temple still stood, Jerusalem alone is said to have had 480 schools each with its own “house of reading” (*bet sefer*) and “house of learning” (*bet midrash*).<sup>35</sup> The Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds say that elementary teachers were appointed everywhere during the century before the Temple fell, and that before the founding of schools, each child learned from his father.<sup>36</sup> The earliest allusion to schools in Jerusalem is from Sirach 51:23 during the first quarter of the second century BC. This text tells the reader to “take up lodging in the house of

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<sup>34</sup> Jonathan M. Lunde, “The Salvation-Historical Implications of Matthew 24–25 in Light of Jewish Apocalyptic Literature” (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1996).

<sup>35</sup> Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale, 1995), 7.

<sup>36</sup> The Babylonian Talmud (*Baba Bathra* 21a) says Joshua b Gamla (*circa* AD 63) established schools. The Palestinian Talmud (*y. Ketuboth* 8.11) credits Simon b Shatah (*circa* 65 BC).

instruction.” Though, the text poetically emphasizes moral improvement as much as literacy, its allusion to the institution of schools should not be discounted.<sup>37</sup>

According to Michael Fishbane, the practice of reading and study that became standard among the Jews was developed in Babylon as a proxy to the Temple service. The liturgy that became standard is described as early as the book of Nehemiah. In chapter 8, Nehemiah describes a service including a public gathering, an opening of the Torah, a hymn with congregational response and genuflection, and a recitation of the Torah which is explained by well-trained Levitical officials.<sup>38</sup> The fact that the Jewish Scriptures were in Hebrew, a language increasingly unfamiliar to many Jews, did not prevent the officials from pronouncing each lection in Hebrew as written. To facilitate learning, a man called a *mētūrgēmān* was appointed to translate or paraphrase the text orally and without notes according to the traditions of interpretation and application that had developed among the recognized teachers.<sup>39</sup> Eventually these traditional paraphrases took written form and are known today as the Targums.

The group of people who actually copied the Scriptures and composed the Targums was comparatively small, confined mainly to officials of the Temple or synagogues. Writing among the masses was confined to record keeping and commerce. Nor is it certain the public at large had much access to scrolls or books. Libraries, like that discovered at the Dead Sea, may have been kept by cultic communities or the ruling

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<sup>37</sup> Martin S. Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism 200 BCE–400 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 20.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (New York: Oxford, 1985), 113.

<sup>39</sup> Shinan Avigdor, “Sermons, Targums, and the Reading from Scriptures in the Ancient Synagogue” in *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lee I. Levine (Philadelphia: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1987), 104–5.

priestly groups, but evidence of other libraries open to the public is very slim.<sup>40</sup> Books or scrolls could be found with the well to do. The Ethiopian Eunuch of Acts 8 read from Isaiah as he traveled from Jerusalem, and Paul had his “parchments” which he used in his travels (2 Tim 4:13).<sup>41</sup> Still, most people were exposed to texts primarily by the public reading of them.<sup>42</sup>

The first Christians seem to have adopted the Jewish habit of public readings followed by official exposition. Luke tells us that Jesus customarily read and gave expositions not only in the synagogue of his hometown Nazareth, but broadly in the surrounding synagogues as well (Luke 4:15–27). Evidence that early Christians continued this practice is in 1 Tim 4:13–14, where Paul tells Timothy, “Until I come, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the spiritual gift you have, given to you and confirmed by prophetic words when the elders laid hands on you.”

For ancient Jews, even when texts were read privately in a familiar language, a proctor or guide was needed for some texts. This is certainly true for some of the rabbinic texts which include traditions as old as Matthew’s Gospel but began to be written a century or two after Matthew’s Gospel. Much of rabbinic literature is so dense, allusive, and laconic that it is virtually unintelligible apart from a proctor who can explain the intertextual and thematic allusions. Jaffee explains the necessity of a teacher to explain these texts, “Only the master can give them life as he repeats and explains them, drawing

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<sup>40</sup> Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth*, 15–16.

<sup>41</sup> The word here for “parchment” is *μεμβράνα*.

<sup>42</sup> Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth*, 17.

out invisible connections and unthought contextualizations, linking them back toward tradition already known and forward to horizons of interpretation scarcely discerned.”<sup>43</sup>

Closer to Matthew’s day, the first century sect of Jews who produced the Dead Sea Scrolls developed policies for study that required a quorum of 10 students and a trained teacher.<sup>44</sup> It would not be too far-fetched to suggest that Jesus himself may have operated in a similar way with his twelve disciples. We know that even as late as the end of the second century, Irenaeus recommends to Christians that the Scriptures be read under the guide of the presbyters of the church “with whom lies the apostolic doctrine” (*Adv. Haer.* 4.32).

It is quite possible, therefore, that when the Gospel of Matthew was read in the meeting houses of early Christians that it was offered with explanations given by a teacher whose comments would be a highly valued part of the service. If so, Keener’s theory about the general applicability of the Gospel of Matthew may need to be supplemented with the recognition that Matthew’s Gospel was most regularly read and explained by a specialist who could have pointed out its allusions to other texts and traditions. An understanding of Matt 25:31–46 similar to that of the original readers would therefore need to take into account the thematic relations this text has with other important teachings and traditions of the reading community. For the same reason, the intertextual allusions which the official expositors may have drawn must also be considered.

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 32–33, Jaffee cites 1QS 6.3–4, 6–8

### Views Concerning the Theological Perspectives of the Author

The themes which appear in other parts of Matthew's Gospel which most directly illumine Matt 25:31–46 include the theological concepts of salvation-history, mission, soteriology, and eschatology. Modern commentators who practice historical-critical exegesis, who are primarily concerned with how the text was understood in its original setting, are content to keep this discussion within the boundaries of what may be reasonably speculated concerning Matthew's own theological perspectives. Other commentators, who do not limit their interest to the authorial intent of the text, may read Matt 25:31–46 in the light of theological opinions which Matthew and his original readers may have never entertained. The following discussion about the theological context of Matt 25:31–46 will primarily focus upon what Matthew may have believed about salvation-history, mission, soteriology, and eschatology. All but the most radically post-modern interpreters still acknowledge that Matthew's original intention for this text is at least a relevant issue.

#### Salvation History in the Gospel of Matthew

“Salvation history” may be defined in the words of John P. Meier as “a schematic understanding of God's dealings with men that emphasizes continuity-yet-difference....” The *continuity* is perceived by the eye of faith which sees “one and the same God acting faithfully and consistently within the flow of human history....” The distinct periods of God's actions among men are marked by the different ways in which God acts at different times and the different ways in which man responds. According to Meier, all of the several periods of salvation-history are only various stages of the one divine

economy.<sup>45</sup> Salvation history is therefore a conceptualization of what God has done in history for the salvation of mankind. God's actions may be seen in both the critical turning points that demark the separate epochs of salvation-history as well as in God's maintenance of his purpose in each epoch. In his work on the theology of the Christian mission, Andreas Köstenberger writes of the evangelical expectation to see in God's written word an "underlying logic and unity in the biblical message" which is united in "one primary pervading purpose: the tracing of God's unfolding plan of redemption."<sup>46</sup>

Matthew's Gospel may be read with sensitivity to what Matthew may have thought about the critical turning points and epochs of God's redemptive work. The belief that Matthew's Gospel is consistent with itself leads to the confidence that what Matthew says about salvation-history is compatible with the rest of Matthew's Gospel in whole and in part. This means that Matthew's portrayal of salvation-history should illuminate Matthew's intention regarding the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats in Matt 25:31–46.

Since the 1960s, many commentators have departed from the tradition of outlining Matthew's Gospel into topically arranged sections and have begun to analyze Matthew according to the "conceptual structure" of salvation-history. David R. Bauer traced this development in Matthean studies and outlined the opinions of several scholars who took positions in the ongoing debate concerning Matthew's conception of salvation-history. Among the commentators, there seems to be a general recognition of a distinction between Israel's stage of salvation history which preceded Jesus' time and the

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<sup>45</sup> Meier, *Law and History*, 22.

<sup>46</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the End of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, vol. 11 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 20.



current age of the church.<sup>47</sup> Some scholars such as Georg Strecker and Rolf Walker marked the time of Jesus' ministry as a clearly separate transitional stage between Israel and the church in which Israel failed to heed the preaching of Jesus and was therefore replaced by the church as the covenanted people of God.<sup>48</sup> Reinhart Hummel also believed Matthew accepted this understanding of Israel's failure and replacement by the church. Hummel, however, creatively described the time of Jesus as a bridge between overlapping epochs. According to Hummel, the time of Jesus' Messianic ministry must be seen as open both to the past and to the future.

As the time of the Messianic works of Jesus to Israel Jesus' ministry is opened to the past, of which it is the fulfillment. These lines [of history] begin with Abraham, find their end with Israel's rejection of Jesus and may be set forth until the destruction of Jerusalem. As the time of the Messianic interpretation of the law, the activity of Jesus is open toward the future as the basis for the church. These lines begin with John the Baptist as the preacher of the 'way of righteousness' and proceed over the apocalyptic final event until the day of judgment and the in breaking of the new aeon.<sup>49</sup>

Others such as H. Frankemölle, Jack Dean Kingsbury, and David Bauer argue that Matthew's Gospel placed Jesus and the church in one and the same period of salvation-history which was distinct from the time of the Jews. In this way, the words of Jesus become primarily relevant for the church age, while the law of Moses may be seen as part of the past.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> David R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew's Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Sheffield: Almond, 1988), 13.

<sup>48</sup> Georg Strecker, "The Concept of History in Matthew" *JAAR* 35 (1967): 219–30, 221–23. Rolf Walker, *Die Heilsgeschichte im ersten Evangelium* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), 114–227.

<sup>49</sup> Reinhart Hummel, *Die Auseinandersetzung zwischen Kirche und Judentum im Mattäusevangelium*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., *Beträge zur evangelischen Theologi* 33 (München: Kaiser, 1966), 172 (my translation).

<sup>50\*</sup> H. Frankemölle, "Jahwebund und Kirche Christi," *Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen N.F.* 10 (1974), 351. Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 31–37. Bauer, *Structure*, 45.

John P. Meier, gave one of the most innovative explanations of this view.

According to Meier, Matthew crafted his story of Jesus to present the law as a prophetic device which would ply its jurisdiction only until the time that “heaven and earth pass away” (Matt 5:17–18). Though Jesus himself may have used the quoted phrase to refer to the end of the age, Matthew skillfully designed his interpretation to give a new meaning to the phrase “end of the age.” According to Meier, Matthew filled his Gospel with so many fulfilled prophecies about Jesus that the law’s forensic nature seems to be displaced by its prophetic use. Since Matthew colors his account of Jesus’ death and resurrection with apocalyptic images normally associated with the end of the age (darkness, earthquakes, rocks splitting, and the resurrection of the faithful Jews, 27:45, 50–52), Meier concludes that in Matthew’s literary art, Jesus’ death and resurrection is the point that “heaven and earth pass away” – and so the law’s forensic purpose is ended. The binding force of the scribes and Pharisees was only in effect until *die Wende der Zeit* (“the change of the era”) of Jesus’ death and resurrection. In place of the law, the teaching of Jesus becomes the guide of the new people of God who are the church (28:19–20).<sup>51</sup>

Anthony J. Saldarini represents a voice in the debate which criticizes attempts like Meier’s for drawing too sharp a distinction between the time of Israel and the time of the church. According to Saldarini and others Matthew wrote as a Jew to win other Jews to the kind of Judaism which Jesus preached.<sup>52</sup> These scholars therefore reject the idea that

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<sup>51</sup> John P. Meier, *Law and History*, 49, 61, 64, 123

<sup>52</sup> J. A. Overman, *Matthew’s Gospel and Formative Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); Anthony J. Saldarini, *Matthew’s Christian Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994); and David Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998).

Matthew considered the church as an epoch of salvation-history which replaced or superseded Israel or which excused the church from following the demands of the law and the prophets. According to Saldarini, this division between the time of Israel and the time of the church leads to the denial of the historicity of the events which the Gospel describes. Adherents to this division too easily cast back into the Gospel the struggles between Jews and the church which did not take place until much later than Jesus' or even Matthew's time.<sup>53</sup>

Questions about the nature of Jesus' teaching and its role in God's saving work are very significant to the interpretations of the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats. As we will see, one of the greatest controversies which divides the commentaries concerns the criterion of judgment which is at work in the judgment scene. Some commentators who align Jesus and Matthew more closely with a Jewish framework of ethics and soteriology are prone to describe the criterion to be one based in the merit of the individuals being judged.<sup>54</sup> Others who think that the turn of the epochs have placed the church in an age of grace in which faith in Christ and his message is the criterion of eternal judgment are prone to think that the charitable deeds which the Son of Man evaluates are used only as evidence of saving faith in Jesus' message. These exegetes have a tendency to align the

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<sup>53</sup> Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian Jewish Community*, 6, 160–64.

<sup>54</sup> J. Du Preez, "Social Justice: Motive for the Mission of the Church," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 53 (2001): 36–46. According to R. T. France, the surprise expressed by those being judged (25:37–39, 44) is proof that neither the sheep nor the goats acted with any regard to the religious identity or message of the "least" of Jesus' brothers. France thinks the sheep are what some modern theologians call "anonymous Christians," i.e., Christian in practice, but not in confession. R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2007), 958-959. M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock also think that the deeds of love and mercy which make up the "weightier matters of the law" (23:23) are the criterion here, not faith alone. M. Eugene Boring and Red B. Craddock, *The New Testament Commentary*, Peoples New Testament Commentary (Louisville: Westminster, 2004), 94-95.

“least” of Jesus’ “brothers” with Christian missionaries who spread the saving message of Jesus’ Gospel and call to discipleship. Under this tendency, the benevolence shown the “least” is an element of judgment along with the Christian faith of the benefactor.<sup>55</sup>

A significant line of argument which is part of the ongoing debate about Matthew’s concept of salvation history may be seen in a string of scholars who argue that Matthew’s Gospel presents Jesus as personally embodying, completing, and replacing the vocation to which Israel was called collectively but which the nation failed to fulfill. Significant British scholars such as T. W. Manson, G. B. Caird, C. H. Dodd, C. F. Moule, and N. T. Wright have forcefully argued for this line of thought. A broad range of arguments are offered in support of this idea among these scholars, but one argument is most relevant to the interpretation of Matthew’s Judgment of the Sheep and Goats. The title “Son of Man” was used in poetic and apocalyptic description of the nation of Israel (Ps 80:8, Dan 7:13) long before it was used in Matt 25:31–46 as a self-designation of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel. George B. Caird suggested that Jesus chose this phrase especially for the multivalent ambiguity which it carried as a designation both for any human being and also to refer to Israel according to its Old Testament use. This allowed the title to carry the insinuation that Jesus would personally adopt Israel’s vocation to enlighten and bring salvation to the nations.<sup>56</sup> According to this theory, people today – even people from among the Gentiles – can be incorporated into the new “Israel” by

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<sup>55</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, “Apostolic Hardships,” 27–37, here 29. R.T France mentions this theory only to dismiss it. According to France, the surprise expressed by those being judged is proof that neither the sheep nor the goats acted with any regard to the religious identification or message of the “least” of Jesus’ brothers. France thinks the sheep are what some modern theologians call “anonymous Christians,” i.e., Christian in practice, but not in confession. R.T. France, *The Gospl of Matthew*, NICNT (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2007), 958-959.

<sup>56</sup> G. B. Caird, *New Testament Theology*, completed and ed. by L. D. Hurst (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 380.

being baptized into Jesus and celebrating the “new covenant” established in the atoning death of Jesus which Jeremiah promised God would one day make with the “house of Israel” (Jer 31:31; Matt 26:26–28).<sup>57</sup> Since the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats makes the “Son of Man” the judge who accepts or condemns people among the nations for how they treat the “least” who are also called Jesus’ “brethren” (25:31, 40), this line of argument is consistent with the idea that the “least” are Christians and that the criterion of judgment is communal or sectarian rather than broadly philanthropic. However, this line of argument need not be so used. Like so many other issues, the matter is relevant, but not exactly determinative.

One other issue concerning salvation history which affects the interpretation of Matthew’s Judgment of the Sheep and Goats concerns the future status of the nation of Israel. Among the theologians and commentators who believe the work of Christ brought about a change of epochs in God’s outworking of the redemption of mankind, dispensational theologians hold the distinct belief that God has not abandoned his original covenant with the literal descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Many dispensationalists believe that God will restore to the race of Israel both the Land of Promise, the populous nation promised to them, as well as their special status as God’s conduit of revelation and blessing to the world (Gen 12:1–3). As explained above in Chapter 1, this premise of biblical interpretation sets dispensationalists on an extended course of prophetic exposition which leads them to conclude that the “brethren” of the

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<sup>57</sup> T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge: University Press, 1935), 227; G. B. Caird, *New Testament Theology*, 374, 380, 418–19. C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (London: Fontana, 1965); C.H. Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity* (London: Collins, 1970) especially “The Founder of Christianity,” 81–97, 90; C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: University Press, 1977), 14, 19, 157–58, 174; and N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1996), 515–17, 524.

Son of Man in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats should be taken literally as a designation of the Jewish people who have been either befriended or persecuted by the Gentile nations (25:32) during a great tribulation which will come upon the earth just prior to the millennial kingdom (Rev 20:1–4).

### The Mission Expressed in Matthew's Gospel

Matthew's understanding of the mission of the church is another interpretive issue which is both relevant to the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 and also divisive among the commentators. The issue of Matthew's missiology affects the discussion of the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 in several ways.

Some commentators who think Matthew's mission included an obligation to convert Gentiles to a Christian form of Judaism think that Matt 25:31–46 promotes a soteriology based on merit which, until E. P. Sanders' challenging counter-proposal, has been broadly assumed to be part of Jewish thinking in the first century. According to Sanders, most Jewish literature from 200 BC to AD 200 represents only one "pattern of religion" by which its adherents believed they could "get in and stay in" favor with God. Sanders called this pattern of religion "covenantal nomism." According to Sanders, this pattern of religion held on the one hand that favor with God is granted by God's mercy, but on the other hand, that a person's continued place in God's favor must be maintained by obedience to God's commands. According to Sanders, even Paul, the apostle of grace, believed that people may forfeit their gracious place among the redeemed because of heinous sin (Rom 11:22).<sup>58</sup> Sanders' theory is not without controversy.<sup>59</sup> In any case,

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<sup>58</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 17, 75, 515–17.

Sanders' idea has taken some of the edge out of the challenge of those who have claimed that Matthew's Gospel was written to combat Pauline soteriology.

Among the commentators who agree that Matt 25:31–46 is primarily a judgment according to works, some are more focused on the ethical mission promoted in the Gospel of Matthew than on its “Jewish” orientation to soteriology. To these commentators, the “righteousness” that “surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees” which Jesus said was required for entrance into the kingdom of God (5:20) is best understood as “social justice.” These commentators understand the Great Commission to be a command to enlist people into Jesus' effort to promote social justice. In harmony with this emphasis, the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats is understood to include the criterion of whether the people of the world lived according to Jesus' teaching regarding social justice.<sup>60</sup>

Dispensationalists have a unique understanding of the identity and the mission of the “least” in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats which affects their interpretation of the whole passage. According to the classic dispensational interpretation of this passage, the “least” will be the Jewish witnesses (Rev 7:4–17) who preach the gospel of the Kingdom during the Great Tribulation to the whole world just before the end comes

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<sup>59</sup> James D. G. Dunn generally supports Sanders' view and believes that Paul used the phrase “works of the law” as a reference only to those Jewish practices which separate Jews from Gentiles. It is on this basis that Paul taught we are “justified by faith apart from the works of the Law” (Rom 3:28). *The Theology of Paul*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 338–39, 354–55, 365–66. Martin Jaffee's description of the evolution of Christian doctrine away from particularly Jewish practices is consistent with Dunn's proposal, *Early Judaism* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1997), 151–55. On the other hand, D. A. Carson has assembled an impressive two volume collection of essays which reviews the same literature as did Sanders with quite a different conclusion: D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004, second printing of Vol. 1).

<sup>60</sup> Joseph A. Grassi, “I Was Hungry;” Du Preez, “Social Justice;” Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, rev. ed. with new intro., trans. Sister Caridad Inda, John Eagleson, and Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Maryknoll, 2006).

(Matt 24:14). In agreement with this premise, dispensationalists describe the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats as the time when the Son of Man will recognize those among the Gentiles who have accepted the message of the Jewish witnesses and who aided them in their missionary effort. The Gentiles who have shown proper recognition of these faithful Jews will be allowed to enter the Millennial Kingdom inasmuch as they will be compatible to the Jewish orientation of God's government over the earth during the Millennium.

In disagreement with these approaches which make the criterion of judgment the dominant theme of the passage are those commentators who subordinate Matt 25:31–46 under the theme of missiology contained in the Olivet Discourse of chapters 24–25. Further support for this perspective is gathered from the Missionary Discourse of chapter 10. In this view, the extended and immediate missiological context of Matt 25:31–46 refers to the missionaries' dependence upon others (10:9–11) and the persecutions (10:17–25; 24:9–14) which missionaries must endure in the prosecution of their mission. Under this approach, the criterion of judgment used in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats is the same as that which Jesus had already expressed in 10:40, "He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me." This allows the acts of kindness done to the missionaries to be explained as evidence of saving faith in their message. Such an interpretation allows the judgment scene to function as a consolation to the missionaries who anticipate difficult times ahead. God will reward those who assist them and punish those who persecute them. Such an explanation also



brings the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 into greater sympathy with the Pauline soteriology of salvation by grace through faith (Eph 2:8–9).<sup>61</sup>

Finally, some have argued that Jesus himself promoted philanthropic social justice as the criterion for entering the kingdom, but that Matthew changed this emphasis by promoting the care of missionaries as the basis of the judgment in Matt 25:31–46.<sup>62</sup> Such a theory is left with the dilemma concerning which application should be normative for the church today. Some commentators believe both are.<sup>63</sup> Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock think the care of the “least” who are missionaries is only one concrete expression of the broader criterion which includes the treatment that Christians give to the needy of the world.<sup>64</sup>

While the sense of mission which is apparent in Matthew’s Gospel is a relevant interpretive issue for the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats, a more directly relevant issue concerns Matthew’s views on how a person enters and maintains a right relationship with God. We must now turn to a discussion of the several views on this important interpretive issue.

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<sup>61</sup> Michaels, “Apostolic Hardships.”

<sup>62</sup> David R. Catchpole, “The Poor on Earth and the Son of Man in Heaven: A Re-Appraisal of Matthew xxv. 31–46,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library* 67 (1979): 355–97.

<sup>63</sup> Kun Chun Wong, *Interkulturelle Theologi un multikulturelle Gemeinde im Matthäusevangelium*, NTOA, no. 22 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 144–54 specifically treats Matthew’s discussions of the final judgment; John P. Heil, “The Double Meaning of the Narrative of Universal Judgment in Matthew 25:31–46,” *JSNT* 69 (1998): 3–14. Graham Stanton believes the church is obligated on pain of judgment to meet the needs of the poor, though he admits Matt 25:31–46 was probably written to show Jesus’ jealous care of the missionary disciples (the “least”) than of the poor in general. Graham Stanton, “Once More: Matthew 25:31–46,” in *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), 207–231, here 211.

<sup>64</sup> E. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary* (Louisville: John Knox, 2004), 94–95.

### Soteriology in Matthew's Gospel

In Matthew's Gospel, the angel who announced Christ's birth promised that he would "save His people from their sins." The child's name would therefore be "Jesus," which in its Hebrew form means "Yahweh is salvation" (1:21).<sup>65</sup> Whatever else "salvation" implied to Matthew, it is certain that it included relief from the problem of sin. Beyond this, the issue becomes complex. Modern readers – focused as we are on God's relationship with individuals – may be surprised by Caird's description of the mission Jesus gave the apostles in Matthew 10. According to Caird, the concept of salvation which the apostles carried was primarily a corporate one which dealt with the saving of entire groups. Private or personal salvation was an idea that took its shape in the shadow of this corporate concept of salvation. Jesus' instruction to the apostles envisioned whole towns either accepting or rejecting Christ (10:14–15, 23). In Caird's words, "The disciples were not evangelistic preachers sent out to save individual souls for some unearthly paradise. They were couriers proclaiming a national emergency and conducting a referendum on a question of national survival."<sup>66</sup> The broader effect which this corporate emphasis on salvation had on Matthew's future expectations will be discussed in the section below that deals with Matthew's eschatology. For now, some attention must be given to the judicial basis, process, and result of how Matthew thought Jesus would "save His people from their sins" (1:21).

While Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats opens with a nod to the corporate concept of judgment and salvation, a simple grammatical shift in the text

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<sup>65</sup> BDB, 221a.

<sup>66</sup> Caird, *New Testament Theology*, 361.

signals Matthew's intention to focus primarily on the eternal salvation or judgment of individuals. In harmony with the corporate idea, "All the nations" (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη—a neuter phrase) will be gathered before the Son of Man for judgment (25:32). However, the text continues, "and He will separate them (αὐτούς—a masculine pronoun) one from another." Had Matthew intended to sustain the corporate emphasis, the habits of speech would have led him to replace αὐτούς with the neuter pronoun αὐτά. His use of the masculine plural αὐτούς suggests a shift of perspective from corporate judgment to individual judgment.<sup>67</sup> For this reason, most commentators believe Matthew's views on individual salvation are most relevant to his intended meaning of Matt 25:31–46.

Reduced to its most literal elements, this text says that the righteous are those who both gave food, drink, lodging, and clothes to those in need and who visited the sick and the imprisoned (25:35–36). The accursed are those who did not (25:42–43). If the passage rested with this description of the criteria of judgment, a great deal of the controversy that has arisen over its interpretation may have never begun. Though systematic theologians would be left with the challenge to make such a judgment compatible with Paul's doctrine of salvation "by grace ... through faith" (Eph 2:8–9; cf. Rom 3:28), the passage would very likely have been broadly understood to teach that a person's eternal destiny will be related to that person's general philanthropy to others in physical need.

The balance of the passage, however, complicates this interpretation by drawing a tight identity between the Son of Man (also called "King" and "Lord," 25:37, 40) and those in need. To the righteous, the Son of Man explains, "Truly, I say to you, to the

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<sup>67</sup> Gundry, *Matthew*, 512. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, I, 423–34.

extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, *even the least of them*, you did it to Me” (25:40). The accursed get a similar explanation, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me” (25:45). This explanation has led some commentators to argue that the criterion of judgment portrayed here is not philanthropy toward the needy in general but is rather faithfulness to a more fraternal or communal ethic driven by a common faith—an ethic which leads the righteous to support the “brethren” of Christ who are—as this interpretation goes—Christ’s servants suffering for the sake of the Gospel. This interpretation brings the criterion of judgment closer to a soteriology that requires faith in Christ as the basis of salvation. Such an interpretation could suppose that the righteous are motivated to give assistance to Christ’s servants because they believe the Gospel which Christ’s servants preach. The question therefore naturally arises whether Matthew’s Gospel teaches elsewhere that a person’s eternal destiny may be earned by philanthropy alone or whether philanthropy and other good works are treated by Matthew as evidence of genuine faith. An investigation of Matthew’s broader teaching about personal salvation should illumine the effort to answer this question regarding the criterion of judgment in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats. The issue is complicated and, as should be expected, the commentators are divided.

The problem is not easily settled because some of Matthew’s passages which speak of personal salvation come with strong admonitions for obedience and personal righteousness. Others speak of God’s favor as if granted according to God’s election or gracious choice. John P. Meier divided Matthew’s discussion of how people enter the kingdom of heaven into two kinds of texts. On the one hand are those statements of

personal obligation and requirement which Meier called statements of *Einlassbedingung* or statements of *Eingangsbedingung*. Jesus' warning in 5:20 is an example of this, "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of God." On the other hand, many of the *basileia*-sayings and *basileia*-parables in Matthew's Gospel highlight the "invitation, initiative, action, gift, and power of God" in bringing people to the kingdom.<sup>68</sup>

Some commentators marginalize the soteriological relevance of the obligations expressed in the statements of *Einlassbedingung* or of *Eingangsbedingung*. William F. Albright and C. S. Mann denied that Matt 25:31–46 teaches that a criterion of works will be used in the final judgment. According to Albright and Mann, Matt 25:31–46 should not be understood as a "scene of final judgment." Such a move, they argued, would miss the point of the final judgment. Because Albright and Mann believe that a response of faith to the work of Christ is the ultimate criterion, they maintain, "It is precisely in the consummation of his ministry, in the seal of death, and in resurrection-glory, that men will be separated by the response they make, or do not make, to that central crucial event."<sup>69</sup> Other commentators find clues in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats that allow them to play up the idea of grace and election, and so to subordinate the criterion of works. The fact that 25:34 says that the righteous "inherit the kingdom" which the Father had prepared for them "from the foundation of the world" led William Hendriksen to conclude that the entire pericope shows that "works are the fruit not the root, of grace."<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Meier, *Law and History*, 113–14.

<sup>69</sup> W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew*, Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday 1971), 308–9.

<sup>70</sup> William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 888.

H. N. Ridderbos' explanation retains a harsher admonition toward good works without missing the inference of saving grace. Ridderbos warns, "Those who have been chosen and blessed, however must make this manifest in the good works that the Son of Man mentions in these verses: and without showing such good works no one may call himself an heir of the kingdom (cf. 7:22–23)."<sup>71</sup>

The complex quality of Matthew's treatment of this issue can be illustrated with a few significant texts. According to Ulrich Luz, Jesus' original version of the Beatitudes promised their blessing by grace, but Matthew edited the text to require the obligation of obedience. In Luz's theory, the summary statement in 5:20 was supplied to emphasize the point, "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." Luz describes the wording of 5:20 as "a classic expression of what Reformation theology terms justification by works." However, lest this line of thought be taken to support only one side of the question, Luz warns, "...Matthews's overall theology shows that the matter is not so simple."<sup>72</sup> The complex quality of Matthew's view can be illustrated by the fact that Matt 5:3–20 does not demand absolute obedience. Any one who annuls a small commandment and teaches others to do the same will not be excluded from the kingdom, but "shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (5:19). This gives rise to a conceivable distinction between an inheritance in the kingdom (by grace) on the one hand and rewards in the kingdom according to ones works, on the other. One passage in Matthew may even imply that the

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<sup>71</sup> H. N. Ridderbos, *The Bible Students Commentary: Matthew*, trans. Ray Togtman (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 468.

<sup>72</sup> Ulrich Luz, "The Fulfillment of the Law," in *Studies in Matthew*, trans. Rosemary Selle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 185–218, here 214.

children of the kingdom who are hard-hearted and unforgiving will be severely punished at the Father's discretion for their shortcomings, but not necessarily with eternal condemnation. This, at least may be inferred from 18:34 which places the unforgiving servant in the hands of the torturers – not forever, but “until he should repay all that was owed...” (cf 6:14–15 which measures the Father's forgiveness to us according to our forgiveness of others).

Still, some of Matthew's demands carry ultimatums and threats of damnation for non-compliance. Consider 7:21: “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven *will enter.*” “Lawlessness” is especially condemned. The disobedient prophets who call Jesus “Lord, Lord” but who practice “lawlessness” will be told to “depart” (7:23). David C. Sim believed the entire passage of 7:13–27 was crafted by Matthew to address the problem of “lawlessness” – not in the broad understanding of the term which denotes a general disregard for proper authority and the justice of God (cf. Rom 4:7; 6:19; 2 Cor 6:14; 2 Thess 2:3, 7–8; Titus 2:14; 1 John 3:4) – but rather in a narrower, Jewish, sense which opposes “lawlessness” to the keeping of the regulations of Torah. If Sim is correct, the wide gate and broad way that leads to destruction (7:13) would stand for the neglect of Torah regulations. Sim's claim that “lawlessness” in Matthew takes its definition in relation to Jewish (albeit Christian-Jewish) regulations is part of a grander theory that claims Matthew was opposed to the “antinomian” or “law-free” Christians who refused to make Jewish regulations part of the Gospel's requirement. According to Sim, “Law-free Christians are considered outsiders in the same way as Matthew's Jewish opponents and

Gentiles are deemed to be outsiders and they are likewise to be avoided at all costs.”<sup>73</sup>

Sim’s belief is not universally received. Davies and Allison have argued that Matthew’s position was probably similar to the description of Paul in the book of Acts who as a Jew observed the regulations but did not require this of Gentile Christians.<sup>74</sup> Though the exact definition of “lawlessness” is a disputed issue, the fact that Matthew excluded the “lawless” from the kingdom is clear. Matthew’s explanation of the Parable of the Wheat and Tares demonstrates this clearly, “The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (13:41–42).

On the other hand, one would go too far to conclude that Matthew denied the hand of grace altogether. Matthew’s recognition of grace in the context of reward is illustrated in the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (20:1–16). Here, each laborer was given a full day’s wage, though some worked all day and some only an hour. Other texts invoke the concept of election by explaining, “For many are called, but few are chosen” (20:16; 24:14).<sup>75</sup> Priority is given to the Father’s gracious actions again in Jesus’ call to discipleship in 11:25–30. Here, the truths of the kingdom and the call to discipleship are hidden by the Father from the “wise and intelligent” and graciously revealed to “infants” (11:25). Nor does Jesus call people to wearisome labor and heavy

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<sup>73</sup> David C. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge: University Press, 1966), 212–15.

<sup>74</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, I, 492–93. W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: University, 1964), 205.

<sup>75</sup> \*This saying is omitted in 20:16 in  $\kappa$ , B, L, Z and other significant MSS and is therefore omitted in the NASB. It was present in C, D, W,  $\Theta$ , as well as the Byzantine tradition and so it appears in the KJV.



burdens, but away from such things, to “rest” and to “learn” from sharing a yoke with Jesus (11:28–29). In the Parable Discourse of chapter 13 Jesus explained to his disciples, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted” (13:11). Texts like these are examples of the merciful “invitation, initiative, action, gift, and power of God” in the process of election and personal salvation which Meier says characterize most of the *basileia*-sayings and parables.<sup>76</sup>

Beyond these, however, Matthew gives some very pointed demands for obedience which seem to mirror the words and context of Matthew’s Judgment of the Sheep and Goats. The following table demonstrates the similarity between two of these texts and the judgment scene described in 25:31. Notice, that in both texts, the call to abandon earthly advantages for Jesus’ sake leads to the prospect of a better judgment when the “Son of Man” comes in “glory” (boldface added below).

Table 1: Matt 25:31 Compared to 16:24–27 and 19:27–29

25:31	16:24–27	19:27–29
<p>But when the <b>Son of Man</b> comes in <b>His glory</b>, and all the <b>angels</b> with Him, then He will sit on His <b>glorious throne</b>.</p>	<p>Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the <b>Son of Man</b> is going to come in the <b>glory of His Father</b> with His <b>angels</b>, and will then repay every man according to His works.</p>	<p>Then Peter said to Him, “Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?” And Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the <b>Son of Man</b> will sit on His <b>glorious throne</b>, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name’s sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life.”</p>

<sup>76</sup> Meier, *Law and History*, 114.

Given the clarity and similar contexts of these texts, one can easily sense the force of Luz' observation noted above that some passages in Matthew's Gospel appear to be classic expressions of what the Reformers called "justification by works." Nevertheless, as Luz also said, the matter is not so simple. One line of thought which argues that faith in Jesus, not works, is the ultimate criterion in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats is built upon the idea that the acts of charity described in 25:35–36 were prompted by a prior commitment to Jesus and the truth of his Gospel. This idea is not merely rooted in an effort to explain Matthew's soteriology in the light of Paul's (though some systematic theologians may argue this would be motivation enough). Evidence for this idea is present in Matthew's Gospel itself, without reference to Paul. Two Matthean texts affirm that the divine judgment will consider how people have used their kindness especially to help others preach or be faithful to Jesus. Texts like these suggest that the charitable works listed in 25:35–36 were intended to be seen as rooted in a faith in Christ's message. Like the texts quoted in the table above, these texts share both the context of divine judgment and certain key phrases with Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats. Notice the use of "least" and "little ones" in the following table (next page):

Table 2: Matt 25:40 Compared to 10:41–42 and 18:4–6

25:40	10:41–42 (from the Missionary Discourse)	18:4–6
The King will answer and say to them, Truly I say to you to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, <b>even the least of them</b> , you did it to Me.	He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me. He who receives a prophet in <i>the</i> name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to <b>one of these little ones</b> even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward.	Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; but whoever causes <b>one of these little ones</b> who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

According to Sherman Gray's comprehensive review of the interpretive history of Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats, before the 20<sup>th</sup> century a majority of exegetes in every era of biblical interpretation concluded that "the least" in 25:40, 45 included only Christians. Gray's calculation of a shift in the majority opinion was achieved only by combining the 34% who explicitly said the "least" includes all the oppressed of the world with the 19% who were not clear.<sup>77</sup> The more traditional view of the commentators who held the "least" of 25:40, 45 to be Christians only is easier to reconcile with Paul's doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. In such an interpretation, the charitable deeds described in 25:35–36 can be seen as an elaboration of the "cup of cold water" given to the missionaries in 10:42 to assist them in the mission. Such an act of charity could be seen as evidence of a faith which is more essential and decisive in the judgment than the actions that only give evidence of it.

Two other observations concerning the vocabulary and themes of Matthew's Gospel may be enlisted as further support for the traditional view. It may be significant that the word "brothers" (25:40) is used in Matthew's Gospel with a metaphorical sense only to refer to the familial bond Christians have with each other (23:8) or—even more to the point—as one of Jesus' expressions of endearment for the apostles (28:10). A consistent connotation of "brothers" in 25:40 would support the idea that the acts of charity listed in 25:35–36 which were given to the "brothers" were given in order to help them spread the faith. Finally, the warnings and promises Jesus gave earlier in Matthew's Gospel concerning the way people would be judged for accepting or rejecting the disciples in their missionary effort seems to presuppose the same kind of criterion. In

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<sup>77</sup> Sherman Gray, *The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25:31–46: A History of Interpretation* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989). An "APPENDIX" below gives a one page synopsis of Gray's findings.

10:14, Jesus made no distinction between those who refused to allow the missionary apostles into their houses and those who rejected their words. The result of denying the apostles or their word was the same—a fate worse than that of Sodom and Gomorrah (10:15). On the other hand, those who received the apostles would be treated as if they had received Jesus himself (10:40).

In summary, the interpretation of Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats would be illumined by a clear understanding of Matthew's views on soteriology. If Matthew promoted a "salvation by works," then 25:31–46 may be read in that light. Some texts in Matthew, when read alone, seem to suggest that this is the case. On the other hand, hints of divine election and grace are sprinkled here and there in Matthew's Gospel. The judgment scene described in 25:31–46 also reveals some significant verbal and thematic similarities with other Matthean passages which suggest that the good works recognized in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats are the result of faith, not a replacement for it. Though Matthew's soteriology is an important and relevant interpretive issue, a greater consensus concerning Matthew's views of how faith and works are related to salvation is needed before the interpretation of 25:31–46 can be finally settled by appealing to it.

#### Eschatology in Matthew's Gospel

Eschatology was a major concern of Matthew. According to John Meier's reckoning, 59 of the 148 pericopes in the Gospel of Matthew refer to future eschatology.<sup>78</sup> Each of the five major discourses around which Benjamin Bacon claimed

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<sup>78</sup> John P. Meier in the "Preface" to Kathleen Weber's dissertation "The Events of the End of the Age in Matthew" (Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of America, 1994).

Matthew built his Gospel ends with a significant reference to the eschatological judgment (7:21–27; 10:32–42; 13:47–50; 18:23–35; 25:31–46).<sup>79</sup> According to Bacon’s outline of Matthew, the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats would be the climactic pericope in the climactic discourse of Matthew’s entire Gospel. Its significance to the balance of Matthew’s Gospel should not be missed. Nor should the eschatological views expressed elsewhere in Matthew’s Gospel be marginalized in the effort to understand Matthew’s intention for Matt 25:31–46.

As with other aspects of Matthew’s theological perspective, a broad range of opinions exists among the commentators regarding Matthew’s eschatological expectations. The issue of eschatology in Matthew’s Gospel is also very complex. Any adequate discussion of Matthew’s eschatology must address a variety of questions including whether Matthew understood the “kingdom of heaven” to be a present reality and/or an apocalyptic hope, how to weigh the relevance of similar eschatological texts in the literary world of ancient Jews and Christians, whether these texts should be taken literally or figuratively, as well as the related question of whether Matthew only used the standard tropes of Jewish and Christian eschatology to evoke insights concerning the justice of God rather than to relay detailed accounts of how and when that justice would be exacted. All of these questions impinge on the question of how to interpret Matt 25:31–46.

Discussions concerning the genre and the possible intertexts to Matt 25:31–46 will be given in Chapters 3 and 4 below. The discussion that follows here will only illustrate the variety of opinion among the scholars concerning Matthew’s general

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<sup>79</sup> Benjamin Bacon, *Studies in Matthew* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1930), 412.

eschatological expectations including Matthew's understanding of the present and/or future aspects of the "kingdom of God," whether Matthew intended his eschatological texts to refer realistically to future events in a coherently detailed manner, and finally whether Matthew's Gospel forecasts only one or more than one divine judgment at the end of the current age.

Kathleen Weber's doctoral dissertation, "The Events of the End of the Age in Matthew" is especially helpful to this part of our survey. Weber charted the variety of opinions which have arisen since the late nineteenth century concerning the present and future aspects of the kingdom of heaven in Matthew's Gospel. Some scholars such as A. von Harnack, W. Bousset, R. Bultmann, and H. Conzelmann believed Matthew's church was a late first century community whose disappointment with the early promises of the soon return of Christ had caused it to lose interest or confidence in its eschatological future. Other influential writers (C. H. Dodd, E. Lohmeier, O. Michel, W. Trilling) argued that this lack of interest in the imminent coming of Christ's kingdom led Matthew's congregation to deemphasize future eschatology in favor of a "realized eschatology" in which Christians could participate during the current age. Finally, an identifiable stream of scholars beginning with B. H. Streeter and G. Bornkamm have concluded that any presence of a "realized eschatology" in Matthew's Gospel has not dampened the expectation for a literal and imminent coming of the Son of Man to judge the world and to establish the kingdom of heaven on earth. According to Weber, this interest in future eschatology is evidenced in Matthew by its abundant future eschatological materials, by its intensification of the eschatological emphasis of its sources, and by its connection of the theme of final judgment with the theme of practical

righteousness. The studies of both Weber (1994) and a slightly more recent one by David C. Sim (1996) support the view that Matthew had not abandoned his hope or emphasis on future eschatology.<sup>80</sup>

According to Weber, some texts in Matthew portray the kingdom as already active in the person (1:23; 11:6, 27), words (4:17; 7:24–29), and deeds (chapters 8–9; 11:2–6; 12:28) of Jesus, as well as in the words and deeds of the apostles in their missionary capacity (10:1–7; 28:18–20). Still, none of these observations diminish the realistic expectation of future eschatology which is very evident throughout Matthew.<sup>81</sup> The text which is perhaps the most frequently cited in favor of Matthew's realized eschatology is 12:28, "But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." Bornkamm, in support of Matthew's emphasis on future eschatology, points out that this text was imported by Matthew from Q and so its content may be once removed from Matthew's own voice. Bornkamm also noticed that Matthew characterizes the current age as one of decision, the outcome of which will only be manifested in a later age (12:30). Bornkamm concludes that the distinction between the current age ("this age") and "the age to come" is clear in 12:32, and so 12:28 finds itself in a context that does not abandon a strong expectation for future eschatology.<sup>82</sup>

If, as the recent trend among scholars suggests, Matthew did expect an imminent end to the current age and an eschatological judgment to take place, then Matthew's eschatological texts may need to be seen as intentionally more realistic and urgent than if

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<sup>80</sup> Kathleen Weber, "The Events of the End," 2–3; Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*.

<sup>81</sup> Weber, "The Events of the End," 90.

<sup>82</sup> Günther Bornkamm, "End-Expectation," 34.

Matthew's focus was primarily upon the current manifestation of the kingdom of God and His justice during the current age. This leads to the next question. Did Matthew intend all of his passages which refer to the final judgment to be understood collectively as a realistic, detailed, and coherently coordinated description of eschatological events or were these texts given only to communicate the ethical and soteriological criteria by which the judgment may eventually be conducted? More data relevant to this question will be discussed below in Chapter 4 which deals with the genre of apocalyptic literature. For now, a simple observation of the breadth of opinion on this issue is sufficient to point up the relevance this question has to the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46.

Prior to his death in 1920, William Sanday held that the ancient Jews in Matthew's day had an elaborate doctrine of eschatology which included clear divisions between successive stages of God's plan. There were to be special "signs" portending the end, followed by "woes" (periods of trouble) including war, famine, and pestilence. After these things, a "Messiah" would appear, then a "judgment" to separate the good from the bad. Finally, there would be a great "transformation" in which a new heaven and earth would come into place. Sanday further argued that Jesus and the Gospels, including Matthew's, expected essentially this same pattern of events to unfold.<sup>83</sup> Since Sanday's time, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has awakened an interest in the diversity that existed among Jewish texts which speak of the prophetic future. Morton Smith believed the lack of eschatological uniformity evident in the Dead Sea Scrolls argued that eschatology could not have been an important doctrine for the community that preserved

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<sup>83</sup> William Sanday, "Eschatology of the New Testament" in *Essays in Biblical Criticism and Exegesis*, ed. Craig A. Evans, Stanley E. Porter, and Scott N. Dolf, JSNTSS 225 (Sheffield: Academic, 2001), 28–32, here 28.



those writings.<sup>84</sup> J. J. Collins and David C. Sims, on the other hand, point out that diversity in detail and presentation is a characteristic of apocalyptic literature in general and that this alone signals no lack of interest in eschatological events.<sup>85</sup>

Weber's, aforementioned dissertation was written primarily to evaluate the significance and level of coherence in Matthew's presentation of eschatological events. Weber's work was in part a reaction against the claims of Georg Strecker and Daniel Marguerat who had earlier argued that Matthew's amalgamation of a disparate collection of apocalyptic traditions made little effort to harmonize them into a coherent narrative of end time events.<sup>86</sup> Strecker alleged that Matthew's discordant collection contained "competition" between the eschatological roles of the angels (13:41–42, 49–50; 24:31), the Son of Man (8:29; 16:27; 25:31–46), and the apostles (19:28). Would the angels or the Son of Man gather people for the judgment?<sup>87</sup> Would the apostles or the Son of Man sit in judgment over the inhabitants of the future kingdom? Marguerat argued that competing elements in Matthew's several accounts of the judgment should lead exegetes to focus primarily on the constant themes in the Gospels rather than upon the conflicting details by which those themes are relayed in any one particular Gospel. Weber countered that Matthew proves elsewhere to be a very careful editor of the material he incorporated, that Matthew often adds touches of his own to the apocalyptic material, and that the Gospels were not intended to be read one next to the other as Marguerat suggests they

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<sup>84</sup> Morton Smith, "What is Implied by the Variety of Messianic Figures?" *JBL* 78 (1959): 66–72.

<sup>85</sup> J. J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroads, 1984) as cited by Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 33–34.

<sup>86</sup> Weber, "The Events of the End"

<sup>87</sup> Ingelaere thinks the angels may act as the Son of Man's agents even in 25:32. Jean Claude Ingelaere, "La 'Parabole' du jugement dernier (Matthieu 25/31–46)," *RHPR* 50 (1970): 23–60, here 28.

should be. Furthermore, Weber maintained that Matthew's Gospel leads readers to seek coherence in the eschatological accounts by encouraging readers to blend diverse versions of events into a composite or by presenting one version of an event as more explicitly authoritative over the others. Weber also recognized, however, that some descriptions of eschatological events in Matthew are left in unresolved tension. The Gospel, as a whole, therefore, according to Weber, does not lead the reader to harmonize all of the accounts, but leads the reader rather to an "impression of coherence."<sup>88</sup> This apparent lack of a complete assimilation of the details in Matthew allows Weber to conclude that Matthew most likely intended all of his several descriptions of eschatological judgment to represent the same judgment of which Matt 25:31–46 is the climactic and most normative presentation.<sup>89</sup> Such a conclusion would of course imply that the entire world including Jews, Christians and non-Christian Gentiles would face the same judgment and be judged by the same criteria.

Other scholars notice that other ancient Jewish texts forecast separate judgments for Jews and Gentiles and that the hypothesis of multiple judgments in Matthew may account for the divergent descriptions which Matthew gives for the final judgment in his Gospel. More will be said about the examples of multiple judgments in Jewish literature in Chapter 3 below which deals with extra-biblical intertexts. The various theories that say Matthew expected more than one judgment are listed here so that the relevance of these theories to the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 may be clear.

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<sup>88</sup> Weber, "The Events of the End," 49–51, 312. Weber here cites Georg Strecker, *Der Weg der Gerechtigkeit: Untersuchung zur Theologie Mattäus*, FRLANT, no. 82, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 236–237; and Daniel Marguerat, *Le jugement dans l'évangile de Matthieu*. Le Monde de la Bible (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1981), 23–25

<sup>89</sup> Weber, "The Events of the End," 219.

David Sim dismisses theories which suggest Matthew expected more than one judgment and says the divergent details were already in the assorted traditions. Sim suggests that Matthew made no successful effort to harmonize these traditions because Matthew “was by no means a ‘systematic theologian.’” According to Sim, Matthew selected and used these traditional texts not for their detailed harmony but because they show that the judgment would take place and that the righteous would be rewarded and the wicked punished.<sup>90</sup>

Robert Gundry, on the other hand believes the divergent details suggest different contexts of judgment. According to Gundry, the particle δε in Matt 25:31 signaled a thematic departure from the judgment of Christians which was the subject of the preceding parables. Gundry argues that 25:31 introduces Christ’s judgment upon the world at large. In further support of separate contexts, Gundry noticed that Matthew has angels separate the good Christians from the bad (13:41–43, 49–50), but in the judgment of the world at large the Son of Man personally separates the sheep from the goats (25:32).<sup>91</sup> Joachim Jeremias, on the other hand, uses the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats to describe a judgment based upon the general neighborliness of non-Christians. According to Jeremias, Jesus originally taught that non-Christians can receive the saving grace of God—they can meet Jesus in the persons who are poor and in need who are Jesus’ brothers. Jeremias concludes, “Thus for them justification is available on the ground of love, since for them also the ransom has been paid....”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> David C. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 213.

<sup>91</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew*, 511–12, 514.

<sup>92</sup> In the extended quote, Jeremias cites Mark 10:45. Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963), 209–10.

Some commentators argue for multiple judgments in Matthew because of clear divergences between the identities of the defendants in Matthew's several descriptions of eschatological judgments. Douglas Hare and Daniel J. Harrington believe Matthew describes three judgments: one for Christians (7:24–27; 10:32–33; 18:35); one for Jews (19:28); and one for non-Christian Gentiles (25:31–46.) Jan Lambrecht identifies three judgments but describes them differently than do Hare and Harrington: one of Israel at the fall of Jerusalem (24:4b–31); one for Christians (24:32 – 25:30); and one for non-Christian Gentiles on the basis of their treatment of Christian missionaries (25:31–46). Jean Claude Ingelaere thinks the evidence points to four distinct judgments: one of Christian leaders in 24:45–51, one of the Christian dead in 25:1–13; one of living Christians in 25:14–30, and one of all non-Christians in 25:31–46.<sup>93</sup> Finally, Eugene Pond, who writes from a dispensational perspective, lists the following who describe the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats as a judgment of “all the nations” (25:32) as corporate entities rather than a judgment of the individuals among the nations: Walter K. Price, William G. Carr, Arno C. Gaebelein, and Lewis S. Chafer.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup>Douglas Hare and Daniel J. Harrington, “Make Disciples of All the Gentiles,” *CBQ* 37 (1975) 359–69, here 365; Jan. Lambrecht, *Once More Astonished: The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 223, 232–34. But in a more recent work, Lambrecht argued that the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats included all humanity, *Out of the Treasure: The Parables in the Gospel of Matthew*, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs, no. 10 (Louvain: Peeters, 1992). J. C. Ingelaere, “Le ‘parabole’,” 24, 37, 52–53. These three opinions are all listed by Weber, “The Events of the End” 2214–15, 218

<sup>94</sup> Eugene W. Pond, “Who Are the Sheep and Goats in Matthew 25:31–46?” *BibSac* 159 (2001): 288–310, 297. Pond disagrees with this view held by Walter K. Price, *Jesus' Prophetic Sermon: The Olivet Key to Israel, the Church, and the Nations* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 142; William G. Carr, *The Gospel of the Kingdom by Matthew* (Rochester: Genesee, 1896), 68–69; Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Gospel of Mathew* (Wheaton: Van Kampen, 1910), 246–49; and L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 7 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947–48), IV, 6.

## CHAPTER 3

### TEXTUAL, INTRATEXTUAL, AND INTERTEXTUAL ISSUES

The preceding chapter demonstrated the differences of opinion among commentators regarding the life setting of Matthew's Gospel and the relevance this issue has for the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46. The breadth of opinion among the commentators regarding textual issues will now be discussed. For convenience, this area of study will be divided into three sections. The first section will address differences of opinion regarding the version of the pericope which should be the ultimate focus of study. All commentators must use the extant version, but some seem to be more interested in the prior history of the traditions which Matthew edited to create Matt 25:31–46. This first section must therefore address the slightly different wording that appears in some of the ancient manuscripts as well as the insights arising from source, form, and redaction criticism. The second and third sections of this chapter will discuss the interpretive effect of reading Matt 25:31–46 in the light of other texts. The second section will compare Matt 25:31 with other passages (“intratexts”) in Matthew's Gospel and will discuss how these texts have affected its interpretation. The third section will compare Matt 25:31–46 with texts outside of Matthew's Gospel (“intertexts”) and will discuss how these texts have affected its interpretation.

#### **Speculated *Vorlagen* or Extant Text(s)?**

The modern “quest for the historical Jesus” brought with it an interest in the history which lies behind the “interpretations” of the Evangelists. The influence of this

quest has led some commentators to attempt to reformulate and interpret the preceding traditions, or “*Vorlagen*,” of Matt 25:31–46 rather than to interpret the extant text alone. Source criticism was developed in order to help historians compare the several parallel passages among the Gospels for the purpose of identifying the earliest and most “original” of the Gospel accounts among the Evangelists. Because Matthew’s account of the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats is the only version of this pericope among the Gospels, source criticism cannot be used fully in the study of this passage. The uniqueness of Matt 25:31–46, however, does not prevent some commentators from attempting to chart the development of themes that eventually led to the composition of Matthew’s Judgment of the Sheep and Goats.<sup>1</sup>

Some commentators use form criticism as a method to distill out of the Gospels the original wording or meaning of Jesus by isolating from the text the forms of expression which were believed to be characteristic of Jesus’ teaching. Others, not as optimistic about finding Jesus’ original voice, speculated the forms of the text which were believed to have developed among early Christians as they applied the teaching of Jesus to changing times. Matthew’s account of the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats is understood by these commentators to represent one stage of a developing tradition. It is not uncommon for commentators who speculate a distinction between the message of Jesus and the message of Matthew to accept the message of Jesus as the more normative.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Scot McKnight, “Source Criticism,” in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, ed. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 2001), 74–105.

<sup>2</sup> Darrell L. Bock, “Form Criticism” in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, ed. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 2001), 106–127.

Redaction Criticism has been applied to Matt 25:31–46 in the effort to better understand Matthew’s editing process and his intent as he blended the theological themes of his sources with his own perspective to produce this pericope. The rise of Redaction Criticism signaled a return to the intent of the evangelist as expressed through the extant text.<sup>3</sup>

Source, form, and redaction criticism differ not only in process and goal, but also in the “text” upon which they ultimately focus. For the study of Matt 25:31–46, source and form criticism focus ultimately upon the speculated *Vorlagen* of Gospel texts.

Redaction Criticism focuses upon the extant text. This distinction notwithstanding, these three methods of research cannot be practiced in easy isolation from each other.

Redaction criticism depends on the findings of source and form criticism in its effort to trace the development of the traditions from earlier sources to the re-worked interpretations of the Evangelists. Reciprocally, the findings of redaction criticism can bring into better relief the contours of the earlier traditions when these are compared to the texts that eventually took shape in their train. Since each method of study begins with the version of the pericope preserved in Matt 25:31–46, it is important to consider the slightly different wording for this text found in the ancient manuscripts.

Thankfully, there are only a few textual variants for Matt 25:31-46 found among the ancient manuscripts which affect the interpretation of the passage to any extent. The only variant discussed in Bruce Metzger’s companion volume to the United Bible Society’s Greek New Testament concerns whether an active or passive voice should be used for the verb “to prepare” in 25:41. The editing committee favored the manuscripts

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<sup>3</sup> Grant R. Osborne, “Redaction Criticism,” in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, ed. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 2001), 128–49.

which use the passive participle to describe the “eternal fire which *has been prepared* (ἡτοιμασμένον – emphasis added) for the devil and his angels.” The passive form is preferred because the passive form of this verb is also used in 25:34, and it is assumed that Matthew would express himself consistently here. An alternative reading with an active voice appears in some manuscripts and describes the eternal fire as that, “which my father prepared (ο ητοιμασεν ο πατηρ μου) for the devil and his angels.” The difference between these two readings only amounts to a more or less direct implication of God’s hand in punishing evil spirits.<sup>4</sup>

A few other textual variants in 25:40 and 45 have a more significant impact on the interpretation of the entire passage. In a few manuscripts, the words “my brothers” (τῶν ἀδελφῶν) do not appear in the very important phrase “the least of these (my brothers).”<sup>5</sup> Since Jesus refers to the disciples as “my brothers elsewhere in Matthew’s Gospel (28:10), the omission of “my brothers” from 25:40 softens the implication that “the least” are specifically the disciples of Jesus. Most commentators believe “my brothers” was original to 25:40 and that its omission in a few manuscripts is due to a copyist’s desire to assimilate 25:40 to 25:45 where “my brothers” does not appear. However, a few manuscripts use “my brothers” in both 25:40 and 25:45 in an apparent attempt to

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, ed., *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1971), 63–64. The apparatus of the United Bible Societies’ Greek text lists the following manuscripts in support of the passive, A D W θ 067<sup>vid</sup> f<sup>1,13</sup> and א. The active appears in D<sup>f</sup> it mae; Ir<sup>lat</sup> and Cyp. Metzger’s current (second) edition of the *Textual Commentary* does not discuss this variant inasmuch as the fourth edition of the Greek New Testament which it explains omits these data in the footnotes. Bruce M. Metzger, ed., *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: American Bible Society, 1994). A most convenient display of the textual variants for Matthew’s entire Gospel can be found in Reuben Swanson, ed., *New Testament Greek Manuscripts: Variant Readings Arranged in Horizontal Lines Against Codex Vaticanus: Matthew* (Sheffield: Sheffield: 1995).

<sup>5</sup> The phrase τῶν ἀδελφῶν in 25:40 does not appear in B\* 1424 ff<sup>1</sup> ff<sup>2</sup> Cl Eus and GrNy.



strengthen the implication that “the least” are Jesus’ disciples.<sup>6</sup> Another way that ancient copyists attempted to strengthen this implication is by assimilating the wording of 10:42 with that of 25:40. The English translation of 10:42 refers to a Christian missionary as “one of these little ones.” The similarity between this description of Christian missionaries and the wording of 25:40 has often been noted as an additional reason for concluding that “the least” of 25:40 are disciples (especially in their missionary capacity). In English, “least” is the expected superlative of “little.” Therefore, 10:42 and 25:40 have a clear similarity when read together in English. In Greek, however, the wording of these two verses is not as similar as it appears in English. The Greek wording most broadly recognized for 10:42 uses the genitive plural of μικρός (μικρῶν) to denote the “little ones” while in 25:40 the genitive plural of ἐλάχιστος (ἐλαχίστων) is used. In an apparent effort to eliminate this incongruity, some manuscripts of 25:40 use μικρῶν instead of ἐλαχίστων. Others either use ἐλαχίστων in 10:42 instead of μικρῶν or add ἐλαχίστων to the verse in order to tie 10:42 to 25:40. All of these variants are apparently due to an effort to identify the “least of these my brothers” mentioned in 25:40 as the same group of disciples who are described in 10:42 as “these little ones.”<sup>7</sup> These textual variants demonstrate how editorial changes by the copyists sometimes reveal and/or affect interpretations.

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<sup>6</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988, 1997, 2004), III, 428 cite A. H. McNeile on this point, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (London: Macmillan, 1915), 371.

<sup>7</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, III, 429. Manuscripts Σ and 067 use μικρῶν in 25:40. Manuscripts 10.42 (D latt 1424 pc) use ἐλαχίστων in 25:40.

### Source and Form Critical Issues

Source and form critics have been virtually unanimous that Matt 25:31–46 is a composite text strung together by Matthew out of some pre-existing traditions and his own compositions. Nearly a century ago, C. F. Burney offered a contrasting theory that claimed Matt 25:31–46 was originally a Hebrew poem. His argument was based on how easily the passage took poetic shape when its Greek phrases were simply turned into their Hebrew equivalents. Burney's interesting theory has not gained many adherents.<sup>8</sup>

Although the chief interest of most source and form criticism is not the extant text of Matt 25:31–46, these two methods of modern biblical research have helped scholars speculate the shape of various streams of tradition that informed Matthew as he composed his own account of this pericope. Modern scholarship hoped to use these methods to distill and give prominence to the original voice of Jesus or the earliest opinions of those who may have been closer to him in time and circumstance. In more recent times, a “post-modern” shift toward reader-centered hermeneutics has led some scholars to accept the pre-history of Gospel texts as part of the ongoing discourse which today's readers must engage in order to be full participants in the process of reading. Francis Watson argues that texts like Matthew's which assemble heterogeneous traditional material contain different and multiple discourses with which modern readers must become conversant. Watson challenges scholars who wish to find in Matthew's composition “a transcendent, God-like mastery over the heterogeneous traditional material he has assembled.” Instead, Watson invites the reader to be a responsible

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<sup>8</sup> C. F. Burney, “St. Matthew xxv. 31–46 as a Hebrew Poem,” *JTS*, 14 (1913): 414–424. Lamar Cope thinks Burney's theory should be given more credit than it has received. Lamar Cope, “Matthew xxv: 31–46 ‘The Sheep and the Goats’ Reinterpreted,” *NT* 11 (1969): 32–44, here 36.

participant in the shaping of meaning by intelligently interacting with the various lines of tradition which may be encountered in the text.<sup>9</sup> Francis Young agrees that modern readers must fulfill their role in “realizing” the text so that they may participate in appropriate interaction with the text.<sup>10</sup> Source and form criticism are therefore believed to be helpful both by modernists who focus on the original intent of the earliest traditions as well as by post-modernists who assign to the reader a larger role in creating meaning in a text.

Matthew 25:31–46 has no parallel in any of the other Gospels. Neither are there apparent parallels in any text predating Matthew’s Gospel. The most source criticism can do for the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 is to mark the distinct perspectives apparent in the sources which Matthew may have used and to suggest theories about how Matthew may have developed his own themes in juxtaposition to these sources. Source criticism helps commentators trace development between Matthew and his sources regarding themes tightly related to the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 (such as the doctrines of salvation history, soteriology, ethics, and eschatology). Of course, questions regarding the order in which the Gospels were written and questions over which Evangelist borrowed from whom are most crucial in this process.

The oldest hypothesis regarding the order in which the Gospels were written is rooted in Papias’ aforementioned tradition and places Matthew first. In this theory Mark and Luke could not have influenced Matthew at all. The later date usually ascribed to the

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<sup>9</sup> Francis Watson, “Liberating the Reader: A Theological-Exegetical Study of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25. 31–46)” in Francis Watson, ed., *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies?* (London: SCM, 1993), 57–84, here 72.

<sup>10</sup> Frances Young, “Allegory and the Ethics of Reading” in Francis Watson, ed., *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies?* (London: SCM, 1993), 103–20, here 110.

Gospel of John leaves the fourth Gospel out of the picture almost entirely. This would mean that Matthew's discussion of the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats can not be easily described as a reaction or adaptation of anything in any of the canonical Gospels. A challenge to the traditional priority of Matthew called the "Two Source Hypothesis" arose in the first half of the nineteenth century to challenge the traditional priority of Matthew. The Two Source Hypothesis holds that Mark was written first and that Matthew and Luke independently blended Mark with a common second source containing traditional sayings attributed to Jesus. This sayings source is broadly called "Q" in abbreviation of *Quelle* (German for "source").<sup>11</sup> Later William Wrede supplemented this theory by suggesting that the material which is unique in Matthew probably came from a third written source which Wrede called "M," and that Luke's unique material came from a similar document which Wrede called "L." Wrede also noticed that some of the miracles in Mark and John appear in the same order. This led Wrede to speculate a "Signs Source" shared by Mark and John. Finally the similarities in the accounts of Jesus' death in all four Gospels suggest that each had access to a "Passion Narrative."<sup>12</sup> In 1925, B. H. Streeter worked out an influential description of the four main sources for the Synoptic Gospels: Mark, Q, M, and L.<sup>13</sup> Only five years later, Benjamin Bacon offered his own description of the sources underlying Matthew's

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<sup>11</sup> A "critical edition" of Q has been speculated. Its most thorough representation can be found in James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann, and John S. Kloppenborg, eds., *The Critical Edition of Q: Synopsis including the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mark and Thomas with English, German and French Translations of Q and Thomas* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Helmut Koester, *History and Literature of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 45–47.

<sup>13</sup> B.H. Streeter, "A Four Document Hypothesis," in *The Four Gospels A Study of Origins* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 223–70.

Gospel. Bacon argued that the “second source” of Jesus’ sayings was actually a body of material larger than the group of sayings which Matthew and Luke added to Mark. Bacon used “Q” to describe the common material which Matthew and Luke took from this document but designated the larger document itself as “S” for “Source.” Linguistic analysis led Bacon to conclude that some of the material peculiar to Matthew’s Gospel did not originate with Matthew himself but probably came from S. Bacon also introduced three other sources: “R” for the redactor’s notes, “O” for some distinct oral traditions that supplied the Gospel, and “N” for elements ultimately deriving from an Aramaic Gospel used by “Nazarene Christians” in the region of Beroea-Aleppo.<sup>14</sup> John A. T. Robinson argued for a fluid or complex use of sources among the Synoptics with several levels of editing for Matthew rather than a linear development of Matthew from Mark and Q.<sup>15</sup> Whatever the case, source criticism attempts to identify the emphases in these sources which preceded Matthew’s Gospel against which Matthew shaped his own ideas.

While most scholars today accept the priority of Mark and many accept the existence of Q, few hold tightly to the complex and detailed theories of Streeter or Bacon. Christian Gottlob Wilke argued in 1837 that all the Gospels were independent works.<sup>16</sup> Few agree with Wilke today.<sup>17</sup> In the past several decades, a growing interest has been

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<sup>14</sup> B. W. Bacon, *Studies in Matthew* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1930).

<sup>15</sup> John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2000, orig. pub. London: SCM, 1976), 94, 102, 116.

<sup>16</sup> Wilhelm Ferdinand Wilke, *Tradition und Mythe. Ein Beitrag zur historischen Kritik der kanonischen Evangelien überhaupt, wie insbesondere zur Würdigung des mythischen Idealismus im Leben Jesu von Strauss* (Leipzig, Hartmann, 1837) as cited by Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery from the 1906 German orig. *Von Reimarus zu Wrede* (New York: Collier, 1968), 113.

<sup>17</sup> Eta Linnemann is an exception who thinks the Synoptics were originally independent works: *Is There a Synoptic Problem: Rethinking the Literary Dependence of the First Three Gospels*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

expressed in the priority of Matthew though unanimity about the order of the other Synoptics has not been achieved. Schlatter, Zahn, and Butler agreed with Augustine of Hippo that the Synoptics were written in the canonical order, Matthew first, then Mark, then Luke. An alternate theory put Luke before Mark (Griesbach, Strauss, Farmer, Dungan, and Longstaff).<sup>18</sup> The “Griesbach Hypothesis” named for Johann Jakob Griesbach, its early supporter, argued that Mark abbreviated and conflated both Matthew and Luke. William R. Farmer is a modern proponent of this view.<sup>19</sup> The ongoing debate about source theories is complex.<sup>20</sup> What should be clear from this brief review is that the conclusions which any source critic would make concerning the thematic development of Matthew’s ideas regarding salvation-history, soteriology, ethics, and eschatology would naturally have an affect on the way that source critic would interpret Matthew’s Judgment of the Sheep and Goats.

Form criticism arose under the assumption that the original sayings of Jesus may be recognized by the distinct characteristics of their literary form and content. A corollary of this assumption is that departures from these characteristics in the extant versions of the sayings of Jesus are due to the editing hand of the church as early Christians attempted to make the sayings of Jesus more relevant to their times and developing doctrine. The gift of prophecy is sometimes suggested as the means by which the “post-resurrection church” justified its reception of new instructions from the risen Jesus so that

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<sup>18</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, I, 97.

<sup>19</sup> William R Farmer, “Certain Results Reached by Sir John C. Hawkins and C. F. Burney Which Make More Sense If Luke Knew Matthew, and Mark Knew Matthew and Luke” in C. M. Tuckett, *Synoptic Studies: The Ampleforth Conferences of 1982 and 1983*, JSNTSS, no. 7 (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 1984), 75–98.

<sup>20</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, I, 97–127 contains an intricate review of the development of source theories for Matthew’s Gospel. “Source Criticism” is more recent and concise.

these fresh prophetic messages could be, by literary license, placed back into the mouth of Jesus in the Gospels as he taught his disciples before his death and resurrection.<sup>21</sup>

Form criticism supports the belief that the Gospels contain the already adapted and applied sayings of the historical Jesus and that modern readers may not hear the original message of Jesus until they first strip off the accretions and supplements brought into the Gospel traditions by the ancient church.<sup>22</sup> The original promoters of form criticism hoped this process would take scholars back to the original voice of Jesus.<sup>23</sup> More recently, a “New Form Criticism” has developed under the influence of Klaus Berger who classifies biblical texts into genre-specific “forms” for better literary and rhetorical analysis without so much speculation regarding the development of the traditions.<sup>24</sup>

The effort to distinguish Jesus’ teaching from that of the Evangelists has been influenced by a question over whether Jesus personally foretold an imminent end of the current world order or whether Jesus’ parables spoke only of a spiritual kingdom of God available to believers in the current age. More will be said about this question in the section below which deals with parables. A brief discussion here, however, will serve as a convenient transition to the issue of redaction criticism.

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<sup>21</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, trans. John Marsh, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York, Harper, 1963), 127, 163.

<sup>22</sup> Darrell Bock, “Form Criticism,” 106–27.

<sup>23</sup> Dockery supplies English titles for these works originally published in German. The German titles are given here with the date of their original publication. German: K.L. Schmidt, *Framework of the Story of Jesus*, (orig. German, *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu*, 1919); M. Diebelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (orig. German, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums*, 1919); Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, (orig. German, *Geschichte der Synoptischen Tradition*, 1921). David Dockery, “New Testament Survey: A Historical Survey,” in David Allen Black and David S. Dockery, *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues* (Nashville: Broadman, 2001), 21–73.

<sup>24</sup> Klaus Berger, “Rhetorical Criticism, New Form Criticism, and New Testament Hermeneutics,” in Stanley E. Porter and Thomas H. Olbricht, eds., *Rhetoric and the New Testament: Essays from the 1992 Heidelberg Conference*, JSOTSS, no. 90 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 390–96.

In 1882, a British scholar named Alexander Balmain Bruce argued that Jesus did not originally intend his simple parables to be complex allegories but that the Evangelists often allegorized them so that the parables could be convenient vehicles for whatever the Evangelists wished to teach to a later generation.<sup>25</sup> Four years later Adolf Jülicher attempted to prove this point by publishing a monumental analysis of the Gospels entitled *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*.<sup>26</sup> A cursory analysis of Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats shows the passage to be part parable and part realistic description of an eschatological judgment. Some of the passage's vocabulary appears regularly in the sections of Matthew's Gospel which are believed to come from Matthew himself while other parts of the pericope have a different stripe. For these reasons some commentators have concluded that Jesus' original words are at most scattered across the pericope and that Matthew is the dominant author of much or most of the passage.<sup>27</sup> Others are not as quick as were Bruce and Jülicher to limit Jesus' teaching to simple parables. Many commentators have agreed with T. W. Manson who wrote of the entire pericope, "It

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<sup>25</sup> Alexander Balmain Bruce, *The Parabolic Teaching of Christ: A Systematic and Critical Study of the Parables of Our Lord* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1882 and the 3<sup>rd</sup> ed revised, New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1908).

<sup>26</sup> A. Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2 vols. (Freiburg: Mohr, 1886, 1888, 1899, 1910 and Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963, 1969, 1976). This remains untranslated. A few helpful summaries of Jülicher's work exist: William Sanday, "A New Work on Parables" originally published in *JTS* 1(1900) 161–80 and now available in Craig A. Evans, Stanley E. Porter and Scott N. Doolff, eds., *Essays in Biblical Criticism and Exegesis*, JSNTSS no. 225, *Classics in Biblical and Theological Studies Supplement Series 2* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 137–54; G. V. Jones, *The Art and Truth of Parables* (London: SPCK, 1964), 1–40; N. Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

<sup>27</sup> Simon Légasse, *Jésus et l'enfant: "Enfants", "Petits" et "Simples" dans la Tradition Synoptique* (Paris: Gabalda, 1969), 85–100. Other scholars doubt the authenticity of all or some of this pericope including Bultmann, *History of Synoptic Tradition*, 123–25; and J. A. T. Robinson, "The 'Parable' of the Sheep and the Goats," *NTS* 2 (1956), 225–37, here 232–34, who argues on linguistic analysis in the absence of clear parallels.



certainly contains features of such startling originality that it is difficult to credit them to anyone but the Master Himself.”<sup>28</sup>

The work of C. H. Dodd marks the beginning of an ongoing dispute regarding Jesus vis-à-vis Jewish apocalypticism. In Jesus’ day, the Jewish apocalypses spoke of an imminent end of the age with a final judgment and the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth. Dodd believed that Jesus subverted this Jewish apocalyptic idea to promote a “realized eschatology” which described the realm of heaven as already active on earth through the mystic union of Jesus with his church before and after his death. According to Dodd, Jesus crafted his parables originally to describe the present form of the kingdom of God already available to believers.<sup>29</sup> Joachim Jeremias, who is chiefly known for reformulating and interpreting Jesus’ teaching in an Aramaic form, disagreed with Dodd. According to Jeremias, two of the ten themes that Jesus addressed in his parables were “The Imminence of Catastrophe,” and “The Consummation.”<sup>30</sup>

Disagreements over the original opinions of Jesus have not been settled by source or form criticism, but a few criteria have been developed by which scholars hope to

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Walter Manson and H. D. A. Major, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1949), 249 cited here approvingly by Geaoge E. Ladd, “The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Recent Interpretation,” in Richard N. Longenecker and M. Tenny, eds., *New Dimensions in New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: 1974), 191–99, here 197. The following also believe the pericope is primarily rooted in the teaching of Jesus: Johannes Friedrich, *Gott im Brüder? eine methodenkritische Untersuchung von Redaktion, Überlieferung und Traditionen in Mt. 25, 31–46*, Calwer Theologische Monographien, no. 7 (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1977), 289; Joachim Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, trans. S. H. Hooke from the 6<sup>th</sup> ed. of *Die Gleichnisse Jesu* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963), 142–44; Théo Preiss, *Life in Christ* (Chicago: A. R. Allenson, 1954), 47; I. Broer, “Das Gericht des Menschensohnes über die Völker: Auslegung von Mt 25, 31–46, *Bibel und Leben* 11 (1970), 273–95. Broer’s argument is recommended by both Donald Hagner, *Matthew*, 2 vols. (Dallas: Word, 1995), II, 741 and Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 602.

<sup>29</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, pp 27–35.

<sup>30</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., trans. S. H. Hooke from 8<sup>th</sup> ed. of *Die Gleichnisse Jesu* (New York: Scribner’s, 1972), 21, 160, 221.

govern the debate. The theory of “dissimilarity” is one of the more controversial. It is predicated on the uniqueness of Jesus and gives full authenticity only to those sayings which disagree both with the Jews who were contemporary with Jesus and also with the Christians who wrote in the developing church.<sup>31</sup> A new approach to this criterion has been offered by N. T. Wright. Wright thinks it is more reasonable to consider the similarities which Jesus must have had with both the Jews and the later church. According to Wright, this “double similarity” must be factored against a “double dissimilarity” so that the teaching of Jesus may be understood as a catalyst that helped to transform some of the Jews of his own time into the Christians of the early church.<sup>32</sup> Two other criteria have also been broadly used. The criterion of “multiple attestation” strengthens the claim of authenticity for those sayings of Jesus which appear independently in more than one source. The criterion of “coherence” recognizes authenticity in those sayings which seem to be compatible with other authentic sayings of Jesus. Grant Osborn calls “dissimilarity,” “multiple attestation,” and “coherence” the “big three” and credits Norman Perrin for their promotion among form and redaction critics. Osborn also lists other criteria which have developed. These include any “divergent pattern” which signals a relic from Jesus that does not easily fit into the literary context of the passage which contains it, any “unintentional signs of history” which signal the influence of an eye-witness, allusions to the “Palestinian environment or Aramaic

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<sup>31</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *History of Synoptic Tradition*, 205.

<sup>32</sup> N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1996), 131–33.

features” in the text, and the criterion of “contradiction” which identifies sayings which are antithetical to authentic sayings of Jesus.<sup>33</sup>

In spite of much effort, source and form criticism have not produced unanimity regarding the basic shape of Jesus’ original teaching. However, these two methods of Bible study have produced a variety of opinions about the original teaching of Jesus that influence the efforts of scholars who attempt to understand the Evangelists’ adaptations of Jesus’ teaching and ultimately the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46.<sup>34</sup>

### **Redaction-Critical Issues**

The method of biblical study that compares existing Gospel passages with their speculated sources in order to analyze and understand the editorial changes of the Evangelists is called redaction criticism. Redaction critics have a special challenge with Matt 25:31–46 because there are no clear pre-Matthean sources for Matt 25:31–46. In the absence of identifiable textual sources, redaction critics customarily look for the words, phrases, and grammatical constructions which belong to Matthew’s own style of writing as indicators of the elements in the passage that can be most directly credited to his creative hand. An absence of such indicators would suggest that the passage should be attributed to the tradition which Matthew received.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Bock, “Form Criticism,” 109–10; Osborne, “Redaction Criticism,” 133–34; Norman Perrin, *What Is Redaction Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970).

<sup>34</sup> James McKonkey Robinson and Helmut Koester, eds., *Trajectories Through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 252

<sup>35</sup> Meier, John P. *Law and History in Matthew’s Gospel* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1976), 3.

In distinction from the source and form critical approach to Matt 25:31–46, redaction criticism focuses on the authorial intent of the Evangelist.<sup>36</sup> This focus leads to another distinction. Redaction criticism tends to read Matthew’s Gospel as a whole. It assumes that the editorial changes which the Evangelist made to his sources are intelligently designed to relay a consistent perspective on the teaching of Jesus.<sup>37</sup> Commentators who believe Mark’s Gospel was one of Matthew’s sources have a basis upon which to judge how Matthew generally treated his sources and to what extent he may have adapted them. A total of 606 of the 661 verses in Mark’s Gospel have close parallels in Matthew’s Gospel. Ben Witherington estimates that Matthew’s version of these verses preserves 51% of Mark’s exact words.<sup>38</sup> While modern sensitivities may be piqued at such editorial freedom, Stendahl reminds us that in some contexts in antiquity deliberate freedom in quoting was expected as a kind of poetic license which displayed a writer’s mastery of his subject matter.<sup>39</sup> Redaction critics attempt to identify the Evangelists’ purposes for creatively adapting the sources with which they worked.

According to David C. Sim, the editorial touches of Matthew may be classified into four categories. Matthew either altered his sources, created new material, supplemented his sources, or deliberately retained his source material in an unchanged or nearly unchanged form. Redaction critics have used these several categories as signals of

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<sup>36</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), xii.

<sup>37</sup> Lamar Cope, “Matthew XXV:31–46,” 44.

<sup>38</sup> Ben Witherington, III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1994), 214.

<sup>39</sup> Stendahl, *School of St. Matthew* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 157.

how heavily Matthew pressed his own opinions into the traditions he received.<sup>40</sup>

Regarding Matthew's editing process for Matt 25:31–46, redaction critics can only speculate which of the four categories of editing Matthew used. We have no earlier written sources of this pericope against which we may compare Matthew's version.

In addition to verbal indicators, Redaction critics must also consider the thematic agreement any passage in Matthew sustains with other passages in Matthew's Gospel. Differences of opinion among the commentators regarding the *Sitz im Leben* of Matthew or regarding his particular perspective on doctrines related to the final judgment may cause redaction critics to come to different conclusions regarding Matthew's intended meaning for Matt 25:31–46. For this reason, Wolfgang Trilling cautioned redaction critics to recognize the hypothetical nature of all presuppositions about the *Sitz im Leben* of the Gospels and to understand that their conclusions are only as solid as the speculations upon which they are built.<sup>41</sup>

The commentators which use redaction criticism point out certain elements of style, wording, and themes which they believe indicate Matthew's emphases in his composition of Matt 25:31–46. Unfortunately, the data has not always yielded the same conclusions for the commentators who use redaction criticism. Charles H. Hedrick cites the absence of allegorical elements in the Gospel of Thomas' collection of Jesus' parables as evidence for the Bruce/Jülicher theory mentioned above. Hedrick argues that

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<sup>40</sup> David C. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 16–17.

<sup>41</sup> "The entire picture of 'theology' shifts depending on the relation between tradition and redaction and the evaluation of redacting activity – if one does not clearly stress the hypothetical nature of all presuppositions and conclusions" (my translation). Wolfgang Trilling's review of R. Hummel's *Die Auseinandersetzung zwischen Kirche und Judentum im Matthäusevangelium* in *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 90 (1964): 433–37, here 36.

the un-allegorized parables of the Gospel of Thomas are more characteristic of Jesus' teaching and that the elements in Matthew's Gospel which display a tendency to expand or allegorize Jesus' parables must be credited either to Matthew or to the intervening tradition upon which Matthew relied.<sup>42</sup> For Matt 25:31–46, this presupposition would imply that the eschatological details which carry the passage beyond the simple analogy in 25:32 must reflect the emphases which Matthew either adopted from elsewhere or added himself. Jeremias, on the other hand, argued that Jesus' original "parables" should not be defined as narrowly as the Bruce/Jülicher theory maintains. According to Jeremias, Jesus thought and spoke in Aramaic. Jesus' native Aramaic incorporated under the same Semitic description (*mashal* or *mathla*) a variety of figurative forms of speech including parable, similitude, allegory, fable, proverb, apocalyptic revelation, riddle, symbol, pseudonym, fictitious person, example, theme, argument, apology, refutation, and jest. For this and other reasons, Jeremias credited Jesus with the bulk of the pericope, not Matthew.<sup>43</sup>

The interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 by redaction critics must also be affected by their several opinions regarding Jesus' conception of the Kingdom of God. In the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats, the Judge is called a "King" (25:34, 40), and the righteous "inherit the kingdom" (25:34). Did Matthew invest the Kingdom of God with this apocalyptic connotation or did Jesus? Some scholars follow Dodd's opinion that such

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<sup>42</sup> Charles H. Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions: The Creative Voice of Jesus* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 22–23.

<sup>43</sup> Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (1963), 20.

apocalyptic uses of “kingdom” were not original to Jesus.<sup>44</sup> Others think that Jesus did speak apocalyptically about the Kingdom of God.<sup>45</sup> Many believe Jesus spoke about both a current realization of the Kingdom of God as well as an apocalyptic climax in which the Kingdom of God would come to earth in its fullest sense.<sup>46</sup>

If the apocalyptic aspect of the Kingdom was original to Jesus, Matthew’s particular emphasis may still be identified in the way Matthew treated the apocalyptic theme. According to David C. Sim, Matthew had a tendency to divide humanity into two opposing groups “more than any other New Testament author.” Whereas Luke 6:35 speaks of God’s kindness to the “ungrateful and evil,” Matthew’s parallel passage (5:45) bifurcates the object of God’s mercy into two opposing groups: “the evil and the good” or the “righteous and the unrighteous” (compare the similar phenomenon in Luke 14:23 and Matt 22:10). According to Sim, the “righteous” and the “cursed” of Matt 25:37, 41 are one more example of Matthew’s tendency to bifurcate humanity.<sup>47</sup> The “parables of

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<sup>44</sup> Hedrick, *Parables*, 22–23 lists these: M. J. Borg, “A Temperate Case for a Non-Eschatological Jesus” *Forum* 2 (1986), 81–102; B. L. Mack, “The Kingdom Sayings in Mark,” *Forum* 3 (1987): 3–47; and J. R. Butts, “Probing the Polling: Jesus Seminar Results on the Kingdom Sayings,” *Forum* 3 (1987): 98–128.

<sup>45</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*, 68 recommends the fresh arguments offered by E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 151–54, 231–32; and Dale C. Allison, Jr., “A Plea for Thoroughgoing Eschatology” *JBL* 113 (1994): 651–68.

<sup>46</sup> Keener, *Matthew*, 69 gives an impressive list of scholars who argued that Jesus spoke of both aspects: Robert H. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus’ Teachings* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 60–79; George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 70–80; David Aune, *The Cultic Setting of Realized Eschatology in Early Christianity*, NovTSup, no. 28 (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 3–4; James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1975), 89; A. E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 91; Davies/Allison, *Matthew*, I, 389; Ben Witherington, III, *Jesus and Paul and the End of the World: A Comparative Study in New Testament Eschatology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 51–74; Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 74; and John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Vol. 2: *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 289–506.

<sup>47</sup> Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 81–82.

separation” which speak of the final judgment as separating the “wheat” from the “tares” or the “good fish” from the “bad” (13:30, 48) are, like the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats, unique to Matthew. Gundry takes this as evidence that these elements not only reflect Matthew’s emphasis of separation, but that Matthew also composed these pericopes. The “parallelistic style” contained in these “parables of separation” also appears in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats, and so Gundry (against Jeremias) argues that most of Matt 25:31–46 is Matthew’s composition and displays his special concern and interest.<sup>48</sup>

Gundry gives the label “non-Mattheanisms” to the words and phrases which do not belong to Matthew’s favorite vocabulary, or which cannot be explained as one of Matthew’s many allusions or quotations from the Old Testament, or which do not exhibit Matthew’s parallelistic style, or which do not display Matthew’s generally acknowledged theological emphases.<sup>49</sup> Under these criteria, Matt 25:31–46 would receive mixed results.” In favor of the passage’s coming essentially from Matthew, Davies and Allison point out that the passage not only contains the parallelism and repetition which are characteristic of Matthew’s style but also uses as many as 17 words or phrases which appear prominently as part of Matthew’s favorite vocabulary elsewhere in his Gospel.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, Johannes Friedrich’s influential analysis points out that six words appear only here in Matthew’s Gospel and that several other phrases which are very

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<sup>48</sup> Gundry, *Matthew*, 511.

<sup>49</sup> Gundry, *Matthew*, xviii.

<sup>50</sup> The Matthean phrases are listed by Davies and Allison as, τότε, συνάγω, ἔμπροσθεν, πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, ὡςπερ, μέν. . . δέ, δεξιός, ἐρῶ, βασιλεύς, δεῦτε, πατρός μου, κόσμος, γάρ, δίκιος, ἀποκριθεῖς + finite verb, ἀμην λέγω ὑμῖν, ἐφ’ ὅσον, εἰς, ἀδελφός, πῦρ, and ἀπέρχομαι, Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, III, 417.



important to the passage are also used only here (“the kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world,” “one of the least of these my brothers,” “the devil and his angels,” and “eternal punishment”).<sup>51</sup> The absence of these phrases elsewhere in Matthew’s Gospel is all the more telling inasmuch as these phrases do not appear to be anti-thematic to what Matthew says elsewhere concerning eschatology. The fact that Matthew uses these phrases here and not elsewhere suggests that he imported them from a prior tradition. Davies and Allison hint that two other phrases appear in Matt 25:31–46 even though they would appear out of place in Matthew. Nowhere else does Matthew give a list of deeds of mercy as he does in this pericope, nor does Matthew elsewhere refer to the Son of Man as “King.” Davies and Allison imply that the list of merciful deeds and the royal aspect of the Son of Man are so potentially important that Matthew would probably have used them more than once if they were part of his own emphasis.<sup>52</sup> If Davies and Allison are correct, this detail presents an additional argument that Matthew relied, at least partially, upon a prior source to compose Matt 25:31–46.

Another issue that is often addressed by redaction critics is Matthew’s use of the title “Son of Man” in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats. Redaction critics ask whether Matthew’s description of the Son of Man as coming in glory with the holy angels to judge the nations (25:31–32) was an innovation placed into the Gospel by Matthew himself, or whether Matthew inherited this description of the Son of Man from prior tradition or whether this description goes back to Jesus himself. The debate over Jesus’

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<sup>51</sup> Friedrich, *Gott im Bruder*, 9–45. This summary of Friedrich’s argument is from Davis/Allison, *Ibid.* The six un-Matthean words are ἔριφος, ἔριφιον, γυμνός, ἐπισκέπτομαι, καταράομαι, and κόλλαις.

<sup>52</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, III, 417–18.

use of the phrase Son of Man is long and too complicated to thoroughly review here. That part of the debate, however, that affects the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 must be mentioned.

B. W. Bacon and others have promoted a theory that says Jesus originally spoke of a Son of Man who would come as described in Daniel 7 at the end of the current age to establish a kingdom for the people of God but that Jesus never claimed to be this eschatological judge. According to Bacon, the identification of Jesus with this apocalyptic Son of Man was Matthew's doing.<sup>53</sup> One line of argument that supports this idea is the fact that of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew alone specifically describes Jesus as the eschatological Judge. Mark and Luke speak of a Son of Man who will give testimony or advocacy for people in the final judgment (Mark 8:36; Luke 12:8–9), but neither Gospel is as clear as Matthew is on the point that Jesus will judge the world as the Son of Man. Sim thinks Matthew took the idea that Jesus will be the Danielic "Son of Man" who will come on the clouds from Christian sources (Mark and Q), but that Matthew got the idea that the Son of Man will be the judge from other Jewish sources. It was a small step for Matthew to conflate his Jewish and Christian sources so that Jesus is both the Danielic Son of Man and the Judge.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, D. R. Catchpole points out that in antiquity, the roles of witness and judge merge as in Matt 12:41–42 and Luke 9:31 which describe the men of Nineveh and the queen of the south as rising up to

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<sup>53</sup> Bacon, *Studies*, 419, 430–31. Bultmann's view was similar, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 112, 115, 151–152. More recently, Geza Vermes has supported this theory, "The Use of BAR NASH/BAR NASHA in Jewish Aramaic" in Geza Vermes, *Post-Biblical Jewish Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 147–68; and in *Jesus the Jew* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973) 163–68, 188–89; and *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 89–99.

<sup>54</sup> David C. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 98–99, 116, 123, 127. The extra-canonical Jewish texts which speak of a Son of Man who will judge the world will be listed and briefly discussed below in the section dealing with intertexts.

“condemn” (κατακρίνειν) the contemporaries of Jesus by giving witness against them.<sup>55</sup>

Catchpole’s observation has the potential of collapsing the distinction between witness and judge which Sim’s theory of composition requires. In summary, redaction criticism may speak of a difference of emphasis or clarity on this point among the Synoptics, but Catchpole’s observation warns against the idea that Matthew contradicted Mark or Luke.

The effort to distinguish Matthew’s emphases from those of his sources is a complicated business. When the method of redaction criticism was beginning to take shape, some commentators emphasized the distinction between passages in the Gospels which were passively preserved by the Evangelists and those which were more actively edited or compiled by the Evangelists. Relics of earlier ideas or perspectives which critics supposed were inconsistent with the Evangelists’ personal views were believed to be concentrated in the passages which the Evangelists did not alter or supplement. Sim, however, believes that Matthew did not often preserve the wording of traditions which were inconsistent with his own. According to Sim, the distinction between active and passive transmission is a false one for Matthew. Matthew’s verbatim quotations represent Matthew’s views just as well as the other passages he edits more thoroughly.<sup>56</sup> If Sim is correct, redaction criticism’s greatest contribution to the study of Matt 25:31–46 would be not only the recognition of the uniquely Matthean phrasing in the pericope, but also how that phrasing coincides with wording in texts which appears to be drawn more purely from prior traditions. For this reason, Matt 25:31–46 should not be read in

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<sup>55</sup> D. R. Catchpole, “The Poor on Earth and the Son of Man in Heaven: A Reappraisal of Matthew 25:31–46,” *BJRL* 61 (1979): 355–97, 383–85. Catchpole cites O. Michel’s article on ὁμολογέω in *TDNT*, vol. 5, 208 for this point.

<sup>56</sup> David C. Sim, *Apoclayptic Eschatology*, 16–17.

isolation from the balance of the Gospel, much less in distinction to any part of it.

Matthew's intended meaning for the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats is best illuminated by comparing Matt 25:31–46 to other texts in his Gospel which either use the same phrasing or touch upon the same themes. These “intratextual” relationships have been the subject and focus of much of the commentary on Matt 25:31–46.

### **Intratextual Considerations—Cross-References in Matthew's Gospel**

Two schools of thought are divided over the issue of whether Matt 25:31–46 should be read in the light of the balance of Matthew's Gospel or in isolation from it. Some commentators hope to discover Matthew's intended meaning of this passage by reading it in the light of the whole Gospel. Ulrich Luz argues that Matthew's Gospel was intended to be read as a whole, not in parts, and not just once but several times.<sup>57</sup> Lamar Cope also believes Matthew's intended meaning for Matt 25:31–46 is best grasped by recognizing the thematic connections this passage sustains with the balance of Matthew's Gospel,

The isolation of xxv 31–46 as an independent saying is the most glaring mistake of the traditional exegesis of this passage. The interconnections that have been shown to exist among various portions of Matthew illustrate vividly the need for study of the Gospels as documents having their own themes, purposes, and unity. The importance of source and form criticism is not thereby denied. It is simply the case that redaction criticism should always be used to supplement, and if necessary correct, the results obtained by those methods.<sup>58</sup>

Literary critics are also interested in the intratextual relations which Matt 25:31–46 sustains with the balance of the Gospel, but for different reasons. While historical-

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<sup>57</sup> Ulrich Luz, “Matthew the Evangelist: A Jewish Christian at the Crossroads,” in *Studies in Matthew*, trans. Rosemary Selle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 20005), 3–17, here 3.

<sup>58</sup> Lamar Cope, “Matthew XXV:31–46: ‘The Sheep and the Goats’ Reinterpreted,” *NovT* 11 (1961): 32–44, here 44.

critical exegesis is primarily concerned with the authorial intention of the passage, literary critics are content to focus on the storyline of the narrative world which Matthew created in writing this Gospel. Literary critics assume this narrative world is self-referentially consistent so that parts of the Gospel may be read in light of the whole. Readers should gather their own lessons from the text by interacting with this narrative world (even if they are not fully conscious of the historical motivations Matthew may have had for creating the text as he did.) Olmstead believes the common ground which historical-critical exegetes and literary critics share allow them to work together and to be “mutually corrective.”<sup>59</sup>

A second school of thought believes that the individual pericopes of Matthew’s Gospel are best read in isolation. According to these commentators, Matthew’s Gospel is a collection of heterogeneous material so that the content of each item should be given its own integrity. What appears to be the literal meaning of any one passage should not be sacrificed in order to make that passage compatible with what Matthew has written elsewhere. Francis Watson criticizes the historical-critical exegetes who pretend to be able to tell Matthew how he should have written the passage in order to make this pericope clearer and more compatible to the balance of his Gospel. Watson asks, “But what if the author refuses to play this game? What if, as we tell him what he should have said to make his meaning clearer, he simply refers us back to the text with the words, ‘What I have written, I have written’?” Watson thinks it is better to recognize the absence

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<sup>59</sup> Wesley G. Olmstead, *Matthew’s Trilogy of Parables: The Nation, the Nations and the Reader* (New York: Cambridge, 2003), 3–5.

of the author as reason to avoid what he calls “the reductionistic tendency to confine textual meaning to the reconstructed circumstances of origin.”<sup>60</sup>

For Watson and other reader-centered commentators the meaning of the text may be isolated from the author’s intention. Historical-critical exegetes and literary critics, on the other hand, are more interested in how Matt 25:31–46 may be read in the light of other “intratexts” in Matthew’s Gospel.

Kathleen Weber, in her work on the eschatological portions of Matthew’s Gospel, observes that Matthew displays a high degree of divergence in describing some of the details predicted for the final judgment. In 10:32–33, the Father is judge and Jesus is a witness, but in 25:32, the Son of Man is the judge. In 13:30, the angels gather and divide the tares from the wheat, but in 3:12 the “Coming One” will gather the wheat, and in 25:32, the Son of Man will divide the sheep from the goats. Despite these divergent details spread out across the Gospel, Weber identifies a tendency in the Gospel to subordinate the eschatological description to a dominant version of events in which the Son of Man is portrayed as the sole eschatological judge (3:11–12; 7:21–23; 16:27; 20:1–16). This version is most clearly set forth in the eschatological discourse of chapters 24–25, which is the most immediate context of the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats.<sup>61</sup>

According to Weber, Matthew’s intended message concerning eschatology should not be isolated to the passages in the Gospel which directly address eschatological events. Many eschatological events are presented by Matthew as “partially and proleptically

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<sup>60</sup> Francis Watson, “Liberating the Reader: A Theological-Exegetical Study of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt 25:31–46),” in *The Open Text: New Directions in Biblical Studies?* (London: SCM, 1993), 65–66.

<sup>61</sup> Weber, “The Events of the End,” 104–7, 214–16.

realized in the lives and activities of Jesus and his followers.” Weber gives the following partial list illustrated here in Table 3.<sup>62</sup>

Table 3: Realized Eschatological Events in Matthew

Eschatological Event	Realization in Gospel's Story Line
Conversion of the Gentiles (Ps 72:8–11; Isa 2:2–3; 60:3–7; Zech 14:16–19)	Magi and the soldiers at the cross (Matt 2:1–12; 27:54)
The dissolution of the physical universe (Matt 24:29)	Earthquakes during Jesus career (8:24; 27:51–52; 28:2)
The Lord's appearance on the Mount of Olives (Zech 14:4–5)	Olivet Discourse (Matt 24:3.)
The messianic banquet (8:11; 22:1–14)	Last Supper (26:29.)
The failure of the sun and moon (24:29)	Darkness at the cross (27:45)
The general resurrection (22:28, 30)	Resurrection of the saints at Jesus' death (27:52–53)
The parousia (10:23; 16:27–28; 23:39; 24:30–31)	Proleptic Parousia at Great Commission (28:16–20)

This tendency of Matthew to weave eschatological connotations into the storyline of his Gospel weighs in favor of Matthew's sustained and programmatic interest in eschatological events throughout his Gospel. The current review of interpretive issues need only mention several of the most significant eschatological intratextual connections. These will include other texts in Matthew which discuss the criteria used in the final judgment as well as texts which may shed light on the identity of the “least” of the “brothers” of the Son of Man (25:40, 45) as well as the identity of the “nations” (25:32).

Several intratexts in Matthew's Gospel mention criteria of judgment in contexts which contain imagery and vocabulary similar to that which is in Matt 25:31–46. In

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 91.

16:27 we read, “For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and will then repay every man according to his works.” The context implies that the “works” to be considered are whether or not a person has denied himself, taken up his cross, and followed Jesus (16:24). In 13:41, the Son of Man’s angels will gather out of the kingdom “all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness.” In 13:49, “the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous.” In 19:28–30, the Son of Man also sits on “His glorious throne / θρόνου δόξης αὐτοῦ.” In this text, Jesus says, “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life.” One other text, 24:31, also mentions the coming of the Son of Man with “power and great glory,” but no clear criterion of judgment is given. This text says only that the angels will gather “His elect.”

To these passages which share some of the imagery and vocabulary of Matt 25:31–46, many others may be compared which speak specifically about criteria to be used in the judgment but which do not describe in detail the coming of the Son of Man, nor his throne, glory, or angels, etc. One may argue that the simple description of “works” as the criteria of judgment in 16:27 incorporates all of Matthew’s moral or ethical teaching as criteria which will be used in the judgment. Such a list would be very long and would not highlight the special interest of Matt 25:31–46. In order to focus mainly on the emphases of Matthew’s presentation of the judgment, Table 4 (below) only lists those passages in Matthew which speak of both the criteria and the outcome of the judgment. Some of the criteria are expressed more literally while others are given through



figurative expressions. The symbolic nature of much of Jesus' teaching must be taken into account.

Table 4: Criteria and Outcomes for the Judgment in Matthew

Passage	Criteria	Outcome
5:22	anger against a brother, saying a brother is good for nothing, saying a brother is a fool	guilty before the court, guilty before the supreme court, fiery hell
5:29–30 (18:8–9)	stumbling because of an eye or hand (18:8–9 adds a foot which causes one to stumble)	whole body in hell
7:13–14	entering the narrow gate entering the wide gate	life destruction
7:19	not bearing good fruit (as a tree)	thrown into the fire
8:10–12	commends the faith of the Roman centurion	implies he will sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven
10:14–15	not receiving the missionary disciples nor heeding their words	less tolerable judgment than will be given to Sodom and Gomorrah
10:22	enduring in mission to the end (though hated by all)	shall be saved
10:32	confess Jesus before men	Jesus will confess you before the Father
10:33	deny Jesus before men	Jesus will deny you before Father
10:41	receive a prophet “in the name of a prophet” (“because he is a prophet,”) <sup>63</sup>  receive a righteous man “in the name of a righteous man” (“because he is a righteous man,” see above)	receive a prophet’s reward  receive a righteous man’s reward

<sup>63</sup> Ramsey Michaels says Εἰς ὄνομα is equivalent to the Hebrew עַל שֵׁם which would translate “in the name of a prophet/disciple” into “because he is a prophet/disciple.” Michaels source for this translation

10:42	give “in the name of a disciple” (see above) a cup of cold water to “one of these little ones”	shall not lose his reward
11:21–22	Chorazin’s and Bethsaida’s lack of repentance in the wake of Jesus’ miracles	less tolerable in the judgment than it will be for Tyre and Sidon
11:23–24	Capernaum’s lack of repentance in the wake of Jesus’ miracles	less tolerable in the judgment than it will be for Sodom
12:31–32	blaspheming against the Spirit	shall not be forgiven
12:36–37	idle words	shall give account in the day of judgment
12:41–42	implies a generation’s failure to repent or listen to a wise man like Solomon (Jesus)	men of Nineveh and the Queen of the South will condemn that generation
18:3–6	failure to be converted and become like children  humble oneself as a child  cause “one of these little ones who believe” in Jesus to stumble	will not enter the kingdom of heaven  greatest in the kingdom of heaven  a fate worse than drowning in the sea with a heavy millstone around the neck
18:22–35	not forgiving a brother his trespasses	the heavenly Father will not forgive you (parable says the unforgiving slave would be “handed over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed”)

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is Hermann Leberecht Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 6 vols. in 7 (München: Beck, 1922), vol. 1, 590f and the translations of RSV and NEB. Ramsey Michaels, “Apostolic Hardships and Righteous Gentiles: A Study of Matthew 25 31–46” *BJRL* 84 (1965): 27–37, 30.

21:33–46	wicked vine-growers who represent the chief priests and Pharisees (21:45) hoard the harvest; beat, kill, or stone those sent to collect the fruit, or kill the son sent to receive it	the kingdom of God will be taken from them and given to a nation producing the fruit of it
22:1–14	not having “wedding clothes” at the wedding feast	cast into outer darkness to a place with weeping and gnashing of teeth
23:1–39	various examples of scribes’ and Pharisees’ transgressions which lead Jesus to describe them as hypocrites, fools, blind, whitewashed tombs, serpents, and a brood of vipers	Jesus’ conclusion: “how will you escape the sentence of hell?”
24:45–51	giving the master’s household their food at the proper time (24:45)  beating fellow slaves, eating and drinking with drunkards (24:49)	put in charge of all the master’s possessions (24:47)  cut in pieces, assigned a place with the hypocrites in a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (24:51)
25:1–13	not having lamp oil in order to join the bridegroom’s procession to the wedding feast	exclusion from the wedding feast
25:14–30	how one invests the talents (money) the master commits to ones trust	slaves who make profitable investments: enter the joy of their lord (25:21, 23)  slaves who do not: lose the talent they were given and are cast in outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (25: 28, 30)

A glance at this chart reveals a broad range of criteria which Matthew’s Gospel implies will be used in judgment. Most significant, especially for Protestants, is the near absence of “faith” as a criterion. The only pericope which directly speaks of faith in the context of final judgment is the passage which commends the faith of the Roman

centurion and implies that he will be among those who sit down in the kingdom with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (8:10–12). The twin criteria of receiving the missionary disciples or heeding their words (10:14–15) may, with only little theological license, be seen as supportive of a criterion of faith as well, as may the requirement to confess Jesus before men (10:32–33). The exhortation to be converted and become as children (18:2–6) may with a little more license be included here as well. Beyond these passages, commentators who wish to interpret Matthew’s treatment of the judgment as compatible with the Reformation doctrine of *sola fide* are pressed to interpret all of the good works listed among the rest of the criteria as evidence of saving faith and the vices as evidence of a lack of saving faith.

Of all of the criteria mentioned in these passages, the ones whose relevance the commentators debate most frequently are the criteria which evaluate the way people treat the missionary disciples (10:14–15, 41, 42). The wording of 10:42 is most advantageous for this connection, “And whoever in the name of a disciple (‘because he is a disciple’)<sup>64</sup> gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward.” The similarity of the wording of this text to 25:40 is striking, “The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, *even the least of them*, you did it to Me.’” Similar wording is also used in 18:6 which mentions “one of these little ones who believe in me....” Commentators who lean on the similarity of wording between 10:42; 18:6; and 25:40 have some basis for suggesting that the criterion of judgment expressed in the Judgment

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<sup>64</sup> See the note from Ramsey Michaels in n. 149.

of the Sheep and Goats includes the common faith which leads the sheep to assist Jesus' disciples in their time of need.

Arland Hultgren opposes the easy connection of 10:42 with 25:40 on the grounds that different Greek words stand behind the “little ones” [μικρός] of 10:42 and the “least” [ἐλαχιστος] of 25:40. According to Hultgren, if Matthew had intended this connection he could have easily used the genitive of μικρός in 25:40 so that the description would be similar to that given in 10:42 both to the ear and to the eye [ἐνι τοῦτων τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου τῶν μικρῶν].<sup>65</sup> Hultgren therefore believes the least of Jesus' brothers in 25:40 include all the oppressed of the world. Kathleen Weber accepts the connection between the “little ones” of 10:42; 18:6 and the “least” of 25:40, but she believes the differences between 10:42 and 18:6 suggest that “little ones” is an “elastic term” which may imply anyone who is in need. In 10:42 “little ones” refers to the missionary disciples in their need. In 18:6 it refers to weak and insignificant members of the believing community. This breadth of meaning leads Weber to conclude that 25:40 may extend the referential circumference of “the least” even beyond the Christian circle to include the weak and vulnerable whether or not they are missionaries or even Christian at all.<sup>66</sup>

Other intratexts which describe the disciples as the Lord's “brothers” are sometimes compared to 25:40 with the intent to explain the criterion of this judgment as that of Christian faith displayed in works. The most explicit text in this group is 28:10 in which Jesus gives instruction for his “brethren” to meet him in Galilee. Another text,

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<sup>65</sup> Arland Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 321. Davies and Allison make a similar argument, *Matthew*, III, 429.

<sup>66</sup> Weber, “Events of the End,” 221–22.

12:49–50, shows Jesus pointing to his disciples and saying, “Behold, My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.” John R. Donahue remarks, “There is no clear instance where an unconverted gentile is spoken of as a brother.” “In Matthew it [‘brother’] is used extensively to describe the social relationships which should exist between those who respond to the gospel of the kingdom (5:22–24; 7:3–5; 18:15, 21, 35) or as a reference to disciples (12:49–50; 28:10.)”<sup>67</sup> Sim lists the same texts and concludes that “brother” in Matthew points to a community setting rather than a general or universal context.<sup>68</sup>

One final intratextual line of argument sometimes offered to support the alignment of the least of Jesus’ brothers with the disciples is taken from the description of the persecution and troubles which the disciples are warned they will face as they preach the gospel (10:9–22; 24:9–12). Some commentators argue that these persecutions which Jesus predicted for the missionaries should be seen as the reason the least of Jesus brothers are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and imprisoned.<sup>69</sup>

Against the theory which aligns the least of 25:40 with the missionary disciples is the overwhelming list of criteria in Matthew’s Gospel which clearly describe the final judgment as a review of each person’s works in general.

Some intratexts in Matthew’s Gospel have been thought to shed light on the identity of the group being judged in Matt 25:31–46. The passage itself describes this group with the phrase “all the nations” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, 25:32). Lexicons give a breadth

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<sup>67</sup> John R. Donahue, “The ‘Parable’ of the Sheep and the Goats: A Challenge to Christian Ethics,” *TS* 47 (1986): 3–31, here 25.

<sup>68</sup> Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 233.

<sup>69</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, “Apostolic Hardships.”

of definition and connotation to the word “nation” (ἔθνος). Ironically, the plural form often appears to carry a narrower connotation than the singular and may be used pejoratively to refer to “outsiders,” “foreigners,” or even “pagans.”<sup>70</sup> James LeGrande notes that “Israel and the nations” is analogous in connotation to “Greeks and barbarians.”<sup>71</sup> Hultgren, however, lists some citations in ancient Greek in which the plural does not carry such a pejorative connotation. The Greek writer Herodotus (5<sup>th</sup> century BC) described the several political divisions of Greeks as “the Greek nations.” The Greek historian Appian (about AD 95) used the plural to refer without prejudice to “all the provinces.”<sup>72</sup> Nils Dahl noted that apocalyptic texts like Matt 25:31–46 tend to speak more globally when using ἔθνη.<sup>73</sup> F. W. Beare argued on the basis of God’s fairness that God would not have two distinct criteria of judgment—one for the Gentiles and another for the Jews.<sup>74</sup> All this notwithstanding, the connotation Matthew intended, whether Matthew used “all the nations” in 25:32 to connote a group foreign to his own (i.e., “non-Jews” or “non-Christians”) or whether he used the phrase to include all people

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<sup>70</sup> Compare the narrowing force of turning the word “authority” into “authorities”. The former connotes the position of having the “say so” in a general sense and can be used in almost any relationship where such a “say so” is in play. The latter almost always refers to political entities. The pejorative connotation of ἔθνος in the plural form τὰ ἔθνη is recognized in *Thayer’s* (1972); *LS* (1976); and *BAGD* (1979). The latter’s comment is most telling, “Somewhat. the word has the connotation of relig. and moral inferiority which was taken for granted by the Jews....”

<sup>71</sup> James LeGrande, *The Earliest Christian Mission to ‘All Nations’: In the Light of Matthew’s Gospel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 174.

<sup>72</sup> Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*, 312. The texts referred to are Herodotus, *Hist.* 9.106 and Appian, *Bell. Civ.* 2.106.

<sup>73</sup> Nils Dahl, “Nations in the New Testament,” in *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World: Essays in Honour of Harry Sawyerr*, ed. M. E. Glasswell and E. W. Fasholé-Luke (London: SPCK, 1974), 54–68, 66.

<sup>74</sup> F. W. Beare, thinks that God’s fairness of judgment would not suggest that God should have one criterion of judgment for Jews and another for Gentiles. *The Gospel According to Matthew* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 493.

groups of the world, is a question that is best addressed within the context of this passage and Matthew's habitual use of this word in the balance of his Gospel.

Of the 17 times a noun form of ἔθνος is used in Matthew, all but two are in the plural. Matthew uses the singular in a non-pejorative sense to refer to the church in 21:43 which contrasts the Jews or the chief priests "to a nation" (ἔθνεϊ) that will produce the kingdom's fruit. This is the only clear use of ἔθνος in Matthew's Gospel in any form which does not carry the connotation of "foreign" in relation to the person using the phrase. However, if the use of ἔθνος in 21:43 is seen in its relation to the Jews, then the connotation of "foreign" is retained. The other use of the singular is in the phrase "nation will rise against nation" (ἔθνος ἐπί ἔθνος, 24:7). While this phrase seems to be inclusive of Jews and Gentiles, one wonders whether in Matthew's Gospel it was inclusive of Christians. Even this use of ἔθνος may carry a connotation of associational distance or distinction from the Christians.

All other appearances of ἔθνος in Matthew are in the plural form. Of these, three use quotations from the Old Testament and so "Gentiles" is the most frequent translation found in English Bibles (4:15; 12:18, 21). Most of Matthew's other uses of the plural also refer to non-Jews and are slightly derogatory (6:32; 10:5, 18; 20:19, 25).<sup>75</sup> Excluding 25:32 for the time being, the three remaining uses of the word are in the Olivet Discourse and the Great Commission. Most commentators agree that the plural "nations" in these passages may refer not only to Gentile groups but to the Jews as well. It must be noted, however, that in each case the "nations" are outsiders or foreign to the circle of Jesus' disciples. The disciples will be hated "by all the nations" (24:9). The disciples will

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<sup>75</sup> Cope, "Matthew XXV:31-46," 37.



proclaim the good news of the kingdom as a testimony “to all the nations” (24:14).

Finally, the disciples are to make disciples of “all the nations” (28:19).

In conclusion, though Matthew’s tendency to supply ἔθνος/ἔθνη with the connotation of “foreign” or “alien” is a factor, a complete review of this issue cannot confine itself to lexical considerations. James Barr’s insight is relevant here. New Testament interpretation should not assume that the expressions of the texts may be understood by weighing the words as individual bearers of meaning.

Theological thought of the type found in the NT has its characteristic linguistic expression not in the word individually but in the word-combination or sentence. The degree to which the individual word can be related directly to the theological thought depends considerably on the degree to which the word becomes a technical term.<sup>76</sup>

Commentators remain divided on whether “nations” in Matthew’s Gospel has crystallized into such a technical term. Many commentators find thematic, theological, ethical, or homiletical reasons for over-ruling the lexical implication in favor of an interpretation which considers more than Matthew’s habitual use of one word group. R. Maddox has even argued that 25:32 refers only to Christian ministers who will be judged for faithfulness in carrying out their ministry of benevolence. Maddox’s argument is based on 25:44 which shows the condemned asking the Son of Man when they did not “minister” (διηκονήσαμεν) to him.<sup>77</sup> Davies and Allison list six different other interpretations of the identity of the “nations” in 25:32. Their list displays each view with its supporters:<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1961), 233.

<sup>77</sup> R. Maddox, “Who Are the ‘Sheep’ and the ‘Goats’?” *AusBr* 13 (1965): 19–28.

<sup>78</sup> Davies and Allison prefer “all humanity.” *Matthew*, III, 422.

1. **All non-Jews:** R. Walker
2. **All non-Christians:** John Heylyn, Alford, Olshausen, F. C. Burkitt, T. W. Manson, G. E. Ladd, Friedrich, Gray, Stanton
3. **All Gentiles who are not Christians:** B. Weiss, A. Loisy, J. Cope, Hare, Court, Lambrecht, Harrington
4. **All Christians:** Prosper of Aquitaine, Caesarius of Arles, H. Grotius, H. A. W. Meyer, Plummer, Wellhausen, Maddox, V. P. Furnish, U. Wilckens
5. **Christians alive when Christ returns:** Daniel van Breen
6. **All humanity:** Jerome, Augustine, Chrysostom, Bonaventure, Erasmus, Zwingli, Matthew Henry, Bengel, Schlatter, J. Weiss, McNeile, Schniewind, Bornkamm, C. E. B. Cranfield, Bonnard, Kümmel, Frankemölle, Beare, Catchpole, Gundry, Sand, Via, Schnackenburg, Hare, Gnilka, K. Weber

### **Intertextual Considerations—Other Texts Which Affect the Interpretation**

The relationship which Matt 25:31–46 sustains to texts outside of Matthew’s Gospel is an issue that has also affected the interpretation of the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats. Few dispute that Matthew adopted and adapted written and oral sources in his composition of his Gospel. The “Two-Source Theory” is the most broadly recognized explanation for Matthew’s composition. Among the New Testament books, Matthew’s Gospel contains one of the highest concentrations of quotations and allusions from the Old Testament—over 100.<sup>79</sup> That Matthew used other texts is virtually certain. The hermeneutical value of identifying these texts (or “intertexts”) and the ways Matthew used them is a more complicated matter over which disagreements remain.

Pre-modern commentators, motivated by a belief in the inspiration of the Bible, tended to harmonize Matt 25:31–46 with the balance of the canon in order to discover God’s will concerning doctrine or Christian duty. Modern historical-critical exegetes, who are often focused upon Matthew’s intended meaning, tend to compare Matt 25:31–

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<sup>79</sup> Bacon, *Studies in Matthew*, 470.

46 only with those texts which Matthew could have consciously invoked or which may reflect prevalent lines of thought in Matthew's day which could have influenced Matthew. Some historical-critical exegetes compare Matthew's writing to the exegetical habits of other ancient Jews and Christians in order to gain insight into the way Matthew expressed himself through his interaction with other texts. In post-modern circles, a reader-centered hermeneutic has arisen which claims Matthew may be interpreted in the light of any intertext which displays any number of imaginable relations to Matthew's text—whether Matthew could have even been personally influenced by the intertext or not. Before the intertexts identified by each of these schools may be seen in clear context, a further word about the relative relevance of these several schools of thought is in order.

#### The Difference between Diachronic and Synchronic Intertexts

A complete review of the origin of intertextuality as a literary issue would wander too far a field from the narrow focus of the current study.<sup>80</sup> A brief word about its initial motivation and subsequent development, however, is useful.<sup>81</sup> Originally, intertextuality was a term coined by the French literary theorist Julia Kristeva during the Parisian cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>82</sup> Kristeva argued that the authoritative claims which historicists and others make for their interpretations of texts are unfounded because

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<sup>80</sup> A very engaging review from a theorist who is sympathetic to the poststructural and postmodern tendencies of intertextuality can be seen in Graham Allen, *Intertextuality: The New Critical Idiom* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>81</sup> This review of intertextuality is greatly indebted to Thomas R. Hatina, "Intertextuality and Historical Criticism in New Testament Studies: Is There a Relationship?" *Biblical Interpretation* 7 1(1999): 24–43; Ulrich Luz, "Intertexts in the Gospel of Matthew," *Harvard Theological Review* 97 (2004): 119–34; Richard Hays (lecture given in an "Integrative Seminar" for Ph.D. students at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, NC in the spring of 2007).

<sup>82</sup> J. Kristeva, "Bakhtine, le mot, le dialogue et le roman," *Critique* 33 (1967): 438–65.

readers have a right and obligation to read for themselves. Kristeva used the term “intertextuality” to describe her belief that every text is made up of bits and pieces of other texts and cultural symbols and that the symbolic force of each of these bits and pieces should not be lost when they are assimilated onto one page.<sup>83</sup> According to Kristeva, each text is in reality a “permutation of texts, an intertextuality” so that the several utterances that are taken from the other texts which make up the current one “intersect and neutralize one another.”<sup>84</sup> Roland Barthes is credited for emphasizing and expanding the argument that the meaning lies not in the author’s intended reconfiguration of the intertexts but in the reader’s ability to reassemble them into an interpretation. This ability is rooted in the assumption that intertexts from the author’s culture as well as intertexts from the reader’s culture all play a part in supplying any passage in which they may be recognized with a network of meaning.<sup>85</sup> The kind of intertextuality that Kristeva and Barthes promoted may be called “synchronic intertextuality” because of its tendency to read passages in the light of intertexts regardless of whether those intertexts preceded or followed the passage historically. The author’s intentional use of the intertexts is not the major concern in synchronic intertextuality.

On the surface, synchronic intertextuality operates much like pre-modern biblical interpretation. In pre-modern interpretation Bible passages from an earlier biblical author

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<sup>83</sup> Hayden White writes of “archetypal story forms” drawn from culture which authors use as patterns for their compositions. Kristeva’s view would add that readers use these as analogies of interpretation as well. Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1978), 58 as summarized by Daniel Boyarin in *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1990), 86.

<sup>84</sup> J. Kristeva, “The Bounded Text,” in *Desire Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia, 1980), 36-63, here 36, as cited by Hatina, “Intertextuality,” 33.

<sup>85</sup> Hatina, “Intertextuality,” 34; Luz, “Intertexts,” 19–20.

are often read in the light of intertexts from later authors whether or not the earlier author could have known the later intertexts by which his writing is interpreted. A great ideological distinction, however, separates post-modern synchronic intertextuality from pre-modern biblical interpretation. Post-modern synchronic intertextuality is not as concerned with authorial intention as the pre-modern commentators were. Pre-modern interpretations of the Bible are built upon the idea that the ultimate Author of the Bible is God. The meaning which God intended to convey through His inspired word is the interest of pre-modern interpretation. Another distinction lies in the fact that synchronic intertextuality was designed to accommodate a distrust of authoritative interpretations. Pre-modern biblical interpretation often displays a confident deference to ecclesiastical authorities, traditions, and creeds. Finally, in synchronic intertextual studies, the intertexts upon which a reader may draw are virtually innumerable. Pre-modern biblical commentators characteristically privilege certain texts above others. Biblical texts are read primarily in the light of each other with some attention to the prior interpretations and doctrinal insights which have been accepted by the believing community. As demonstrated above, some pre-moderns such as Origen, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas incorporated insights from philosophy, history, science, and the arts as part of the data against which biblical texts should be interpreted regardless of the biblical author's knowledge of such insights. This notwithstanding, pre-modern biblical interpretation is noticeably distinct from Kristeva's and Barthes' synchronic intertextuality both in its interest in authorial intention, its respect for authority, and in its privileging of texts.

Some literary theorists who disregard Kristeva's "synchronic" approach to intertextuality have adopted the term "intertextuality" but use it in a "diachronic" way—

to describe the conscious adoption and reapplication of earlier texts by later authors.

Gerard Genette developed a complete nomenclature to describe the relationships which exist between texts and the quotations, allusions, and plagiarisms they incorporate.<sup>86</sup>

Many other scholars who write primarily about the Bible also departed from Kristeva's ideological foundation in the use of intertextuality.<sup>87</sup> Because the term "intertextuality" had become so fluid – fluid enough to now be used by historians who were completely at odds with the ideology Kristeva hoped to promote in coining the term—Kristeva dropped the term as a description of her own method and began to call her approach "transposition."<sup>88</sup>

Other biblical scholars have found a middle ground between the school of thought which is focused primarily on authorial intention and the post-modern indifference for authorial intention which characterized Kristeva and Barthes. Richard Hays' work on the letters of Paul recognizes five places in which the hermeneutical event happens (with

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<sup>86</sup> Gerard Genette, *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 7–16. These terms are concisely given by Luz, "Intertexts," 3–4. Luz lists as another theorist who has developed criteria for weighing the influence of one text upon another Manfred Pfister, "Konzepte der Intertextualität," in *Intertextualität. Formen, Funktionen*, eds., Ulrich Broich and Manfred Pfister, *Anglistische Falstudien* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1985), 25–30.

<sup>87</sup> This list comes from Hatina's "Intertextuality and Historical Criticism," 28–29; K. Heim, "The Perfect King of Psalm 72: An Intertextual Enquiry," in *The Lord's Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts*, ed. P. E. Satterthwaite, R. S. Hess and G. J. Wenham (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), 223–48; D. N. Fewell, ed., *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster, 1992); S. C. Keesmat, "Exodus and the Intertextual Transformation of Tradition in Romans 8.14–30," *JSNT* 54 (1994): 29–56; W. S. Kurz, "Intertextual Use of Sirach 48.1–16 in Plotting Luke–Acts," in *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel*, ed. C. A. Evans and W. R. Stegner, *JSNTSup* no. 104 (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1994): 308–24; R. B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale, 1989); D. E. Aune, "Intertextuality and the Genre of Apocalypse," in *SBL 1991 Seminar Papers*, ed. E. H. Lovering, Jr. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991); R. L. Brawley, "An absent Complement and Intertextuality in John 19:28–29," *JBL* 112 (1993): 427–43; W. Weren, "Psalm 2 in Luke–Acts: An Intertextual Study," in *Intertextuality in Biblical Writings: Essays in Honour of Bas van Israel*, ed. S. Draisma (Kampen: Kok, 1989), 189–203.

<sup>88</sup> One wonders if Kristeva took offence over the historians' freedom to re-interpret her term in the light of their own cultural intertexts.

continuity). These include the author, the original audiences, the texts, the modern readers, and the communities of interpretation.<sup>89</sup> Recently, Hays has promoted the possibility that moderns may adopt something like the interpretive practices of the pre-moderns with a trust that God will guide readers in the selection and application of intertexts by their “imagination” toward grace. Hays calls this a “hermeneutic of trust.”<sup>90</sup> Ulrich Luz is another scholar who uses a modified form of intertextuality. Luz believes that the effective ways texts have influenced communities of faith provide interpretations which in turn may be seen as intertexts to the original biblical passage. Luz expresses this perspective most concisely through Alfred Schindler’s words, “The polyphonic echo of the centuries belongs to the Bible as an element of itself.”<sup>91</sup>

The intertexts discussed below will be drawn from three categories: canonical intertexts, ancient extra-canonical intertexts, and more recent intertexts.<sup>92</sup>

### Canonical Intertexts

Many commentators believe that Matthew crafted his Judgment of the Sheep and Goats by assimilating words and images from Jewish Scriptures, from written and oral Christian traditions, as well as from other Jewish apocalyptic texts. Jean Claude Ingelaere

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<sup>89</sup> Hays, *Echoes*, 25–29.

<sup>90</sup> Hays, “Integrative Seminar” at SEBTS, 2007.

<sup>91</sup> Ulrich Luz, “Reflections on the Appropriate Interpretation of New Testament Texts” in *Studies in Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 265–89, 277, citing Alfred Schindler, “Vor- und Nachteil der Kirchengeschichte für das Verständnis der Bibel heute,” *Reformatio* 30 (1981): 261–77, here 265.

<sup>92</sup> Though these three categories respectively reflect in a rough fashion the special interests of pre-modern, modern, and postmodern commentators, the discussion that follows will not emphasize this point. It may only be pointed out, that many commentators still either limit their intertextual references to canonical intertexts or privilege the canonical intertexts in some way. The isolation of the canonical intertexts from all the non-canonical intertexts is a convenient way of displaying the data so that these commentators may be in the future evaluated on their own terms.

calls Matt 25:31–46 an “anthology of favored themes” in Matthew. The clearest intertexts which Ingelaere identifies for these themes include both biblical and extra-biblical texts.<sup>93</sup> Though Matt 25:31–46 may be read in the light of canonical and non-canonical intertexts, it must be acknowledged that Matthew would not have been unconscious of the difference between the sacred status of the Jewish Scriptures and other books. Long before Matthew wrote, the scribal tradition among the Jewish people had already recognized a very meaningful difference between the books which they called “Scripture” (כתובים) and other books.<sup>94</sup> Modern readers should also take into account the “marked differences” of style and theme which distinguish the extra-canonical Jewish apocalypses from the Scriptures of the Jews.<sup>95</sup> In fact, many commentators who write from a traditional Christian perspective still privilege the biblical intertexts as guides for understanding Matthew. An initial review of intertexts which are drawn primarily from biblical sources is therefore in order.

Robert Gundry thinks Matt 25:31–46 is an eschatological application of Isa 58:7 and should be seen in the light of Isaiah’s familial ethic. According to Gundry, Isa 58:7 promotes the feeding, housing, and clothing of relatives. It is not broadly humanitarian. This perspective leads Gundry to endorse other arguments which portray the “least” of Jesus “brothers” (25:40) as Christian brothers or missionaries.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Jean Claude Ingelaere, “La ‘Parabole’ du jugement dernier,” *Revue d’histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 50 (1970) 23–60, here 26–29. These include Jesus’ coming in *glory*, Dan 7:13; with *angels*, Zech 14:5; *throne of glory*, Ezek 1:4 and Enoch 62.2; the *assembling* of the nations, rabbinic material and Enoch again; and *judging* the nations, Enoch 61.6–63:12.

<sup>94</sup> Daniel Patte, *Early Jewish Hermeneutic in Palestine* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), 21.

<sup>95</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish & Christian Apocalypses*, NovTSup, no. 93 (Boston: Brill, 1998), 81.

<sup>96</sup> Gundry, *Matthew*, 513–14. Gundry refers to Matt 25:31–46 as a “targum” of Isa 58:7.



John P. Heil suggests Ezekiel 34 as a most illuminating intertext with quite a different result. In Ezek 34:17–21 God warns that he will judge “between one sheep and another, between the rams and the male goats” (34:17), “between the fat sheep and the lean sheep” (34:20), because they “push with the side and with the shoulder, and thrust at all the weak” with their horns (34:21). Though Heil acknowledges that Ezekiel had in mind the competing members of the children of Israel, Heil believes Matt 25:31–46 extends the metaphor so that now the sheep includes not only the people of Israel (Matt 2:6; 9:36; 10:6; 15:24), the disciples (10:16), or even believers only (18:12–14), but should include the righteous among all peoples including Gentiles (25:32).<sup>97</sup>

Many dispensationalists use Revelation 19–20 as an intertext in order to identify the timing and participants of Matthew’s Judgment of the Sheep and Goats. Dispensationalists expect the events listed in Revelation 19–20 to happen sequentially. Such a reading concludes that the Son of Man will occupy his glorious throne one thousand years before the great white throne judgment (20:4–15). This leads dispensationalists to conclude that the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats is distinct from the Great White Throne Judgment and will occur just prior to these 1,000 years at the close of the Great Tribulation. Pond believes Matt 25:31–46 is best reconciled to the book of Revelation if the phrase “all the nations” in Matt 25:32 represents the Gentiles who live through the Tribulation and who will be judged for their treatment of the 144,000 Jewish witnesses of Rev 7:1–8.<sup>98</sup> This interpretation is bolstered by Pond’s

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<sup>97</sup> John P. Heil, “Ezekiel 34 and the Narrative Strategy of the Shepherd and Sheep Metaphor in Matthew,” *CBQ* 55 (1993): 698–708, 698–99, 705.

<sup>98</sup> Eugene W. Pond, “Who Are ‘the Least’ of Jesus’ Brothers in Matthew 25:40?” *BibSac* 159 (2001): 436–48; “Who Are the Sheep and Goats in Matthew 25:31–46?” *BibSac* 159 (2002): 288–301; and “The Background and Timing of the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats,” *BibSac* 159 (2002) 201–20. John R. Walvoord, “Christ’s Olivet Discourse on the End of the Age: The Judgment of the Gentiles,” *BibSac*

intertextual word study of the important term “nations” (ἔθνη) in Matt 25:32. According to Pond, of the 105 times “nations” (ἔθνη) is used in the New Testament outside of the Synoptics, it consistently refers to non-Jewish peoples with only few exceptions.<sup>99</sup>

Many other commentators use various Old Testament texts which promote generosity and benevolence to support their belief that Matt 25:31–46 teaches that charity and general benevolence will be the criteria in the final judgment. Other texts which promote neighborly love or certain acts of charity are also cited by modern writers as part of a broader argument for this view. Catchpole notes that Ezek 18:7, 16 promises life to those who feed and clothe the needy. Job pleads for God’s favor based on his charity toward the orphans, the naked, the needy, the hungry, and the alien who needed housing (Job 31:16–20, 31–32.)<sup>100</sup> Arland Hultgren categorizes many similar texts according to the way each text promotes the six acts of charity listed in Matt 25:35–36.<sup>101</sup> Some commentators use the parable of the “Good Samaritan” (Luke 10:30–37) to prove that Jesus would not have commended the narrow application of charity which Gundry suggests is operative in Matt 25:31–46.<sup>102</sup>

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129 (1972): 307–15; Leon J. Wood, *The Bible & Future Events* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 152; John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody, 1974), 202; Dwight J. Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 418–19; and Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study in Matthew* (Portland: Multnomah, 1980), 288–89. Toussaint’s opinion is cited here indirectly from David L. Turner, “The Gospel of Matthew,” in *The Gospel of Matthew. The Gospel of Mark*, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, vol. 11, 1–389 (Carol Spring: Tyndale, 2005), 330.

<sup>99</sup> Pond cites 26 texts which use τὰ ἔθνη to contrast Jews with Gentiles (whether or not the Gentiles are believers), 47 texts in which τὰ ἔθνη refers to non-Jews as targets of Paul’s ministry, and 21 texts in which τὰ ἔθνη refers to the nations or peoples of the world who oppose God or are yet without Him but who will be ruled by Him. Pond, “Who Are the Sheep,” 294–97.

<sup>100</sup> D. R. Catchpole, “The Poor on Earth,” 390.

<sup>101</sup> Arland Hultren, “The Final Judgment,” 314–17.

<sup>102</sup> Catchpole, “The Poor on Earth,” 392.

On the other hand, many commentators cite biblical intertexts in support of the idea that the criterion at play in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats is not broadly humanitarian but is more narrowly focused.<sup>103</sup> One line of argument attempts to explain the Son of Man's close identity with the "least" in Matt 25:40, 45 by comparing these verses to the close connection seen between Christ and his followers elsewhere in the New Testament (Mark 13:13; John 15:5, 18–21; Acts 9:4, 5; 22:7; 26:14, 15; 2 Cor 1:5, 10; Gal 2:20; 6:17; and Rev 12:4, 13).<sup>104</sup> Another line of argument is based on the early designation of Christians as the "poor" (Gal 2:10; Rom 15:26).<sup>105</sup> Ramsey Michaels thinks the acts of charity listed in Matt 25:35–36 were expected to help the missionaries in their hardships which are listed elsewhere in the New Testament (1 Cor 4:10–11; 2 Cor 11:23–29). Michaels also enlists Gal 6:6 as support: "Let him who is instructed in the word share with his instructor in all good things." Michaels also cites the actions of the Philippian jailor who washed the stripes of Paul and Silas, and who fed and clothed them. According to Michaels, the Philippian jailor is an example of how a Gentile can gain a standing before the Son of Man by caring for Christian missionaries (Acts 16:33–34.)<sup>106</sup> Another list of texts used to support this narrower criterion of judgment are those from the Old Testament which predict that God will judge the "nations" (גוֹיִם—"Gentiles")

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<sup>103</sup> Stephen C. Barton describes the ethic of John's Gospel as "centripetal love" – a kind of sectarian love that was overwhelmingly pessimistic concerning relations with the outside world. "Early Christianity and the Sociology of the Sect," in *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies*, ed. Francis Watson (London: SCM, 1993), 140–62, here 146–47.

<sup>104</sup> William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 889.

<sup>105</sup> Shuyler Brown, "Faith, the Poor and the Gentiles: A Tradition-Historical Reflection on Matthew 25:31–46," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 6 (1990): 171–81, here 173.

<sup>106</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, "Apostolic Hardships and Righteous Gentiles," *JBL* 84 (1965): 27–37, 29, 30, 33.

because of their mistreatment of the Jews. These intertexts may be used in support of the dispensational interpretation described above, or they may be used in tandem with the belief that the church is now the covenanted people of God and that God will judge the world based on its current reception of Christians and their message (Joel 3:11; Isa 2:4; Dan 7:13, 14, 17–18, 21–22; Zech 14:1–5).

The “angels” mentioned in Matt 25:31 which come with the Son of Man at the time of the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats have been compared to the “holy ones” which Zechariah says will accompany the LORD in the great eschatological day when God comes to the Mount of Olives to destroy the nations encamped against Jerusalem (Zech 14:1–5). Sim invokes several New Testament texts which have angels accompanying Jesus upon his return (1 Thess 3:13; 2 Thess 1:7; Jude 14–15).<sup>107</sup> The belief that all the nations of the world are aligned with various angelic powers (Deut 33:2, LXX) is compatible with the idea that angels may also be recipients of divine judgment here. The description of the punishment as “eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt 25:41; cf. Mark 9:43; Jude 7) may endorse this view. Then again, other texts in Matthew suggest that righteous people will take on the status of angels in the new age (5:8; 18:10).<sup>108</sup>

The eternal nature of the punishment described in 25:41 has been challenged by an intertextual comparison of all biblical texts which carry similar wording. According to Edward Fudge, the consistent biblical portrayal of God’s punishment against the wicked involves relative degrees of painful ordeals in the process of eventual annihilation (Ps

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<sup>107</sup> Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 76.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

2:9; Mal 4:3; Ps 37:20; 1:4; 58:8; Isa 1:31; 33:12; Ps 68:2; 73:20). Fudge believes the “fire” and “worms” of Isa 66:24 was originally associated with the corpses, not the spirits, of the condemned, but that the apocryphal book of Judith (16:17) under Gentile influence transformed this imagery into the conscious suffering of people in an afterlife. The passage in Jdt 16:7 says that God will “put fire and worms in their flesh. And they shall weep and feel their pain forever.” Because no New Testament text is as graphically clear about this as is Judith, Fudge thinks the “eternal fire” mentioned in Matt 25:31–46 and elsewhere in the New Testament should connote the certainty and finality of the punishment rather than the conscious eternal pain of the condemned.<sup>109</sup> David Sim, on the other hand, lists three passages that he believes do attest that the wicked will burn forever as punishment (Mark 9:43, 45, 47–8; Jud 7; Jas 5:3).<sup>110</sup> To these may be added the even clearer statements of Rev 14:10–11 and 20:15, “And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night....”

#### Ancient Extra-Canonical Intertexts

The ancient extra-canonical intertexts suggested for Matt 25:31–46 have been drawn from Jewish, Christian, and other sources. Though difficulties in dating some of these intertexts challenge their diachronic influence on Matthew’s intention, the discussion which follows will give only slight attention to the dating of these intertexts. In all cases of similarity between Matthew and other ancient intertexts, only four possible explanations can be given: (1) coincidence, (2) the intertext was influenced by Matthew, (3) Matthew was influenced by the intertext, or (4) both Matthew and the intertext draw

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<sup>109</sup> Edward Fudge, “The Final End of the Wicked,” *JETS* 27 (1984): 325–34, here 326–27.

<sup>110</sup> Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 133–34.

upon a common tradition or cultural symbol.<sup>111</sup> The goal of this section is not to decide which explanation in every case is correct, but only to point out some of the more significant intertexts which have influenced the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46. For convenience, the intertexts will be grouped according to the topics of interpretation for which the intertexts suggest relevance.

Matthew's "Son of Man" who comes to judge the nations (Matt 24:3; 29–31; 25:31) is often compared to several eschatological figures which appear in extra-canonical judgment scenes. Both Matthew's Gospel and 1 Enoch 62–63 present the "Son of Man" as the eschatological judge. Catchpole, lists as many as twelve similarities between these texts and only two differences (Table 5, page 151). This high level of similarity leads Catchpole to conclude that the two come from "similar patterns of thought" even if there were no direct dependence between the texts.<sup>112</sup>

Many commentators agree with Catchpole that the similarity is due merely to a common familiarity with the same apocalyptic traditions.<sup>113</sup> Fewer think Matthew must have known the 1 Enoch passage.<sup>114</sup> Gundry argues that the traditional statements of Jesus and Old Testament parallels were more likely the source of Matthew's vocabulary

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<sup>111</sup> William Stegner made this point in reference to rabbinic influence on the New Testament. William Stegner, *Narrative Theology in Early Jewish Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster, 1989), 9.

<sup>112</sup> Catchpole, "The Poor on Earth," 379–82.

<sup>113</sup> Sim's argument is based on the "cluster of motifs" in 1 Enoch comprising the "sheep and goats" mentioned in Enoch's "Animal Apocalypse," the use of "Son of Man," "throne of Glory," and the criteria of judgment in which the judge identifies with the "righteous" against those who offended them, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 123–24. Similar conclusions are expressed by Ulrich Luz, "The Son of Man in Matthew: Heavenly Judge or Human Christ?" in *Studies in Matthew*, trans. Rosemary Selle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 97–112, 97, 101; Donahue, "The 'Parable of the Sheep and Goats,'" 10;

<sup>114</sup> Friedrich, *Gott im Bruder?* 150–64. Johannes Theisohn, *Der Auserwählte Richter*, StUNT no. 12 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974), 158–200. Robinson, "The 'Parable' of the Sheep," 228.

and imagery than anything in 1 Enoch.<sup>115</sup> The question is complicated by the fact that 1 Enoch is a compilation of several documents which appear to be written in different centuries and that the date and provenance of the “Similitudes” (chapters 37–71) which contains this judgment scene is still a matter of dispute.<sup>116</sup> In any case, Matthew and 1 Enoch are the only ancient sources which speak of the “Son of Man” both as a coming judge and as sitting on a “throne of glory” (1 Enoch 61.8; 62.2–3; 69.29; Matt 19:28; 25:31.)<sup>117</sup> The exact relation of these two texts is an ongoing debate.

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<sup>115</sup> Gundry, *Matthew*, 516.

<sup>116</sup> Donahue lists the following voices in the debate, “‘Parable,’” 10: J. Milik argues a date as late as 270 A.D. *The Books of Enoch: Aramaic Fragments of Qumran Cave 4* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976,) 89–107, 298–317. Many disagree: J. Fitzmyer, “Implications of the New Enoch Literature from Qumran,” *TS* 38 (1977): 322–45; J. C. Greenfield and M. E. Stone, “The Enochic Pentateuch and the Date of the Similitudes,” *HTR* 70 (1977): 51–65; G. Nickelsburg thinks a date around the turn of the era is reasonable, *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 221–22. Donahue recommends for a review of 1 Enoch’s possible contacts with Matthew D. Suter, *Tradition and Composition in the Parables of Enoch* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), 23–31. To these may be added Mark Adam Elliot’s argument for a pre-Christian origin of 1 Enoch, *The Survivors of Israel: A Reconsideration of the Theology of Pre-Christian Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 492 as well as the “emerging consensus within Similitudes scholarship” which supports a pre-Christian provenance. Elliot lists F.H. Borsch, “Further Reflections on ‘the Son of Man’: The Origins and Development of the Title,” in *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 130–44; M. Black, “The Messianism of the Parables of Enoch: Their Date and Contribution to Christological Origins,” in *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism*, 145–68; and J. C. VanderKam, “Righteous One, Messiah, Chosen One, and the Son of Man in 1 Enoch 37–71,” in *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Christianity*, 169–91. E. Isaac thinks the Similitudes were probably written before the end of the first Christian century in Judea, “1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch (Second Century B.C.–First Century A.D.): A New Translation and Introduction,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigraph: Volume 1, Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 5–92, here 9–10. Michael Stone accepts an early date and a Jewish provenance, “Apocalyptic Literature,” in *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran Sectarian Writings, Philo, Josephus*, ed. Michael Stone, *Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum*, section 2, *The Literature of the Jewish People in the Period of the Second Temple and the Talmud* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 383–442, here 398–400.

<sup>117</sup> Sim points out that John 5:27 lacks the “throne of glory.” The Testament of Abraham describes Abel as sitting on a throne of glory and acting as the final judge (chapters 12–13). Sim suggests this as a possible source because Abel was the son of “Adam” (which in Hebrew is a synonym for “mankind”). Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 36, 119–120.

Table 5: Catchpole's Comparison of Matt 25:31–46 and 1 Enoch 62–63<sup>118</sup>

Similarities	Differences
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The “throne of glory.”</li> <li>2. Enthronement results in punishment.</li> <li>3. An assemblage of persons from all over the world.</li> <li>4. The whole is divided into two groups—one labeled “the righteous.”</li> <li>5. An eternal separation of the two groups.</li> <li>6. The righteous will enjoy the Son of man’s heavenly presence.</li> <li>7. The Son of man is the judge.</li> <li>8. Still God is the ultimate judge (Son of man his agent.)</li> <li>9. Angels are active.</li> <li>10. Both scenes ‘hinge on the idea of recognition.’</li> <li>11. There is an equivalence of those who suffer and the one who judges.</li> <li>12. The same criteria: the manner in which those being judged have treated those with whom the judge associates himself.”</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. 1 Enoch 62–63 is a judgment against “the kings and the mighty and the exalted and those who dwell on the earth.” Matthew’s judgment is against “all the nations.”</li> <li>2. 1 Enoch’s judgment is against active and aggressive persecution, while Matthew’s is against the absence of active beneficence.</li> </ol>

One of the chief points of interpretation that is affected by this debate is the nature of the Son of Man’s alignment with the “least.” How should this connection be described? Explanations range from H. Wheeler Robinson’s psychological theory of “corporate personality” and S. Mowinckel’s theory of “representative unity” in religious leaders to the political or ethical role that kings play in representing their realms.<sup>119</sup> The representative role of patron deities in Near Eastern mythology has also been suggested as an analogy (Daniel 10’s “Prince of Persia” and “Prince of Greece”). Similar to this is

<sup>118</sup> Catchpole, “The Poor on Earth,” 379–82.

<sup>119</sup> H. Wheeler Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); S. Mowinckel, *He that Cometh*, trans. G. W. Anderson (Nashville: Abingdon, 1955), 381. John J. Collins, “The Heavenly Representative: The ‘Son of Man’ in the Similitudes of Enoch,” in *Ideal Figures in Ancient Judaism: Profiles and Paradigms*, ed. John J. Collins and George W. E. Nickelsburg (Chico: Scholars, 1989), 11-134, here 114.



Eliade's mythological theory of the *Doppelgänger*, who in mythological thinking is more real and permanent than its earthly counterpart and prior to it in the order of being.<sup>120</sup> Nickelsburg and others argue that 1 Enoch's "Son of Man" probably inherited its role from a stream of Jewish interpretations which combined the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 52–53 with the representative role of the Son of Man in Daniel 7 to produce a righteous representative figure who would suffer, die, and be exalted.<sup>121</sup> Morna Hooker specifies on the basis of 1 Enoch 60:10 and 71:14 that the "Son of Man" in 1 Enoch 62–63 refers to the antediluvian Enoch.<sup>122</sup> Mark Elliot agrees.<sup>123</sup> Collins' review of the entire debate, however, leaves him with the opinion that the Son of Man in the Similitudes of 1 Enoch is the projection of one particular Jewish ideal of righteousness onto a heavenly and mythological figure.<sup>124</sup> Collins argues that Christians probably applied a similar description to Jesus based on their own assimilation of Isaiah and Daniel, apart from the influence of other Jewish traditions. In fact, Collins suggests that this tradition's presence in 1 Enoch 37–71 may be due to a Jewish reaction against the Christian use of this theme.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Pantheon, 1954), 3–6, 116, cited by Collins "Heavenly Representative," 114.

<sup>121</sup> G. W. Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality and Eternal Life*, Harvard Theological Studies, no. 26 (Cambridge: Harvard, 1972), 70–78; Joachim Jeremias, "*pais theou*," in *TDNT*, vol. 5, 687–88. Other sources are cited in Collins, "Heavenly Representative," 130, n. 31.

<sup>122</sup> Morna Hooker, *The Son of Man in Mark* (Montreal: McGill, 1967), cited by Collins, *ibid.*, 130, n. 50.

<sup>123</sup> Mark Adam Elliot, *The Survivors of Israel: A Reconsideration of the Theology of Pre-Christian Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 491. Elliot believes "Son of Man" in 1 Enoch 60:10 is a circumlocution for "man" in general in the same way the phrase is used to refer to Ezekiel in his prophecy.

<sup>124</sup> Collins, "Heavenly Representative," 111–12.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 125–26.

Several descriptions of an eschatological figure who comes to relieve the righteous at the end of the age are given among other intertexts. The similarity of these figures to the Christian understanding of Jesus is a question often discussed in the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46. Sim notices that the figure is often God (*1 Enoch* 1:3–9; 90:15–19; *Testament of Moses* 10:3–7), but is sometimes the messiah who is variously described in human terms (*Psalms of Solomon* 17) or as supernatural (2 Baruch and 4 Ezra).<sup>126</sup> Other descriptions of the eschatological judge are also varied. And again, God is the Judge in the majority of the texts (*1 Enoch* 1:7–9; 90:2–27; 91:7; 100:4; 2 *Enoch* 66.6; 2 *Baruch* 5.2; 13.8; *Apocalypse of Abraham* 31.1–8; *Testament of Levi* 4.1; *Testament of Benjamin* 10.9; Jub 23.31; Rev 20:11–15; *Sibylline Oracles* 3.741–43; 5.110.) Other figures include the messiah (*Pss. Sol.* 17.26–46) sometimes specified as Davidic (Isa 11 and 4Q161), Melchizedek (a pseudonym for Michael, 11QMelch), the holy angels (*1 Enoch* 91:15), a “Righteous One” (*1 Enoch* 38.2; 53.6), and the righteous ones (though their role is not fully delineated, *1 Enoch* 95.3; 96.1; *Testament of Abraham* 13.6).<sup>127</sup>

Questions about the timing of the judgments in Matthew are also influenced by ancient intertexts. Both Matt 19:28 and 25:31 speak of the Son of Man sitting on “His glorious throne” (θρόνου δόξης αὐτοῦ) in the context of judgment. Matthew says this will happen “in the regeneration” (ἐν τῇ παλιγγενεσίᾳ, 19:28). Among the Stoics, the phrase παλιγγενεσία was used to describe the successive renewals of the world after great conflagrations in the endless cosmic cycles of destruction and rebirth. Philo, the

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<sup>126</sup> Sim, “Apocalyptic Eschatology,” 43–44.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 46–47.

Jewish allegorist from Alexandria, used the term to describe the renewal of the world after the great flood. Josephus used it to describe the reconstitution of the Jews after the Exile. Sim concludes that Matthew agreed with the opinion expressed in many intertexts which forecast the judgment to take place after a great eschatological destruction on the eve of the earth's renewal (*4 Ezra* 7.30–32; 5.55; 7.75; 14.10–11; *2 Baruch* 85.10; 32.6; 44.12; 57.2; *1 Enoch* 45.4–5; 72.1; 91.16; *Jub.* 1.29; *Sibylline corpus* 160–61, 175–79; 1QH 3.28–33; 1QS 4.25; 2 Pet 3:10–12).<sup>128</sup>

Matthew also uses the phrase “end of the age” (συντέλεια τοῦ αἰῶνος) in the context of this judgment (24:3). Though this phrase is used in the New Testament outside of Matthew only in Heb 9:26, it was broadly used in apocalyptic circles to denote the end of the current world order (*1 Enoch* 16.1; *2 Bar.* 13.3; 19.5; 21.8; 27.15; 29.8; *T. Levi* 10.2; *T. Ben.* 11.3; *T. Mos.* 12.4). The words of *4 Ezra* 7.113 are directly on point, “But the day of judgment will be the end of this age and the beginning of the immortal age to come....”<sup>129</sup>

The question of whether Matthew speaks of one judgment or several has arisen not only from the distinct details which Matthew gives in several different accounts of the judgment but also from many Jewish intertexts. The work of D. R. E. Hare and Daniel J. Harrington figures prominently in this discussion.<sup>130</sup> The Jews and Gentiles will be

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<sup>128</sup> Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 112. David C. Sim, “The Meaning of παλιγγενεσία in Matthew 19:28,” *JSNT* 50 (1993):3–12, here 11.

<sup>129</sup> B. M. Metzger, “The Fourth Book of Ezra (Late First Century A.D.) With the Four Additional Chapters: A New Translation and Introduction,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigraph: Volume 1, Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 517–60.

<sup>130</sup> D. R. E. Hare and D. J. Harrington, “‘Make Disciples of All the Gentiles’ (Matthew 28:19)” *CBQ* 37 (1975): 359–69, 364–65 and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 1 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991), 358–59.

judged separately according to *T. Benj.* 10:8–10. Several other texts speak of more than one judgment (*1 Enoch* 91.12–15; *4 Ezra* 12.33–34; *Rev* 19.17–20:15; *T. Abr.* A 13:1–8).<sup>131</sup>

Though Gentiles were very often considered to be categorically outside of God's covenant, some Jewish texts teach that God would save the Gentiles who proved righteous.<sup>132</sup> According to Jeremias, Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats is a Christian counterpart to this Jewish extension of grace beyond the recognized community of faith.<sup>133</sup> Some Jewish apocalypses say that Gentiles who submit to the Law are expected to survive the end of the age (*Bar.* 72.4; *Apoc. Abr.* 31.) More on point is the rabbinic tradition which taught that the Gentile nations which did not subjugate Israel will be admitted by the Messiah into the kingdom of God (*Pesiqta Rabbati* 1 on Isa 66:23).<sup>134</sup> These intertexts notwithstanding, the thesis of separate judgments is still a minority opinion whether the divisions proposed are between Jew and Gentile (so Hare and Harrington) or between Christian and non-Christian (so Jeremias).

The "least" with whom the Son of Man aligns himself and for whose sake the Son of Man pronounces sentence in Matt 25:31–46 are sometimes intertextually compared to groups which or either described by a similar term or who play a similar role. Ramsey Michaels claims that the "closest purely Jewish parallel to the thought of Matt 25:31–46" is in a rabbinic tradition which says, "If a man hears a word (of Torah) from the mouth of *the least in Israel*, it should be to him as if he heard it from the *wisest in Israel*...and not

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<sup>131</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, I, 423.

<sup>132</sup> Davies and Allison cite *t. Sanh.* 13.2b and *Sanh.* 105a. *Matthew*, III, 423.

<sup>133</sup> Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (1963), 209–10.

<sup>134</sup> Kaufmann Kohler, "Eschatology," in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 12 vols., 1904 ed.

only as if he heard it from a wise, man, but as if he heard it from *all the wise*; and not only as if he heard it from the wise, but as if he hear it from the *Sanhedrin*; and not only as if he heard it from the Sanhedrin, but as if he heard it from *Moses*; and not only as if he hear it from Moses, but as if he heard it from God.”<sup>135</sup> This text not only aligns the treatment of the “least” in Israel with the treatment of God, it also illustrates the broadly cited “*shaliah* principle” of the rabbis which holds that “the one sent by a man is as the man himself.”<sup>136</sup>

These texts suggest a criterion of judgment by which the judge will condemn or commend people based on the way they treated his messengers. Several apocalyptic texts place the “righteous” or “Israel” in the place of the *shaliah* so that God punishes nations or individuals based on their treatment of these groups. Jonathan M. Lunde surveyed nine Jewish apocalypses and concluded that two criteria are consistently used in the apocalypses: fidelity or obedience to God and the oppression of the righteous. Lunde remarks that the criterion of oppression of the righteous could have easily been subsumed under the former criterion as a display of obedience to God. The isolation of the oppression of the righteous as a specific criterion of judgment is therefore significant.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Ramsey Michaels, “Apostolic Hardships,” 31 cites this *baraita* as from *Numbers Rabba* 14.4 (174a).

<sup>136</sup> The quote is cited here from Catchpole, “The Poor on Earth,” 358, but the principle appears in most of the better commentaries. Keener, *Matthew*, 603, 605 gives its rabbinic reference as Midrash Tannaim. Cope, “Matthew XXV:31–46,” 40 says it also appears in the Talmudic text Kid. 43a and recommends as an extensive treatment of agency P. Borgen, *Bread from Heaven* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1965), 158–64.

<sup>137</sup> Jonathan M. Lunde, “The Salvation-Historical Implications of Matthew 24–25 in Light of Jewish Apocalyptic Literature” (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1996), 127. The texts Lunde cites for this conclusion among these apocalypses include texts from Daniel (7:21–23, 25; 8:24; 9:12; 11:21, 28, 30–34), 1 Enoch 22.6–13; the Similitudes of 1 Enoch (38.3–6; 48.8–10; 53.5, 7b; 54:2–6; 55.4a; 62.1–13; 63.1–12), the Book of Heavenly Luminaries in 1 Enoch (81.1–4, 9); the Dream Visions of 1 Enoch (89.65–67, 69, 74b–75; 90.1–5, 8–9a, 11–13a, 16), the Two Ways Apocalypse of Weeks (91.5–7, 8b, 11–12; 94.6a, 9a; 95.5a, 6b, 7; 96.5c, 7a, 8; 97. 1, 6d; 99.11, 15; 100.7; 103.11 [108.10]), 4 Ezra (5. 29;

Sim would add to Lunde's list the fifth book of the Sibylline corpus which predicts terrible punishments for the Romans (5.162–78, 386–96) and other Gentile nations (5.52–93, 11–35, 179–227, 286–327, 333–59, 434–46) because of their oppression (often typified in their destruction of Jerusalem).<sup>138</sup>

Ramsey Michaels cites several Christian sources in support of the idea that the “least” in Matt 25:31–46 referred to the apostles. The texts which Michaels cites show that this interpretation was possible in the generations following the composition of Matthew's Gospel. According to Michaels, the Second Epistle of Clement contains allusions to Matt 25:31–46 which suggest this interpretation is at work. In the context of an admonition to pay attention to the elders, *2 Clement* 17.3 lists “all nations, tribes, and languages” as the group which Christ will gather for judgment. (“All the nations” are gathered for judgment in Matt 25:32). Michaels believes the lament of the nations given in *2 Clem.* 17.3 demonstrates their realization that they are being judged for disregarding Jesus who had been represented to them in the persons of the elders. The nations are quoted in this text to say, “Woe to us, for it was you, and we did not know, and did not believe, and were not obedient to the Elders who told us of our salvation.” Michaels also thinks echoes of this theme can be seen in Didache 4, the Apostolic Constitutions, and the Acts of Thomas 145–46.<sup>139</sup>

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6.57–58; 8.57; 10.23), 2 Baruch (72.2–5), and the Apocalypse of Abraham (29.14, 19; 31.1–2). Most of the first seven of these apocalypses list the “righteous” as the group for which the judge shows a special concern. The latter two, 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch, specify Israel as treated by the Gentiles.

<sup>138</sup> Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 67. Graham Stanton also believes this theme in extra-biblical apocalyptic accounts of the judgment is repeated in Matt 25:31–46 so that the “least” in Matt 25:40, 45 should be understood to be Christians. Graham Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), 9.

<sup>139</sup> Michaels, “Apostolic Hardships,” 32, 31, 35–37.

On the other hand, a large number of extra-canonical sources commend an ethic of general benevolence regardless of the religious or ethical disposition of the recipients. Hultgren cites two interesting texts which mention many of the deeds of Matt 25:35–36. The ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead (125) reports a dead person’s appeal at his judgment, “I have given bread to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothes to the naked and a boat to him who was boatless.” The Mandaean *Ginza* (236.13–17) gives the proverb, “If you see one who hungers, feed him, someone who thirsts, give him to drink; if you see one naked, place a garment on him and clothe him. If you see a prisoner who is believing and upright, obtain a ransom from him.”<sup>140</sup> Rabbis call merciful actions of this sort *gemiluth hasadim* or “deeds of lovingkindness.” These deeds are frequently promoted in Jewish sources (*m. Abot* 1.2; *b. Sotah* 14a; *b. Šabbat* 127a). Giving to the needy is a special concern (*Testament of Issachar* 3.8; *Testament of Zebulun*.7.4; *Vision of Ezra* 7, 31; *Leviticus Rabbah* 34.9–11; *Ruth Rabbah* 5.9 and *Sukkah* 49b).<sup>141</sup> Some texts command, “Show mercy to all men, even though they be sinners” (*T. Benj.* 4.4). Others quote God as aligning with the poor in general (not only with the believing poor or the poor of Israel), “My children, when you gave food to the poor I counted it as though you had given it to me.”<sup>142</sup> Most relevant are those texts which specifically say that God’s judgment will consider a person’s acts of lovingkindness. Rabi Abba Arik (2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D.) said that one who visits the sick will be delivered from the punishments of

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<sup>140</sup> Hultgren, “The Final Judgment,” 324.

<sup>141</sup> Hultgren and others recognize the most extensive list in H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrash* (Munich: Beck, 1928), 4/1, 559–610. Hultgren’s list partially cited above is briefer, “The Final Judgment,” 314, 324.

<sup>142</sup> David R. Catchpole, “The Poor on Earth,” 391–92, cites this source as *Midrash Tannaim* 15.9. Catchpole here recommends A. Wikenhauser, “Die Liebeswerke in dem Gerichtsgemälde Mt. 25. 31–46.

Gehenna (*b. Nedarim* 40a).<sup>143</sup> Davies and Allison identify the promise of a rabbinic interpretation of Ps 118:17 as an illuminating intertext. This midrash says that those who have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, brought up orphans, given alms, or otherwise practiced works of love will be shown the gate of Yahweh with the invitation to enter in.<sup>144</sup> The Christian text of 2 Esdras 2:20–3 also gives the first place in the resurrection to those who “guard the rights of the widow, secure justice for the fatherless, give to the needy, defend the orphan, clothe the naked, care for the injured and the weak, do not ridicule a lame man, protect the maimed, and let the blind man have a vision of my splendour.”<sup>145</sup>

The meaning of the “eternal fire” in Matt 25:41 is sometimes compared to extra-canonical texts which mention fire in the context of divine judgment. In addition to the pivotal text of Judith 16:17 mentioned above, Sim cites a large number of texts through which the punishment by everlasting fire runs “like a common thread” (*1 Enoch* 54.1; 90.26–27; 91. 9; 100.9; 102.1; 103.7; *4 Ezra* 7.35–38, 61; *2 Bar.* 44.15; 48.39, 43; 59.2; 85.13; *3 Baruch* 4.16; *2 Enoch* 10.2; *Apoc. Abr.* 31.2–6; *T. Levi* 3.2; *T. Zeb.* 10.3; 1QS 2.8; 4.12–13; CD 2.5–6; and 4QAmram 9). The *Sibylline Oracles* (3.53–54, 84–93, 672–74, 690–92; 4.160–61) say that both good and bad people will be burned up by a great conflagration just prior to their final judgment. On the other hand, the *Testament of Abraham* (12.10–14; 13.11–14) says that fire will be the means by which a person’s work

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<sup>143</sup> Quoted by Hultgren, “The Final Judgment,” 316.

<sup>144</sup> Davies and Allison, III, 418.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 429.



will be tested. In this intertext, fire is the revealer of a person's standing, not the punishment for a shortcoming.<sup>146</sup>

The role of the angels in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats may also be compared to the role angels play in extra-canonical intertexts. Bauckham's summary of the relevance of the *Apocalypse of Peter* is useful here. Uriel is specifically named in *Apoc. Pet.* 6.7 as the angel who will gather to judgment the souls of sinners who perished in the Flood. In the Ethiopic version of this text, Uriel brings the souls and spirits back to resurrected bodies so they may be judged. Four angelic duties in the judgment of sinners are described in *Apoc. Pet.*: (1) According to 6.6, angels prepare an appropriate punishment for each category of sinner according to his guilt. (2) According to 7.4, angels ignite the fire in which some are punished. (3) In 9.2, a "spirit of wrath" scourges some of the damned. (4) A group of angels force some to repeatedly throw themselves off a precipice (10.2). The Ethiopic version of this last text calls this group "demons."<sup>147</sup> Other intertexts lead to the possibility that the angels accompanying the Son of Man are glorified believers. Some texts clearly expect the righteous to become angels (*2 Bar.* 51.5, 10 and *1 Enoch* 104.6). The DSS imply that members of the Qumran community have already achieved angelic fellowship in their worship.<sup>148</sup> Finally, at least one text teaches that angels will serve as attorneys in the court of the final judgment. A rabbinic

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<sup>146</sup> Sim, "Apocalyptic Eschatology," 47–48. This intertext may be compared to Paul's portrayal of fire in the day of judgment in 1 Corinthians 3.

<sup>147</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 221, 225. Bauckham's entire book is a treasure of possible intertexts to Matt 25:31–46. It is a pity that the only time Bauckham referred to Matt 25:31–46 in this book he mistakenly cited it as "Matthew 23:34–46" and summarily remarked that it teaches along with James 2:13 and Matt 6:12 that "All who perform works of mercy will be saved" 151.

<sup>148</sup> Sim, "Apocalyptic Eschatology," 49.

midrash on 1 Kings 22:19 says that the angels on God's right hand will lean toward acquittal, while the angels on God's left hand lean toward condemnation.<sup>149</sup>

This last text brings up the significance and connotation of the "right" and "left" sides of the Son of Man in Matt 25:33, 34, and 41. Court argues that the positive and negative connotations of "right" and "left" respectively is common to various cultures. Plato's Republic 10.614c–d tells of a warrior's dream of the judgment in which the souls of the righteous passed through portals on the right into heaven while the unjust went to the left. Several rabbinic texts are given as further examples (*Midr. Num.* 22.9; *Midr. Cant.* 1.9.1; and b. Šabb. 88b).<sup>150</sup>

#### More Recent Intertexts

The synchronic use of intertextuality as proposed by Kristeva and Barthes opens the door to a limitless number of texts and cultural symbols which may influence the interpretations of Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats today. A comprehensive list of these intertexts would be impossible to produce. It would also be unnecessary. For the purposes of this study, only a few significant examples are needed.

Cultural symbols and the connotations these symbols carry can influence interpretations of Matt 25:31–46. The connotative force of the categories of sheep and goats is a case in point. In her review of this issue, Kathleen Weber discusses the Sarakatsani herdsmen of modern Greece and the moral connotations which they attach to sheep and goats. The Sarakatsani herdsmen, who rank virginity and chastity very highly,

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<sup>149</sup> From Midrash Rabba on Song of Songs as summarized by J. M. Court, "Right and Left: The Implications for Matthew 25:31–46," *NTS* 31 (1985): 223–33, here 226.

<sup>150</sup> Court, "Right and Left," 224–26.

see goats as a symbol of sensuality and sexuality. The folk culture of these people held that goats were originally the animals of the Devil which Christ captured and only imperfectly tamed for the service of man. According to Weber, the Sarakatsani would understand Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats as the declaration of a condemnation that is obviously deserved. Weber, on the other hand, argues that such an interpretation would not have been likely for Matthew's original readers. According to Weber, ancient Syrians, unlike the modern Greeks, herded sheep and goats together and did not attach such a deeply negative connotation to goats. Weber argues that Matthew's original audience would have felt an element of surprise in the severe condemnation of the goats—much like the surprise of the bridesmaids who were rejected for lack of oil (Matt 25:1–13) and the surprise of the servant who failed to turn a profit (25:14–30).<sup>151</sup>

Some commentators who read Matt 25:31–46 in the light of today's views of science and ethics marginalize some of the pericope's views and ideas which are now thought to be outmoded. Dan O. Via admits that the apocalyptic language in Matt 25:31–46 originally was understood to have a literal cosmological reference in addition to the ethical lessons evoked through the readers' imaginative engagement with it. Via's opinion of the outdated cosmology of Matthew's original readers leads him to conclude, "Apocalyptic language may still function imaginatively for us, but the reference can no longer be to the cosmos. It will have to be an existential project, a way of being in the world." The "way of being in the world" which Via believes is promoted in Matt 25:31–46 includes the blessings of grace and wholeness he describes as the "actualization of the best self." This is experienced in the non-calculating acts of love which the passage

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<sup>151</sup> Kathleen Weber, "The Image of Sheep and Goats in Matthew 25:31–46," *CBQ* 59 (1997): 657–79, here 659–60, 666–67.

teaches are the responsibility of “all people, in or out of the church.”<sup>152</sup> Via’s perspectives on cosmology and ethics function very much like an intertext in Via’s reading of the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats.

Ecclesiastical pronouncements which invoke Matt 25:31–46 may also become influential intertexts which guide communities of faith in their interpretations of this passage. In 1943, the Roman Catholic Church received an influential encyclical from Pope Pius XII called *Divino afflante Spiritu* which was intended to guide Catholics who interpret Scripture.<sup>153</sup> Though Pius’ letter promoted historical-critical exegesis and stated that the literal (or literary) sense of Scripture and the author’s intention should be normative for interpretation, the letter also stated that God speaks to people today in Scripture and so the meaning of Scripture may also be unfolded by the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the life and teaching of the Church. Recent important Catholic documents have invoked Matt 25:31–46 for moral and theological instruction. John Donahue, S.J. lists several of these documents which collectively interpret the “least” of 25:40, 45 to be anyone on earth who is hungry, afflicted with human weakness, the poor, or those afflicted by pain or sorrow.<sup>154</sup> Donahue points out, that given the currently strong move in critical exegesis lately toward a narrower ethic in Matt 25:31–46 rather than toward the broadly humanitarian one presupposed by these documents, it is possible that these Catholic documents have given an interpretation “in a sense not intended by the author.”

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<sup>152</sup> Dan O. Via, “Ethical Responsibility and Human Wholeness in Matthew 25:31–46,” *HTR* 80 (1987): 79–100, 89, 93, 100.

<sup>153</sup> The portion of the text referred to comes from J. J. McGivern, *Official Catholic Teachings: Bible Interpretation* (Wilmington: McGrath, 1978), 327. The summary is based on John R. Donahue’s discussion given in “Parable,” 7–8.

<sup>154</sup> All three of these documents were issued during Vatican II. *Gaudium et spes*, no. 27, *Lumen gentium* 8, and a homily by Paul VI spoken on Dec 7, 1965. Donahue, “Parable,” 4.

The seismic impact of these recent documents is all the more felt when one considers that the classic interpretation given to Matt 25:31–46 even in Catholic interpretive history understood the “least” to be Christian brothers and sisters.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Donahue, “Parable,” 8.

## CHAPTER 4

### LITERARY ISSUES OF GENRE AND RHETORICAL STRUCTURE

Chapters 2 and 3 have discussed the interpretive issues for Matt 25:31–46 which are related to Matthew's life setting and the interpretive issues which address the primary text of study and its intratextual and intertextual relationship to texts inside and outside of Matthew's Gospel. The literary issues of genre and rhetorical structure will now be addressed.

The categories of literature and the art of composition have been a source of literary interest at least since the time of Aristotle's *Poetica*. Literary evidence suggests, however, that Aristotle's work was either lost or neglected for hundreds of years after it was written so the influence of Aristotle's literary science upon Matthew would be indirect at most. Horace's similar work *Ars Poetica* (12–8 BC) and a work which touched upon literary matters called *On the Sublime*, now accredited to "Pseudo-Longinus," were extant in the first century AD.<sup>1</sup> These texts notwithstanding, most commentators believe Matthew's literary outlook has more in common with the Jewish scribal tradition than with the Graeco-Roman world.<sup>2</sup> Whichever view proves true, the idea that texts should be

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions: The Creative Voice of Jesus* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 47. Also recommended is J. W. H. Atkins, *Literary Criticism in Antiquity*, 2 vols. (New York: Peter Smith, 1952).

<sup>2</sup> E. von Dobschütz, "Matthäus als Rabbi und Katechet," *ZNW* 27 (1928): 338–48; Krister Stendahl, *The School of St. Matthew* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 31; Günther Bornkamm, "End Expectation and Church in Matthew," in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, ed. Günther Bornkamm, G. Barth and H. J. Held (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 49; Birger Gerhardsson, *The Testing of God's Son (Matt 4:1–11 & Par.): An Analysis of an Early Christian Midrash*, trans. John Toy *Coniectanea biblica, New Testament* 2, no. 1 (Lund: Gleerup, 1966), 79; Michael D. Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew*, (London: SPCK, 1974), 10.

categorized into genres according to the ways they were intended or perceived to communicate has been broadly held since Matthew's time.

### **Issues Regarding the Genre of the Passage**

The following discussion will adopt Kevin Vanhoozer's eclectic definition and explanation of a literary genre. A genre should be understood as a species of literature. As a distinct species of literature, a genre has distinct rules or habits of conceptualization, expression, and interpretation which are established by the traditional ways the genre has been used. Over time, genres may evolve according to the subject matter they treat or because of the clever mixing of genres by the literary community. In every case, the interpretation of any text is tightly related to the correct recognition of the rules of interpretation implied by the text's genre. Because authors purposefully choose the genre through which they write, and because the rules of any genre govern the manner by which authors and readers envision the world during the communication process, Vanhoozer (citing Bahktin) concludes that the concept of genre brings together three important and related parts of the communication process: "the enactment of the author's intent, the engagement with the world, and the encounter with the addressee." Vanhoozer summarizes, "Genre is a way of engaging with reality and with others through words."<sup>3</sup>

Though many other factors affect the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46, the identification and understanding of its genre are most basic. The identification of the genre of Matt 25:31–46 is complicated by at least two factors. In the first place, genres

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<sup>3</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 336–42. The passage in Bahktin to which Vanhoozer alludes comes from M. Bahktin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984).

are not static categories. They develop along paths that are not easy to trace. Alistair Fowler explains, “Only relevant states of the form, not subsequent modifications or primitive antecedents, lead to the meaning: though a critic assessing significance may take the genre’s whole time-worm into account.”<sup>4</sup> The interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 will be affected not only by identifying the passage as a parable, apocalyptic vision, or prediction, but also by charting the passage’s position upon the trajectory of development which each of these genres have experienced during the composition of the New Testament.<sup>5</sup> In the second place, genres combine and overlap in texts.<sup>6</sup> This is not a great problem when the boundary lines between parable and prediction, for instance, are clearly marked. The passage in question, however, is a curious blend of several genres. It has at least one significant parabolic element, uses apocalyptic imagery, and assumes the outward form of a prophetic prediction of a real judgment. It will soon be demonstrated that the commentators are divided over whether or not the apocalyptic images should be read as a detailed prediction of a real judgment to come or whether the whole passage should be read more like a parable designed only to evoke a moral lesson or an existential insight.

Efforts to read the passage as a precise prediction are met with an interpretive dilemma concisely worded by Ramsey Michaels, “If ‘the least’ are the poor of the world generally, as most commentators believe, then how are they to be distinguished from ‘all

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<sup>4</sup> Alistair Fowler, “The Life and Death of Literary Forms,” *New Literary History* 2 (1971): 199–216, 204–5.

<sup>5</sup> Klaus Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Naperville: Alec R. Allenson, 1972), 129. Koch makes this point with special reference to the development of Old Testament prophecy to apocalyptic literature and the New Testament.

<sup>6</sup> Brent Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 2002), 107.



the nations' (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη) who are being judged (vs. 32)? But if they are understood as the Christian community, then who are the 'sheep' that inherit the kingdom?"<sup>7</sup>

Commentators who believe Matthew's judgment scenes carry a referential precision regarding these groups are left with the burden to reconcile Matthew's several judgment scenes into a harmonized sequence of eschatological events which clearly distinguishes the groups involved. Other commentators believe Matt 25:31–46 was not intended to be a precise description of eschatological events but was intended only as an evocative dramatization intended to evoke a different kind of insight. Ultimately, the difference between these two approaches is a difference of opinion about the genre of Matt 25:31–46.

#### Matthew 25:31–46 Considered As Parabolic

Paschaius Radbertus (*circa* 785–860) is credited as the first writer to call Matt 25:31–46 a parable.<sup>8</sup> Though many authors still include the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats in their studies of Gospel parables, few classify the entire pericope as a parable strictly speaking.<sup>9</sup> The text as a whole appears to be a blend of genres. It opens with a brief parabolic element—a simile which compares the separation of the nations by the

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<sup>7</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, "Apostolic Hardships and Righteous Gentiles," *JBL* 84 (1965): 27–37, here 27.

<sup>8</sup> Davies and Allison, III, 418.

<sup>9</sup> T. W. Manson lists it as one of the three eschatological parables of Matthew 25. T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1975), 242–52. Lamar Cope, "Matthew XXV:31–46 'The Sheep and the Goats' Reinterpreted," *NovT* 11 (1969): 32–44, 34. Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 310 notes the following who list the pericope in their studies of parables: Joachim Jeremias, *Parables*, 206–10; Robert Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 131–40; and PHEME PERKINS, *Hearing the Parables of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1981), 158–65. John P. Heil is one of the few who suggest it be called a parable in "the strict sense." "The Double Meaning of the Narrative of Universal Judgment in Matthew 25:31–46," *JNST* 69 (1998): 3–14, here 13.

Son of Man to the separation of sheep and goats by a shepherd. Most of the text, however, resembles the descriptions of a final judgment which appear in Jewish apocalyptic texts. The opinions of commentators concerning how to read parables and apocalyptic texts and opinions concerning how these two genres coalesce in Matt 25:31–46 affect what commentators conclude about the passage’s referential significance concerning God’s reign, His justice and judgment, and the events of the end of the world.

Matthew recognized speaking “in parables” (ἐν παραβολαῖς) as a distinct mode of communication (Matt 13:3, 10, 34, 35; 22:1). In Matthew’s Gospel, when the disciples asked Jesus why he spoke in parables, Jesus replied that his parables were part of God’s plan to reveal the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven to the disciples. Jesus concluded his answer by implying through a quotation of Isa 6:9 that others would hear but not understand and see but not perceive because their hearts have become dull, their ears scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes. “Otherwise they would see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I would heal them” (13:11–15; cf. Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10). This exchange shows that Matthew understood parables to convey mysteries which some would understand and others would not. The special ability of the disciples to understand the parables is here and there explained by Matthew’s narrative line as the result of private (sometime allegorical) explanations which Jesus gave to the disciples alone (13:36; 15:15; 16:5–12). In Matthew’s account, the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats is part of this body of private instruction (24:3). This may imply that any parabolic element in the pericope would have been intended by Matthew to communicate clearly to the disciples, not as a means of concealing mysteries from the obstinate.

This notwithstanding, Matt 25:31–46 has produced a variety of conflicting interpretations. Part of the conflict is due to questions concerning the interpretation of parables in general and concerning the parabolic quality of this passage in particular. Several studies have attempted to chart the opinions of scholars regarding parables and the appropriate way to interpret them.<sup>10</sup> The brief review here repeats the findings of Charles W. Hedrick who identifies five historical phases in the interpretation of parables.<sup>11</sup>

According to Hedrick, the first phase was completed with the teaching career of Jesus. Much of the controversy over the interpretation of the parables and of Matt 25:31–46 extends from differences of opinion regarding whether Jesus used his parables as allegories for eschatological events and whether or not Jesus would have identified himself as the apocalyptic Son of Man named in Matt 25:31.

The second phase extends from the time of the Evangelists until the modern era. Current opinions are divided over whether or to what extent the Evangelists allegorized Jesus' parables beyond the historical intention of Jesus. However, most agree that many other ancient and medieval interpretations of Jesus' parables (including interpretations of Matt 25:31–46) sometimes contained allegorical applications which were not contextually drawn from the Gospels themselves. The pre-modern works of Mani, Origen, John Chrysostom, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Martin Luther represent commentaries which developed in this period.

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<sup>10</sup> Warren S. Kissinger, *The Parables of Jesus: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1979), Norman Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom: Symbol and Metaphor in New Testament Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985, first printing 1976); Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990); and David B. Gowler, *What Are They Saying About Parables?* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Hedrick, *Parables*, 8–10.

The third phase (already discussed in Chapter 3) initiated the “modern critical study of parables” in 1886 under the influence of Adolf Jülicher and A. B. Bruce before him in 1982. Jülicher and Bruce argued that Jesus’ parables were much simpler in form than the allegorically detailed adaptations of the Evangelists.<sup>12</sup> Many subsequent commentators have used Jülicher’s hypothesis in an effort to distill Jesus’ simpler teaching from the expanded editions preserved in the Gospels.

A fourth phase began with the works of C. H. Dodd (1935) and Joachim Jeremias (1947) who mark in separate ways a deeper interest in the background of Jewish apocalyptic thought for the parables of Jesus.<sup>13</sup> In Jesus’ day, the Jewish apocalypses spoke of an imminent end of the age with a final judgment and the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth. Dodd was sympathetic with Jülicher’s view of the simplicity of Jesus’ parables. Dodd also thought Jesus used his simple parables to subvert the Jewish apocalyptic idea and to promote a “realized eschatology” which described the kingdom of heaven as already active on earth through the presence of Jesus and his abiding presence with the church.<sup>14</sup> Jeremias, on the other hand, thought Jülicher went too far. Jeremias believed Jesus included allegorical elements in some of his parables.<sup>15</sup> Jeremias also believed Jesus resembled the traditional apocalypticists to a greater degree than Dodd

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<sup>12</sup> Alexander Balmain Bruce, *The Parabolic Teaching of Christ: A Systematic and Critical Study of the Parables of Our Lord* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1882); Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2 vols. (Freiburg: Mohr, 1886, 1888, 1899, 1910 and Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963, 1969, 1976). Jülicher’s work is still unavailable in English.

<sup>13</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev ed (Glasgow: Collins, 1961) first delivered in lecture format in the Shaffer Lectures at Yale Divinity School in 1935; Joachim Jeremias, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu* (originally published: Zürich: Zwingli, 1947, 1952) now available in English *The Parables of Jesus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., trans. S. H. Hooke from the 8<sup>th</sup> German ed. of *Die Gleichnisse Jesu* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963) [trans by S.H. Hook from *Die Gleichnisse Jesu*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed, 1962].

<sup>14</sup> C.H. Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*, pp 27–35.

<sup>15</sup> Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 16–18.

believed.<sup>16</sup> Jeremias' most unique contribution was through his speculations regarding the original Aramaic wording of Jesus' teaching. Jeremias' work on Matt 25:31–46 is based on speculations regarding the Aramaic *Vorlage* of Jesus.<sup>17</sup>

The fifth phase saw a marginalization of the authorial intent of either Jesus or the apostles. Dan O. Via (1967) helped initiate an existential/aesthetic approach to the parables which claims that Jesus' parables are works of art which may be interpreted without notice of the historical context in which they were created and without going outside of the stories to some hypothetical referent.<sup>18</sup> Adherents of this existential/aesthetic hermeneutic believe that Jesus' parables do not carry their own didactic point but are works of art which should elicit insights and evoke realizations in the hearers regarding their existence before God. A parable therefore interprets the reader as much as the reader interprets the parable.<sup>19</sup> Some adherents make the radical claim that any methodology which reduces the parable to a didactic point outside of its own story destroys the parable. This means that even Jesus' habit of relating the parables to the "kingdom of God" does not prevent the parables from evoking other valid insights from

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<sup>16</sup> Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, p 21. Two of the ten themes that Jeremias found in Jesus' original parables are "The Imminence of Catastrophe" and "The Consumation" (beginning on pages 160 and 221 respectively).

<sup>17</sup> Jeremias, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 206–10.

<sup>18</sup> Dan Otto Via, *The Parables of Jesus: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) as summarized by Hedrick, *Parables*, 10.

<sup>19</sup> Wesley G. Olmstead, *Matthew's Trilogy of Parables: The Nation, the Nations, and the Reader in Matthew 21.28 – 22.14* (New York: Cambridge, 2003), 16–17 summarizing Ernst Fuchs, a precursor of Via. Ernst Fuchs, *Studies of the Historical Jesus*, trans. Andrew Scobie (London: SCM, 1964). Another author who endorses the turn toward an aesthetic hermeneutic for parables is Norman Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*

people who read them. As works of art, the affect of parables on people is limitless, bound only by the imaginations and dispositions of those who hear them.<sup>20</sup>

Grant Osborne identifies a second manifestation of this fifth phase represented by the school of thought called “structuralism.” Structuralists analyze a text to discover the way the characters and actions mentioned in the text relate to each other when charted according to a basic paradigm which is believed to represent the deep structure of narratives in general. Like practitioners of the aesthetic hermeneutic, structuralists interpret parables as independent from the historical intention which their authors may have had for them.<sup>21</sup> Daniel Patte is an influential structuralist who has written a commentary on Matthew from a structuralist’s perspective.<sup>22</sup>

#### Matthew 25:31–46 Considered As Apocalyptic

As noted in the previous section, Matt 25:31–46 blends a parabolic element (a shepherd simile, 25:32) with a description of a judgment scene portrayed through the turns of phrase, symbols, and themes which frequently appear in apocalyptic literature of the period. A clear understanding of the genre of apocalyptic literature is, therefore, an interpretive issue for Matt 25:31–46. The most relevant questions concerning apocalyptic literature deal with the life setting out of which the genre developed and the degree to which the genre’s eschatological references were intended to be taken literally. Or to put

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<sup>20</sup> Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) as summarized by Olmstead, *Matthew’s Trilogy*, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Grant Osborn, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 251.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Patte, *The Gospel according to Matthew: A Structural Commentary on Matthew’s Faith*. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); *What Is Structural Exegesis?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976); and *Structural Exegesis for New Testament Critics*. (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1990).

the questions directly, should the circumstances in which apocalyptic literature thrived elsewhere be assumed for Matthew and his original readers? and, to what degree did Matthew intend his description of the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats to be a literal, detailed, and coherent prediction of a particular eschatological judgment? The significance of questions regarding Matthew's life setting was addressed above in Chapter 2. The current section will revisit this issue vis-à-vis Matthew's relation to apocalypticism. The importance of the second question (concerning the degree this genre intended to give a precise literal prediction) has already been illustrated in the immediately preceding section on parables. A similar question affects the interpretation of apocalyptic texts. Just as a recent paradigm shift has led commentators to view parables as more evocative than referential, so recent studies regarding apocalyptic literature have promoted the idea that this genre was also intended to be less referentially precise than previously had been thought. An interpretation interested in the authorial intention of Matt 25:31–46 must take into account the degree to which Matthew intended this passage to speak in a precise and referential way concerning real events to come. For these reasons, an understanding of apocalyptic literature and Matthew's relation to it is a very important interpretive issue for Matt 25:31–46.

Many of the Jewish works which are now classified as apocalypses were not called apocalypses in Matthew's day. Use of the Greek word "*apocalypsis*" (ἀποκάλυψις, or "revelation") as a genre label did not begin until the word appeared in the title of the last book of the New Testament, Ἀποκαλυψις Ἰωαννου. Even there, the word may not have been used generically but may have simply implied that the book is a

prophetic “revelation.”<sup>23</sup> Soon after, however, a number of similar books were grouped together by early Christians and collectively called “apocalypses.”<sup>24</sup> Interest in apocalyptic literature grew in modern times under the influence of Ernst Käsemann’s essay, “The Beginnings of Christian Theology” in which Käsemann argued that Christianity originated within an apocalyptic world view.<sup>25</sup> Since that time a host of scholars have addressed the origins of apocalyptic literature. This genre’s relation to early Christianity is an abiding interest as is the genre’s relation to Matthew’s Gospel.<sup>26</sup>

A few points of nomenclature are helpful at this point. In 1979, J. J. Collins defined “apocalyptic” as “a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological

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<sup>23</sup> John J. Collins, “The Apocalyptic Genre,” in *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity: The Apocalyptic Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 1–32, here 3.

<sup>24</sup> David C. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996), 23.

<sup>25</sup> Klaus Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Naperville: Alec R. Allenson, 1972), 14, citing Ernst Käsemann, “Die Anfänge christlicher Theologie,” *ZTK* 57 (1960): 162–85; English trans., “The Beginnings of Christian Theology,” in *New Testament Questions for Today*, trans. W. J. Montague (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 82–107. The citation is from page 102 in the English translation.

<sup>26</sup> This exemplary list is given in Jonathan M. Lunde’s dissertation “The Salvation-Historical Implications of Matthew 24–25 in Light of Jewish Apocalyptic Literature” (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1996), 29; Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic: 200 B.C.–A.D. 100*. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964); Christopher Rowland, *The Open heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 196–239, 272–304; Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker, vol. 2, *The Theology of Israel’s Prophetic Traditions* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965), 303–8; John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1987) and “Genre, Ideology and Social Movements in Jewish Apocalypticism,” in *Mysteries and Revelations: Apocalyptic Studies Since the Uppsala Colloquium*, ed. John J. Collins and James H. Charlesworth, 11–32, *JSPSup*, vol. 9 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991); Michael Stone, “Apocalyptic Literature,” in *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran Sectarian Writings, Philo, Josephus*, ed. Michael E. Stone (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 383–441; Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 12–18, 23–31.



salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.”<sup>27</sup> Collins further divided the apocalypses into two types. Some apocalypses narrated other-worldly journeys or used similar means to reveal cosmological mysteries. Other apocalypses used visions to recount history up to and including its eschatological conclusion.<sup>28</sup> Matthew’s Judgment of the Sheep and Goats more closely resembles the eschatological type. A standard nomenclature for important terms related to this subject has been promoted by P. D. Hanson which will be used here. Hanson recommends that “apocalypse” be used to designate the literary form or genre, “apocalyptic eschatology” to refer broadly to the eschatological religious perspective of this genre, and “apocalypticism” to refer to the socio-religious movement in which this literature developed.”<sup>29</sup> Many authors also use “apocalypse” as a noun, to refer to any one of the books of this genre and the plural “apocalypses” to refer to more than one such book.

Richard Bauckham argues on the basis of the obvious borrowing of traditions between the texts that apocalypses may be studied today as a group. The whole group of apocalypses bears witness to a general outlook shared by all. Jewish texts illumine Christian ones and vice versa.<sup>30</sup> In the commentaries that treat Matt 25:31–46, apocalypses written both before and after Matthew are used to illumine this apocalyptic outlook and to shed light on Matthew’s place in apocalypticism. In fact, almost all of the

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<sup>27</sup> John J. Collins, “Towards the Morphology of a Genre,” *Semeia* 14 (1979): 1–19, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Collins, “Morphology of a Genre,” 14.

<sup>29</sup> P. D. Hanson, “Apocalypticism,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Keith R. Crim and others, Supplement Volume (New York: Abingdon, 1976), 28–34.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish & Christian Apocalypses*, SupNT, no. 93 (Boston: Brill, 1998), 1–3, 74, 76, 161; R. T. France, “Matthew,” Tyndale New Testament Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985, reprinted 1992), 354–55.

apocalypses, both Jewish and Christian, that are extant today were adopted and variously adapted and preserved by Christians.<sup>31</sup> It is widely held that these apocalypses began their textual forms between 200 BC and AD 100 in the Semitically influenced worlds of Israel and early Jewish Christianity.<sup>32</sup> The hypothesis that Matthew may have been influenced by these texts is supported by their common origin, common words and themes, as well as the interest these texts clearly held for some early Christians. One other commonality sometimes suggested between Matthew's community and apocalypticism is the strong themes of alienation and persecution which run through many apocalyptic texts. In apocalypses, God's eschatological judgment is often portrayed as the critical point of history in which God will display his wrath against those who persecuted His faithful people.<sup>33</sup> Social crisis, distress, and alienation from the wider world are broadly accepted as part of the social experience out of which apocalypticism emerged and continued.<sup>34</sup> David Sim suggests, Matthew's use of apocalyptic images is "tied inextricably to his historical and social circumstances."<sup>35</sup> If so, Matthew's circumstances may be illumined by a better understanding of the social purpose and function of apocalyptic literature. Other theories about the origin of apocalypticism are divided over whether these texts

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 1–3. This is also true of almost all pre-rabbinic Jewish texts (ibid., 82).

<sup>32</sup> Koch, *Rediscovery of Apocalyptic*, 20.

<sup>33</sup> Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 134–35.

<sup>34</sup> Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 54 lists the following in support: D. S. Russell, *Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 16–18; John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroads, 1984), 29–30; David Edward Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 110–12; and Mitchell Glenn Reddish, *Apocalyptic Literature: A Reader* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 24.

<sup>35</sup> Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 248.

developed among simple or learned people and whether they were exotic to Palestine or indigenous.<sup>36</sup>

Certain strands of Jewish tradition show no appreciation for the apocalypses. Philo never mentions them, and they almost never appear in rabbinic texts in spite of a rabbinic interest in divine judgment at the end of the age.<sup>37</sup> Christianity eventually canonized one apocalypse written in this period as the final book of the New Testament, but it is clear that certain groups of Christians retained a broader interest in these texts for generations. The extent to which Matthew's community was influenced by apocalypticism is a question that has affected the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46.

Many scholars have noticed that Matthew uses apocalyptic images and style more than any other Gospel.<sup>38</sup> In addition to the apocalyptically oriented darkened sky seen

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<sup>36</sup> Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic*, 21–22 lists the following theories: (1) obscure and simple people far removed from the Jerusalem hierarchy and its theology (Bousset, et al); (2) a small class of highly learned sages, who were also familiar with the non-Israelite culture of their time (D. S. Russell, *Method and Message*, 28; (3) Babylonian (or Persian) diaspora (Otto Eissfeldt, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament: Unter Einschluss der Apokryphen und Pseudepigraphen sowie der apokryphen- und pseudepigraphenartigen Qumran-Schriften: Entstehungsgeschichte des Alten Testaments* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1964), 711; ET, *The Old Testament: an Introduction, Including the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, and also the Works of Similar Type from Qumran: the History of the Formation of the Old Testament* (New York: Harper, 1965), 525; Russell says from people returning from Mesopotamia during the Maccabean rebellion, *Method and Message*, 19; (4) native Palestinian growth (the view of the most) with several options) including Essenes: F. M. Cross, *The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1958), 54, Hasidim (Ploeger), Pharisaic lay movement (Charles), Zealots (R. T. Herford, *The Pharisees*), and All Parties (Russell).

<sup>37</sup> Koch, *Rediscovery of Apocalyptic*, 34.

<sup>38</sup> Lunde, "Salvation-Historical Implications," 22 approvingly cites Leopold Sabourin, "Apocalyptic Traits in Matthew's Gospel," *RSB* 3 (1983): 19–36, here 19; and Donald A. Hagner, "Apocalyptic Motifs in the Gospel of Matthew: Continuity and Discontinuity," *HBT* 7, no. 2 (1985): 53–82. Kathleen Weber, "The Events of the End of the Age in Matthew" (Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of America, 1994), 17–19 cites the following authors and dates in general support: B. H. Streeter's, *The Four Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 520–22; and those who followed him: V. Taylor, *The Gospels: A Short Introduction* (London: Epworth, 1952, orig. 1930), B. W. Bacon, *Studies in Matthew* (New York: Holt, 1930), H. A. Guy, *The New Testament Doctrine of Last Things: A Study of Eschatology* (London: Oxford, 1948), J. A. T. Robinson, *Jesus and His Coming* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), E. F. Grässer, *Das Problem der Parusieverzögerung in den synoptischen Evangelien und in der Apostelgeschichte*, *BZNW*, no. 22 (Berlin: Töpelmann 1957), F. C. Grant, *The Gospels: Their Origin and Their Growth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), and E. P. Blair, *Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew*

also in Mark 15:33 and Luke 23:44, Matthew alone records the earthquake, the splitting of the rocks, and the resurrection of the dead in Jerusalem in his account of the passion of Christ (27:51–53). Of all the Gospels, Matthew alone uses the apocalyptic catch phrase “end of the age” (συντέλεια [τοῦ] αἰῶνος).<sup>39</sup> Kathleen Weber has identified a list of apocalyptic terms in Matthew’s Gospel and concludes that the Gospel assumes that the readers would have an extensive familiarity with these terms in their apocalyptic contexts. This is especially true for the first use Matthew made of three of these terms in contexts that would not lead an uninformed reader to obtain the correct apocalyptic connotation (“in that day” [ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ] in 7:22, “before the time” [πρὸ καιροῦ] in 8:29; and the word “coming” [παρουσία] in the phrase “the sign of your coming” [τὸ σημεῖον τῆς παρουσίας] in 24:3).<sup>40</sup> In addition to these verbal similarities, David Sim identifies five functions which Matthew’s Gospel fulfills which were also commonly performed by apocalypses: (1) identification and legitimization of the group, (2) explanation of current circumstances, (3) encouragement and hope for the

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(Nashville: Abingdon, 1960). Günther Bornkamm influenced a separate stream in the same direction: H. E. Tödt, *Der Menschensohn in der synoptischen Überlieferung* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1956); H. Conzelmann, *Gundriss der Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Kaiser, 1967); Jack Dean Kingsbury, *The Parables of Jesus in Matthew 13* (London: SPCK, 1969); J. Lambrecht, “The Parousia Discourse: Composition and Content in Mt. XXIV–XXV,” in *L’Évangile selon Matthieu: Rédaction et théologie*, ed. M. Didier, BETL 29 (Gembloux: Duculot, 1972), H. Frankemölle, *Jahwebund und Kirche Christi*, NTAbh, no. 10 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1974), P. F. Ellis, *Matthew: His Mind and Message* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1974), J. P. Meier, *The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church and Morality in the First Gospel*, Theological Inquiries (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), and H. Baarlink, *Die Eschatologie der synoptischen Evangelien*, BWANT, no. 120 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1986). Some were influenced by both Streeter and Bornkamm: F. W. Burnett, *The Testament of Jesus: Sophia* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1981); D. Marguerat, *Le jugement dans l’évangile de Matthieu*, Le Monde de la Bible (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1981); and R. Mohrlang, *Matthew and Paul: A Comparison of Ethical Perspectives*, SNTSMS, no 48 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>39</sup> Lunde, “Salvation-Historical Implications,” 26 compares Matt 13:39, 40, 49; 24:3; 28:20 to 1 Enoch 10.12; 16.1; 2 Baruch 13.3; 27.15; 29.8; Dan 12:13; T. Levi 10.2.

<sup>40</sup> Weber, “Events of the End,” 55. Weber here lists all the apocalyptic terms in Matthew as *synteleia tou aiōnos*, *telos*, *parousia*, *hēmera kriseōs*, *krisis*, *mellousa orgē*, *aiōn ho mellōn*, *palingenesia*, *anastasis*, *hēmera ekeinē*, *hēmera (ekainē) kai hōra*, *hōra*, *kairos*.

future, (4) vengeance and consolation, and (5) group solidarity and social control.<sup>41</sup>

Johannes Friedrich's assessment of Matt 25:31–46 in particular led him to describe the pericope as an “apocalyptic revelation-discourse,” a description that would satisfy the majority of scholars.<sup>42</sup>

Though scholars generally characterize sections of Matthew's Gospel including Matt 25:31–46 as part of the apocalyptic genre that flourished at the time, the significance of this characterization is not uniformly explained. For most of the history of interpretation, Matt 25:31–46 was interpreted as a straightforward realistic description of a judgment to come. The several groups mentioned in the pericope (all the nations, righteous, cursed, least) were often allegorically interpreted to represent distinct groups. Currently, there is a growing opinion that apocalypses were not always intended to have such precise referential force.

Brent Sandy argues that the biblical apocalypses of Daniel and Revelation used images at times which were not intended to be referentially precise. According to Sandy, both the goat and its horn in Daniel 8 alternately symbolize the king of Greece—even though both symbols are used in the same vision (Dan 8:8, 21). The woman of Revelation 12 who has been taken as a symbol of either Israel or the church, is in Sandy's judgment a much more allusive symbol which does not precisely refer to Israel or to the church but which was used only as a foil against the dragon who conversely is clearly described as Satan (12:9). Some scholars believe that apocalyptic literature needs to be read much like

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<sup>41</sup> Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 223–41.

<sup>42</sup> Johannes Friedrich, *Gott im Bruder? eine methodenkritische Untersuchung von Redaktion, überlieferung und Traditionen in Mt. 25, 31–4.*, Calwer Theologische Monographien, no. 7 (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1977), 163 as cited by David R. Catchpole, “The Poor on earth and the Son of Man in Heaven: A Re-Appraisal of Matthew xxv. 31–46,” *BJRL* 67 (1979): 355–97, 355–56.

Jesus' parables. Sandy explains, "Parables of Jesus used characters he created for the point of illustration; apocalyptic may do the same. We must proceed cautiously, therefore, in considering whether the details of an apocalyptic vision are precise, allusive, symbolic, predictive, imaginary or a combination."<sup>43</sup>

The lack of referential coherence in extra-biblical apocalypses may reinforce Sandy's point. The *Apocalypse of Peter*, written at least a generation after Matthew, reports a tour of hell which displays 21 types of sinners and their 21 corresponding punishments. The story seems to assume that people will be guilty of only one of the 21 sins. In spite of its overly simplistic presentation of the complex issue of guilt, the story still evokes its moral point and encourages a proper respect for God's judgment, its lack of referential precision or consistency with reality notwithstanding. The same apocalypse incorporates other accounts of the judgment which if taken literally would conflict with one another. In one scene, a person's deeds are personified to give testimony against him before the Judge. In another, people are put through fire as an ordeal. The righteous are unharmed and the guilty are burned. Details, like this, which cannot easily be reconciled into one coherent narrative, suggest to Richard Bauckham that the editor did not intend them to be taken as precisely literal.<sup>44</sup>

Many scholars think that the apparent lack of coherence in the stories reported as apocalyptic visions or other-worldly journeys is due to the composite or eclectic quality of their texts. Bauckham explained the inconsistent details in the *Apocalypse of Peter* this

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<sup>43</sup> Brent Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 114–16, 124–25.

<sup>44</sup> Bauckham, *Fate of the Dead*, 176, 202, 203. According to Bauckham, this eclectic grasp allowed "particular images and ideas to move from the apocalyptic of one religion to another," 209.

way.<sup>45</sup> J. J. Collins lists many other apocalypses which eclectically gather and juxtapose visionary scenes about essentially the same material with varying imagery (including Daniel, *Sibylline Oracles*, *Similitudes of Enoch*, *4 Ezra*, *2 Baruch*, and Revelation.) According to Collins, the apocalypses did not aspire to conceptual consistency. They brought together diverse formulations to complement each other.<sup>46</sup> Klaus Koch says the “composite character” of apocalyptic literature as a whole is evident in its widespread and frequent “breaks in the train of thought and contradictions in detail.”<sup>47</sup> Commentators must decide to what degree the apocalyptic elements in the Gospel of Matthew deserve a similar description. If Matthew’s apocalyptic descriptions of the judgment, including Matt 25:31–46, are as eclectic, diverse, and intentionally complementary as other apocalypses are believed to be, then it is quite possible that Matthew never intended Matt 25:31–46 to be read as a precise and detailed description of eschatological events.

Some scholars argue that similar apocalypses, including Matt 25:31–46, should be read less like predictions and more along the lines of the “poetic nature of myth.” Collins believes apocalyptic literature was meant to be poetic and mythological, to make its point by expressing feelings and attitudes rather than by describing reality in an objective way. If so, Matthew’s use of the apocalyptic genre may indicate a similar symbolic rather than literal intention.<sup>48</sup> According to Sandy even the word “symbolic” suggests too fine a

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<sup>45</sup> Bauckham, *Fate of the Dead*, 203, 245.

<sup>46</sup> J. J. Collins, “Apocalyptic Genre,” in *An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity: The Apocalyptic Imagination* (New York: Crossroads, 1984), 1–32, here 13–14.

<sup>47</sup> Koch, *Rediscovery of Apocalyptic*, 27. Koch here says this quality is perhaps equally apparent in the Mishnah.

<sup>48</sup> Collins, “Apocalyptic Genre,” 13–14, citing H. Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1921); H. Gunkel, “Das vierte Buch Esra,” in *Die Apokryphen und Pseudepigraphen des Alten Testaments: 2 Die Pseudepigraphen des Alten Testaments*, ed.

point for the way some elements in apocalyptic literature should be read. Sandy explains that an apocalypse's use of allusion should not be mistaken for symbolism. Symbolism suggests some kind of contact between the image and the thing to which it refers. The point of contact may be small, but it is usually well defined and broadly recognized. In apocalyptic allusions, however, the correspondence is less defined or precise."<sup>49</sup> For this reason, Sandy argues that apocalyptic visions are not always easy to decipher in advance of their recognized fulfillments. The primary function they served was to provide encouragement, not futuristic certitude. Efforts to read with a microscope to decipher each detail for its eschatological significance may defraud the genre of its intended function. "To hear apocalyptic, to feel its emotive language, to sense its mystery is to hear it aright."<sup>50</sup> Dan O. Via pushes the level of existential engagement even further when he writes, "The imagery of apocalypse is not just a vehicle for theological ideas but is mythological-poetic language which evokes imaginative participation and which elicits understandings and emotions which cannot be fully conceptualized in propositional language."<sup>51</sup>

In spite of a clear trend in apocalyptic studies to marginalize the historical and eschatological references of apocalypses, Kathleen Weber has argued that Matthew made

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E. Kautzsch (Tübingen: Mohr, 1900), II, 331–401; J. M. Schmidt, *Die jüdische Apokalypik* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1969), 195–204; P. D. Hanson, "Prolegomena to the Study of Jewish Apocalyptic," in *Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God: Essays on the Bible and Archeology in Memory of G. Ernest Wright*, ed. F. M. Cross, W. Lenke, and P. D. Miller, Jr. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), 389–413, 393–96.

<sup>49</sup> Sandy, *Plowshares*, 117.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 126–27.

<sup>51</sup> Dan Otto Via, "Ethical Responsibility and Human Wholeness in Matthew 25:31–46," *HTR* 80 (1987): 79–100, here 89.



identifiable efforts to encourage a unified expectation of eschatological events. Against those who believe that the details of Matthew's several descriptions of the final judgment are irreconcilable, Weber uses a version of the "Two Source Theory" to point out that Matthew was in other matters a very careful redactor who regularly altered his sources so that they would conform to his particular emphasis. Matthew also enriched the apocalyptic details of his sources. According to Weber, these facts alone should put the burden of proof upon those who would assume that Matthew did not attempt a level of consistency in his portrayal of end time events.<sup>52</sup> Though Weber recognizes that some elements in Matthew's eschatological passages must remain in unresolved tension, Weber believes Matthew's Gospel achieved a basic coherence in eschatological matters by encouraging readers to blend the several descriptions which it gives into one composite account or by leading the reader to understand the several less referentially precise versions in the light of one eschatological narrative which is more authoritative and direct.<sup>53</sup>

According to Weber, the apparent tension between the several accounts of the coming of the Son of Man is reduced by Matthew's use of five strategies: (1) Matthew isolates divergent accounts from each other so that the differences in them are not as easily noticed by the readers, (2) Matthew puts some of the divergent details into passages which use figurative speech such as parables so that readers may suspect that these details are not as precisely ordered as the details that appear in direct reports of the events, (3) Matthew places one eschatological description (Matt 25:31–46) in such a

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<sup>52</sup> Weber, "Events of the End," 2–3. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 50.

<sup>53</sup> Weber, "Events of the End," 51.

prominent place in his Gospel that readers are led to recognize it as the authoritative version, (4) Matthew encourages the readers to integrate the various accounts together by using similar vocabulary in each (Son of Man, angels), and (5) Matthew emphasizes the characteristics which are common to each account. This emphasis is based on their repeated appearance across the several accounts.<sup>54</sup>

These and similar arguments to be reviewed presently support the traditional opinion that Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats, though it includes a parabolic element and is given with the symbols and imagery of apocalyptic literature, was nonetheless intended by Matthew to be a factual and detailed reporting of an eschatological judgment.

#### Matt 25:31–46 Considered As a Prediction

Almost all commentators believe Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats addresses God's judgment at the end of the current age, but as the discussion above demonstrates, a high level of referential precision has been challenged because of the parabolic or apocalyptic quality of the passage as well as because of its lack of consistency with Matthew's other descriptions of the judgment. If the passage were taken as a precisely detailed account of the last judgment, and if the "least" and "all the nations" refer to mutually distinct groups, as such a reading would imply, then the passage might also imply that the "least" will escape judgment. Conflicts concerning the correct interpretation of this passage are often related to the various ways the commentators address this dilemma. The dilemma, of course, disappears for those who believe the passage was intended to be read as an evocative parable or as an allusive

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 105–7.

apocalypse. Commentators who believe the passage was intended to be more like a precise and detailed prediction have the burden of carefully distinguishing the “least” from “all the nations” in a coherent description of the final judgment.

Ramsey Michaels distinguishes these groups by saying the “least” are the preachers and teachers of the word. “All the nations” are the rest of the entire world which Michaels believes will have heard the word by the time the judgment takes place (as Michaels puts it) “either in the initial missionary contact or in a later stage, as catechumens or even baptized believers.” On the broader question, Michaels does not think Matt 25:31–46 speaks with complete precision about the final judgment, but argues rather that its description of the judgment of the hearers of the word serves as a thematic complement to the theme of the three preceding parables which give warnings more directly to church leaders.<sup>55</sup> Some commentators who believe the passage is a more precise, detailed, and more complete description of the judgment of “all the nations” solve the dilemma by saying Matthew’s Gospel predicts separate judgments for separate groups. According to this approach, the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats represents only the judgment of “all the nations.” The “least” would be judged in a different setting. The ongoing debate over the predictive precision of Matt 25:31–46 is clearly an issue which affects the interpretation of the passage.

This debate may be reduced to a question of genre. It touches upon the intended precision of biblical prophecy in general as well as the specific level of precision which Matthew implies for the predictions he makes. The general and specific aspects of this issue may be addressed one at a time.

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<sup>55</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, “Apostolic Hardships and Righteous Gentiles: A Study of Matthew 25:31–46” *BJRL* 84 (1965): 27–37, here 28–30.

According to Sandy, future oriented prophecies of the Old Testament may be divided into three specific headings: oracles of salvation, announcements of judgment, and apocalyptic. While Sandy describes the first two as less visionary or fantastic than apocalyptic, Sandy maintains that the figurative and poetic language in all Old Testament prophecy must be taken into account.<sup>56</sup> Sandy argues that the level of precision which may be expected for biblical prophecies in general may be gauged by the level of precision by which some prophecies have already been fulfilled. According to Sandy, this test demonstrates that prophecies exhibit a wide span of precision. Some may have a measure of uncertainty about fulfillment, give incomplete or enigmatic information, employ stereotypical language, conceal long spans of time, predict something that does not happen as expected, or on the other hand some may be fulfilled in a very transparent way.<sup>57</sup> To explain both his trust and his caution concerning biblical predictions, Sandy says “Prophecy is always accurate in what it intends to reveal. But exactly when and how things will happen is generally unclear. Biblical prophecies were not understood until after fulfillment. This was not because the hearers were inept. It was because prophecy is not primarily prediction.”<sup>58</sup> The emotive, hyperbolic, and figurative elements of biblical prophecy led Sandy to conclude that predictive prophecies in the Bible are more like poetry than prose.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Sandy, *Plowshares*, 107–08.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 146–57. Wolfhart Pannenberg maintained that prophecy is usually fulfilled “in such a way that the original sense of the prophecy is revised by an event that corresponds to it but nonetheless has a more or less different character than could be known from the prophecy alone.” *Jesus, God and Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 226.

<sup>58</sup> Sandy, *Plowshares*, 154.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

Sandy's conclusion is not universally received. Dispensationalism is a school of interpretive thought which characteristically takes the Bible's prophecies more literally than other schools of thought. As explained in Chapter 1 above, this presupposition of dispensationalism has a great influence on the way Matt 25:31–46 is interpreted by dispensationalists.

Specifically, the question at hand is whether Matthew's prophecy in particular is (in Sandy's terms) more "transparent" or more "poetic." James Kugel maintains that Matthew emphasized the "predictive aspect of Scripture" more strongly than other New Testament writers. While Paul often cites the Old Testament in support of a theological point, Matthew frequently cited the Old Testament as being historically "fulfilled" in the events surrounding Jesus' life (1:22–23; 2:5–6, 15, 17–18; 3:3; 4:14–16; 8:17; 12:17–21; 13:14–15; 13:35; 21:4–5; 27:9).<sup>60</sup> A verse near the end of the Gospel appears as a general description of Matthew's predictive use of the Old Testament, "But all this has taken place to fulfill the Scriptures of the prophets" (26:56).

Kugel's point, however, must be measured against the character of the passages that Matthew cites as predictions for the events of Jesus' life. Many of these passages would not have been easily recognized as predictions or interpreted exactly the way Matthew interpreted them before they were fulfilled in Jesus' life. According to Donahue, other challenges against "precision" in Matthew's use of prediction arise from Matthew's use of "multiple images" to describe the eschatological judgment. Donahue concludes that Matthew presents "no unified scenario" but rather gives conflicting details both in his description of the role of the angels (13:41, 49; 16:27; 24:31; 25:31), the descriptions

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<sup>60</sup> James L. Kugel and Rowan A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 135.

of who will judge (the twelve disciples, 19:28; or the Son of Man, 25:31); and of who will be judged (all those who cause sin and evildoers, 13:41; the evil and the righteous, 13:49; every person, 16:27; all the tribes of the earth, 24:30). Donahue concludes that the language is more evocative than descriptive and that any attempt to define precisely who is intended by the groups that are mentioned in these passages and in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats may exact more than the genre permits.<sup>61</sup>

However, the “multiple images” which Donahue points out may be difficult but not impossible to reconcile as elements of one unified scenario. The role of the angels is variously described, but not necessarily described in conflicting ways. Angels are said to separate the good from the bad in 13:41, 49. But they are not said, as Donahue claims, to be only “passively” witnessing the judgment in 16:27 and 25:31. Nor does the fact that angels are specifically described as gathering the “elect” in 24:31 necessarily conflict with 25:32 which says the Son of Man will gather “all the nations.” In each description, the angels’ tight association with the Son of Man suggests that the angels are in every case agents of the Son of Man in the judging process. This continuity may be more significant than the argument from silence which Donahue attempts. The disparity between the judging role of the twelve disciples and the judging role of the Son of Man may be explained as a difference between the critical judgment for entering the kingdom performed by the Son of Man and the disciples’ continual role of judging in the kingdom. Finally, the different ways the defendants are described in each account may be due either to multiple judgments or by the more and less precise descriptions due to the parabolic quality of some of the accounts. The question of whether or not Matt 25:31–46

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<sup>61</sup> Donahue, “Parable,” 11.

was intended to be a precisely detailed account of the judgment is related to but not identical with the question of whether or not other accounts in Matthew were intended to be precise predictions.

One final line of argument in favor of Matthew's intention to precisely predict the events of the judgment in Matt 25:31–46 may be drawn from an expansion of two of Weber's observations recounted above. Weber argued (# 3) that Matthew places one eschatological description (Matt 25:31–46) in such a prominent place in his Gospel that readers are led to recognize it as the authoritative version, and (# 4) that Matthew encourages the readers to integrate the various accounts together by using similar vocabulary in each (Son of Man, angels, etc.) These arguments which support Matthew's effort to relieve the tension of conflicting accounts may be expanded and strengthened by the following observations.

Excluding the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats, Matthew records seven parable stories with explicit eschatological reference.<sup>62</sup> The first of these ("The Wheat and Tares") includes eight eschatological elements which are repeated in many of the subsequent parables. These may be concisely listed as Son of Man, dualism between good and evil, the devil, the end of the age, angels as agents of the Son of Man, separation at the judgment, severe punishment, and splendid reward. Aside from the "wedding clothes" (22:11–12) which Matthew does not explicitly interpret, only two new elements are given in the eschatological parables which are not already introduced in the first. These are the eschatological commonplaces regarding the judgment's imminence

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<sup>62</sup> These parables are commonly called "The Wheat and the Tares" (13:24–30), "The Net" (13:47–48), "The Wedding Feast" (22:1–14), "The Householder and the Thief" (24:43–44), "The Faithful and the Evil Slave" (24:45–51), "The Wise and the Foolish Bridesmaids," (25:1–13), and "The Talents" (25:14–30).

(24:42, 50; 25:13) and the concept of determinism which is revealed in the cryptic statement of 22:14, “For many are called, but few are chosen.” It may be significant that ten out of eleven of these elements (all except for the “wedding clothes”) are repeated in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats, Matt 25:31–46. This passage not only stands at the end of Matthew’s eschatological parable stories, it seems to serve as a comprehensive summary of all that they contain.

Weber’s claim that Matthew intended to present a unified scenario of the judgment would be strengthened if Matthew intentionally introduced and summarized these eschatological elements in the way just described. In any event, the logical progression which Matthew intended his audience to follow from one thought to another or from one passage to another as they read or heard the text is a very important interpretive issue for Matt 25:31–46. For this reason, the following section will discuss the relevance of Matthew’s rhetorical structure to the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46.

### **Issues Regarding the Rhetorical Structure of the Passage**

The title to this section uses both the words “Rhetorical” and “Structure” in a less technical sense than these words are used in the systems of literary analysis known as rhetorical criticism or structuralism. By “rhetorical structure” all that is implied here is the literary result of Matthew’s intention to present his “line of thought” verbally to good advantage. Many studies attempt to trace Matthew’s lines of thought through Matt 25:31–46 by outlining the basic elements of this passage and by reading it as an integral part both of the Olivet Discourse and of Matthew’s Gospel as a whole. Structuralism and the interpretation of Daniel Patte have already been discussed in Chapter 1 above. Rhetorical



criticism, however, is more tightly related to the subject of this section so a few words about it are in order.

In his concise review of the role of rhetorical criticism in biblical studies, Grant Osborne defines rhetoric as “the art of persuasion.” In antiquity, the skills and methods employed in the art of persuasion were identified and standardized for the purpose of intelligently crafting an effective way to make a point in court, in political councils, or in ethical or religious debate. Rhetorical criticism is the analysis of a text or speech according to its use of these skills and methods of persuasion. In 1968, an interest in the rhetorical study of the Bible was piqued by the presidential address of James Muilenburg to the Society of Biblical Literature. Muilenburg invited biblical scholars to apply “rhetorical criticism” to biblical texts by marking and evaluating the texts’ aesthetic qualities, literary styles, and rhetorical structures. Immediately scholars began to analyze biblical books according to the standards of classical rhetoric, even though it is not very likely that the biblical authors intended to follow such formalized patterns in their writing. Osborne lists two studies which include sections dealing with Matthew’s Gospel, but neither one appears prominently in the commentaries which treat Matt 25:31–46.<sup>63</sup> The slight impact of rhetorical criticism upon New Testament studies may be due to its anachronistic tendency. This lack of direct impact notwithstanding, the movement at least encouraged an interest in the logical and emotive progression of ideas and images which authors arrange in texts for the purpose of making a cohesive point.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of N.C., 1984); and Burton L. Mack, *Rhetoric and the New Testament: Guides to Biblical Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

<sup>64</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity, 1991), 121–26. James Muilenburg, “Form Criticism and Beyond,” *JBL* 88 (1969): 1–18.

Some scholars today are ideologically following a similar interest without the anachronistically technical categories of classical rhetorical criticism. This newer approach is called “discourse analysis.” George H. Guthrie defines the discourse analysis of biblical literature as “a process of investigation by which one examines the form and function of all the parts and levels of a written discourse, with the aim of better understanding both the parts and the whole of that discourse.”<sup>65</sup> According to Guthrie, three presuppositions influence the scholars who use this method. The first is that meaning primarily resides not at the sentence level but above it – in the broader way that sentences relate to each other. Simply put, words, clauses, and sentences derive their meaning and function from the surrounding contexts. The second presupposition is that the constituent parts of a discourse function at various levels and play roles in relation to each other which should be identified. This means that sentences or clauses may relate to each other as restatements, descriptions, explanations, contrasts, concessions, and so forth. The relation sentences have to each other colors greatly the meaning of each sentence in the context of the whole. The third presupposition is that the cohesion of a text – the quality that gives the text unity – is the result of several dynamics working together in relationship with each other. According to Guthrie, “These relationships may be formal (i.e., a relatedness of form), semantic (related according to meaning), or pragmatic (related in function on the readers or hearers).”<sup>66</sup> All in all, the unity or cohesive quality of a text seems to be the most basic assumption of discourse analysis

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<sup>65</sup> George H. Guthrie, “Discourse Analysis” in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, ed. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 2001), 253–71, here 255.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 256–58.

while the basic goal of discourse analysis seems to be to properly describe how each part of the discourse relates to this central unity.

Though Guthrie seems pleased that discourse analysis is developing, he acknowledges that it has not yet made significant inroads on the exegetical methodologies of most New Testament scholars.<sup>67</sup> However, many scholars who have studied Matt 25:31–46 tend to read this passage in the light of the whole Gospel under the assumption that a better understanding of Matt 25:31–46 can be gained from a better understanding of the whole Gospel and that a better understanding of the whole Gospel can be gained by a better understanding of Matt 25:31–46. In a day when many were pitting pieces of Matthew against other pieces and blaming the apparent inconsistencies on Matthew's awkward confluences of discordant sources, G. B. Caird proposed that conflicts in Matthew were only "apparently contradictory" and that opposing statements in Matthew could be seen as examples of the Semitic habit of promoting balance and wisdom in the light of opposing tensions. According to Caird, the truth is somewhere between and including both sides of Jesus' apparently conflicting exhortations. For example, Jesus said we should let our good works be seen so that others may glorify our Father (Matt 5:16), but Jesus also warned us to do our alms only in private so that only God will see them and reward us.<sup>68</sup> According to Caird, the truth is somewhere in the balance of the two seemingly antithetical statements. Caird also believed that Matthew so carefully edited the theological content of his sources that we can be confident he did not

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<sup>67</sup> Guthrie, "Discourse Analysis," 255.

<sup>68</sup> G. B. Caird, *New Testament Theology*, compl. and ed. L. D. Hurst (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 262.

include anything he disbelieved.<sup>69</sup> Ulrich Luz concurs. One of Luz's major premises for his exegetical study of Matthew states, "The Gospel of Matthew is a book intended to be read as a whole and not in parts or pericopes. It is intended to be read not just once but several times."<sup>70</sup>

Not all scholars, however, who reciprocally read Matt 25:31–46 in the light of the whole, or who attempt to follow Matthew's lines of thought regarding Matt 25:31–46 agree on how to describe those lines of thought or how to characterize the unity of his Gospel. Some commentators argue that Matthew's Gospel contains some elements imported from tradition which fit awkwardly against Matthew's train of thought. George M. Soares Prabhu opined, "Not all is grist to the evangelist's mill! Not everything that he hands down necessarily reflects his own particular point of view. There is the force of tradition to be reckoned with, which will oblige him to incorporate into his Gospel material which may have no particular significance for his theology, even material which may conflict with it."<sup>71</sup>

Some commentators argue that an analysis of Matthew's rhetorical structure displays an intentional polyvalence rather than a single and unified meaning for Matt 25:31–46. John P. Heil, for instance, who was interested in what Matthew expected the auditors of his Gospel to "hear" concludes that Matthew intentionally built in a "double meaning" for Matt 25:31–46. According to Heil, readers hearing the first part of the pericope would identify with the sheep who represent those who assist the downtrodden.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>70</sup> Ulrich Luz, "Matthew the Evangelist: A Jewish Christian at the Crossroads," in *Studies in Matthew*, trans. Rosemary Selle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 3–17, here 3.

<sup>71</sup> George M. Soares Prabhu, *The Formula Quotations in the Infancy Narrative of Matthew: An Enquiry into the Tradition History of Mt 1–2* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1976), 43.

As the hearers continue to listen, however, they are soon led to identify, not with the sheep but with the downtrodden in need of assistance. Heil believes the poetic and parabolic quality of the passage allows both of these interpretations to be valid.<sup>72</sup>

Matthew's desire to conserve traditions and the possible polyvalence of his genre are not the only reasons commentators may find something other than unity in their analyses of Matt 25:31–46. Sociological considerations also lead some commentators to speculate contradictions in Matthew's Gospel. Writers such as Gerd Theissen and Kun Chun Wong think Matthew's Gospel includes discordant materials intentionally conflated without resolution by Matthew to appease opposing sides of a sociological conflict between the Jewish and Gentile Christians. Theissen and Wong study the parts in the light of the whole, but without a presupposition of unity, Theissen and Wong conclude that the lines of Matthew's thought are not always linear or even compatible.<sup>73</sup>

The following discussion of rhetorical structure will list some of the kinds of arguments which arise among the commentators who attempt to follow Matthew's lines of thought in Matt 25:31–46, as well as the lines of thought that connect this passage both to the Olivet Discourse of which it is the concluding pericope and to the Gospel of Matthew as a whole.

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<sup>72</sup> John P. Heil, "The Double Meaning of the Narrative of Universal Judgment in Matthew 25:31–46," *JSNT* 69 (1998): 3–14, here 13–14.

<sup>73</sup> Gerd Theissen, "Aporien im Umgang mit den Antyjudaismen des Neuen Testaments," in *Die Hebräische Bibel und ihre zweifache Nachgeschichte* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1990), 535–555; Kun Chun Wong, *Interkulturelle Theologie in multikultureller Gemeinde im Matthäusevangelium*, NTOA, no. 22 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 144–54 specifically treats Matthew's discussions of the final judgment. Another writer who followed a similar concept of sociological conflict is Kenzo Tagawa, "People and Community in the Gospel of Matthew," *NTS* 16 (1969–70): 149–162. These all cited by Ulrich Luz, "Anti-Judaism in the Gospel of Matthew as a Historical and Theological Problem: an Outline," in *Studies in Matthew*, trans. Rosemary Selle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 243–261, 250–51. Graham Stanton, "Once More: Matthew 25:31–46," in *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), 207–231, here 211.

### The Structure of the Passage Itself

An analysis of the rhetorical structure of Matt 25:31–46 presupposes the integrity of the text which is rooted in the intention of Matthew to verbally and effectively frame a line of thought. Against the trend of early historical-critical studies, C. F. Burney argued for the integrity of this text nearly one hundred years ago. Burney argued that Matt 25:31–46 appears to have been translated directly from a Hebrew Poem into Greek.<sup>74</sup> In spite of the fact that Burney's hypothesis has not caught much attention, a current literary turn in biblical studies has led many commentators to once more read the text "as is" without the speculative distractions arising from source and form critics or from the redaction critics who depend on source and form criticism. The speculative results and self-authenticating hypotheses of 20<sup>th</sup> century historical-critical scholars regarding the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 led Louis-Jean Frahier to remark that even if these methods do give some aid to the reading process, none of these can replace the direct reading of the account as such.<sup>75</sup>

The Judgment of the Sheep and Goats lends itself very well to an outline. The text divides nicely between major points. The passage contains a clear introduction, a brief parabolic analogy, one section which portrays the King's judgment upon the righteous followed by a similar section which shows the King's judgment upon the cursed. All of this is followed by a concise summary. The following outline of Matt 25:31–46 will help our effort to read the passage afresh:

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<sup>74</sup> C. F. Burney, "St. Matthew xxv. 31–46 as a Hebrew Poem," *JTS*, 14 (1913): 414–24.

<sup>75</sup> Louis-Jean Frahier, *Le Jugement Dernier: Implications Éthiques sur le Bonheur de L'Homme* (Paris: Cerf, 1992), 71.

25:31–32a – Introduction, “But when the Son of Man comes...”

25:32b–33 – Parabolic analogy—dividing “the nations” (τά ἔθνη) “as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats”

25:34–40 – The King’s judgment of the “blessed” (οἱ εὐλογημένοι)

25:34 – King’s invitation of the blessed—“inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (κληρονομήσατε τὴν ἡτοιμασμένην ὑμῖν Βασιλείαν ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου)

25:35–36 – King’s criteria—**enumeration of deeds** done to the King

25:37–39 – The question of the righteous concerning when they so acted upon the King (repeating the **enumeration of deeds** done to the King)

25:40 – The King’s response—“to the extent that you did it to one these brothers of Mine, *even* the least of them (ἐνὶ τούτων τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου τῶν ἐλαχίστων), you did it to Me.”

25:41–45 – The King’s judgment of the “cursed” (25:41, οἱ κατηρομένοι)

25:41 – King’s dismissal of the cursed to “eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels” (τὸ πῦρ τὸ αἰώνιον τὸ ἡτοιμασμένον τῷ διαβόλῳ καὶ τοῖς ἀγγέλοις αὐτοῦ)

25:42–43 – King’s criteria—**enumeration of deeds** done against the King

25: 44 – The question of the cursed concerning when they so acted against the King (concisely repeating the **enumeration of the deeds** done against the King)

25:45 – The king’s response—“to the extent that you did not do it one of the least of these (ἐνὶ τούτων τῶν ἐλαχίστων), you did not do it to Me.”

25:46 – Summary: [The cursed] to everlasting punishment (κόλασιν αἰώνιον); [The righteous] to eternal life (ζωὴν αἰώνιον)

Jesus’ introductory remarks put the reader in view of the eschatological coming and enthronement of the Son of Man and of the assembling of “all the nations” before him. Any suspicion that this is a judgment scene is quickly confirmed by the brief simile of 25:32b–33. Here the Son of Man is represented as a shepherd who will divide “them” (αὐτούς) “as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” The use of the masculine

plural “them” (αὐτούς) to refer to the neuter plural antecedent “all the nations” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη) may personalize this judgment. If so, the readers would now recognize at this point that individuals—not just nations—will be judged.<sup>76</sup> The Shepherd places the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. After 25:33 the only remnant overtly preserved from the Shepherd/sheep/goat simile in the balance of the pericope is the fact that some people will be grouped on the right and some on the left. Whatever cultural connotations would have been attached to sheep and goats or to the “right” and the “left” will now have colored the prospects of the people grouped on either side.

The rest of the pericope may be divided into two sections followed by a summary. In both the first and second section Jesus now refers to the judge as “King” (25:33, 40). The two groups being judged in each section refer to the judge as “Lord” (25:37, 44). The use of the word “Lord” by both groups may imply that professing Christians will be among both groups, but few commentators press this title here to imply that people on the left will lose a salvation already received.<sup>77</sup> Aside from the different verdicts pronounced upon each group and the careful use of concision in subsequently repeated lines, these two sections are virtual mirrors of each other. They each open with the King’s verdict (25:34, 41), followed by the King’s explanation of the criterion for reward or punishment (25:35–36, 42–43), followed by each group’s apparent surprise and their requests for further clarity (25:37–39, 44), and both sections conclude with the King’s concise answer to each group (25:40, 45).

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<sup>76</sup> Hultgren, *Parables*, 311, notices a similar construction is in 28:19 which says to baptize “them” (αὐτούς) even though the antecedent is the same neuter plural “all the nations” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη).

<sup>77</sup> Heil, “Double Meaning,” 11–12 is among the minority. Davies and Allison, III, 531 say the use of “Lord” in the second group is either insincere (as it is in 7:21–23) or signals the universal confession of Christ’s Lordship already expected by other Christians (Phil 2:11)



The most arresting difference between the two sections is the difference between the reward and punishment given to each group respectively. The “blessed” ones on the right are invited to enter the kingdom prepared for them by the Father from the foundation of the world (25:34). The “accused ones” on the left are told to depart into eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels (25:41).

Several other verbal characteristics of these two sections may be rhetorically significant. The enumeration of six charitable deeds (boldfaced in the outline) given twice in each section for a total of four times is the most prominent structural feature of the entire pericope. This repetition not only calls special attention to this list, but it is also an aid to the memory.<sup>78</sup> The progressively concise way the deeds are enumerated in the several repetitions of the list of charitable deeds may be significant in two ways. The simplifying of the phrasing used to repeat the list not only keeps the story moving by reducing monotony, the last and most concisely expressed list uttered by the condemned may also enhance their distress, especially when their response is compared with the leisurely prolonged repetition uttered by the blessed ones only a few verses before.<sup>79</sup> Finally, the lack of the word “brothers” in 25:45 may be due to more than Matthew’s desire to concisely phrase repeated lines. In 25:40, the King’s explanation to the blessed ones was given more fully, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, *even the least of them*, you did it to Me.” The use of the word “brothers” here invites the readers to aspire to be among the “brothers” with whom the King identifies himself. According to Heil, this is the point in the story where those who

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<sup>78</sup> Davies and Allison, III, 416.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 431, citing Théo Preiss, *Life in Christ* (London: SCM, 1954), 45.

hear it will stop aspiring to identify with the sheep on the right and start aspiring to identify with the “brothers” in need. Heil further explains that the King’s response to the cursed ones leaves out the familial “brothers” in order to emphasize the philanthropic and humanitarian sentiment which the cursed ones lacked. According to Heil, the point is that they should have been kind to those in need whether or not the needy were recognized as the King’s brothers.<sup>80</sup>

The apparent surprise of both the blessed and the cursed ones is sometimes used to rule out any quick and easy alignment of the “least” with missionary disciples. The argument for this claims that neither the blessed nor the cursed ones should have been surprised if their actions were motivated by the fact that the “least” were Jesus’ missionaries.<sup>81</sup> This argument, while strong, is not necessarily conclusive. The entire pericope read as a self-contained unit is still capable of implying that the defendants knew the “least” as representatives of the King even before the judgment. Under such a reading the surprise could stem not from the failure of either group to recognize the “least” as missionaries but could stem from the simplicity of charity among believers who befriended the missionaries on the one hand and the calculating obduracy of the unbelievers who did not on the other.

The summary of the entire pericope (25:46) re-emphasizes the final destination of each group. The summary leaves the hearer who thinks he may be more like the goats with fear, and the hearer who hopes he may be more like the sheep with the anticipatory joy of the kingdom. The fact that the pericope ends on the happy note that the righteous

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<sup>80</sup> Heil, “Double Meaning,” 11–12.

<sup>81</sup> J. M. Court, “Right and Left: The Implications for Matthew 25:31–46” *NTS* 31 (1985) 223–33, here 229, 231.

receive eternal life brings the pericope to a more comforting conclusion than it would if the eternal punishment of the cursed ones were the last thing mentioned.<sup>82</sup>

Considered by itself, apart from the balance of the Olivet Discourse or the rest of Matthew's Gospel, Matt 25:31–46 seems to present a stronger case that the judgment will include a criterion of active kindness to the downtrodden people of the world rather than a criterion that privileges Christian faith, fellowship, or Christian identity of any sort. Hultgren remarks that nothing within the passage itself would require a reader to assume that the “least” are missionaries. The personification of the “least” as missionaries, Hultgren says, comes only from comparing certain terms in the pericope such as “brothers” and “least” with passages in Matthew which imply a Christian identity through these terms. This is a practice which Hultgren normally approves, provided that the full force of the primary text being studied is not lost in the shuffle. However, since Hultgren thinks such an exegetical move, in this case, subverts the meaning of Matt 25:31–46, Hultgren prefers not to allow its use in this case.<sup>83</sup>

Hultgren's argument, while strong, is not necessarily conclusive. Other elements in the pericope could have carried a connotation natural to the language itself which could carry a narrower implication for the “least” than Hultgren admits. As explained above, the word “nations” often connotes the pagan or heathen nations as opposed to the Jews. If Matthew's readers understood themselves to be the true bearers of God's covenant, then the word “nations” may have implied for them “non-Christian.” The word

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<sup>82</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, III, 432.

<sup>83</sup> Hultgren, *Parables*, 321. The same point is made by Francis Watson, “Liberating the Reader: A Theological-Exegetical Study of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt 25:31–46),” in *The Open Text: New Directions in Biblical Studies?* (London: SCM, 1993), 57–84, 65.

“brothers” also more regularly carried real familial or religiously fraternal connotations. If these very possible connotations were given their full force in the beginning and middle of the pericope, then the whole context of judgment would shift away from the universal and philanthropic criterion which Hultgren suggests the passage teaches. The question in play in such a reading would then be, “Who among the people in the mission field of the pagan world will be accepted into the Son of Man’s kingdom, and who will not?” The criterion by which the question would be answered would then be, “He who shares and soothes the trials of the King’s afflicted “brothers”—they will be accepted. He who does not will be rejected.”

Though a reading of Matthew’s Judgment of the Sheep and Goats all by itself does not firmly settle this question, further evidence may be gathered from the immediate context of the Olivet Discourse to which we now turn.

#### The Passage As Part of the Olivet Discourse

Many commentators consolidate Jesus’ sermon against the scribes and Pharisees (Matt 23:1–39) with the Olivet Discourse (24:3 – 25:46) so that the combination is described as the fifth and final major discourse of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel. This consolidation is understandable given the relatively little space between the two speeches. In Mark’s Gospel, the story of the widow’s mite interrupts the two. Redaction criticism may therefore support the idea that Matthew, by removing this story, intended to bring the two speeches into thematic union. Gundry also notes that the intervening verses (24:1–3) serve as a link between the two speeches. Jesus’ words against the scribes and Pharisees (23:38) are invoked in Jesus’ prediction about the Temple, “not one stone here will be left upon another” (24:2), which phrase in turn serves as the catalyst for the

disciples' questions which introduce the Olivet Discourse. Gundry thinks the union of the two speeches allows them to be seen as a single discourse dealing with the history of the kingdom.<sup>84</sup> The Judgment of the Sheep and Goats is the concluding pericope of this extended history and speaks of the conclusion of the current age and the entrance of the righteous into the eschatological kingdom of the Father (24:3; 25:34).

A minority opinion among the commentators is represented by Daniel J. Harrington who believes the anti-Pharisaic connotations from Jesus' Jerusalem sermon should be recognized in the Olivet Discourse so that the three parables immediately preceding the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats should all be interpreted as an extension of Jesus' harsh warnings against the synagogue and not directly for the church.<sup>85</sup> If Harrington is correct, this Jewish context would greatly color the momentum in thought which readers or auditors would have experienced as they moved from these parables directly into Matt 25:31–46.

Most commentators, however, do not think an anti-Jewish invective from chapter 23 plays so heavily in the Olivet Discourse. Most think the three parables which immediately precede the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats address Christians specifically. This consensus, however, has not led to unanimity concerning the rhetorical effect such a reading should have on Matt 25:31–46. The several opinions about this

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<sup>84</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 474. For the purpose of the rhetorical analysis, the redaction argument is not as relevant as the argument based on the linking force of 24:1–3. Matthew hardly expected his readers to be redaction critics, but he would have expecting them to follow the lines of thought clearly represented in the text he wrote.

<sup>85</sup> Daniel J. Harrington, "Make Disciples of All the Nations," *CBQ* 37 (9175): 359–69; and "Polemical Parables in Matthew 24–25," *USQR* 44 (1991): 287–98.

issue will be addressed below, after a few more general comments about the Olivet Discourse and its relation to Matt 25:31–46

According to Frahier, the Olivet Discourse may be outlined into four sections. The Discourse is introduced by a limited dialogue in which the disciples ask Jesus in private conversation when the Temple will be destroyed and what will be the sign of Jesus' "coming" (literally "your arrival/presence," σῆς παρουσίας)<sup>86</sup> and of the "end of the age" (συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος, 24:2–3). The second section includes Jesus' direct and picturesque speech concerning these things (24:4–44). The third section includes the three parables which immediately precede the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats. The fourth section is the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats (25:31–46), which according to Frahier, resumes and extends the direct teaching of 24:4–44 (especially the concise description of the coming of the Son of Man in 24:30–31.) Many terms and concepts appear in 24:30–31 which also appear in 25:31–46. Notice the following highlighted phrases, "And then the sign of the **Son of Man** (25:31) will appear in the sky and then **all the tribes of the earth** (πᾶσαι αἱ φυλαὶ τῆς γῆς, compare "all the nations / τὰ ἔθνη" of 25:32) will mourn and they will see the **Son of Man coming** (25:31) on the clouds of the sky with power and great **glory** (25:31). And He will send forth His **angels** (οἱ ἄγγελοι, 25:31) with a great trumpet and they will gather together His **elect** (cf. "prepared for you from the foundation of the world," 25:34) from the four winds, from on end of the sky to the other."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> L.S. (1994), s.v. παρουσία.

<sup>87</sup> Frahier, *Le Jugement*, 56. The parabolic language of Jesus actually begins early in 24:32, "the parable of fig tree" and may include the example of the days of Noah (25:36–39) and what has been popular called "The Parable of the Thief" (25:42–44).

In addition to the verbal resonance between 24:30–31 and the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats which Frahier identifies, Davies and Allison mark the following:<sup>88</sup>

Table 6: Matt 25:31–46 Compared to 24:30–31

The coming of the Son of Man (25:31)	24:27, 30, 37, 39, 44
Eschatological glory (25:31)	24:30
Angels (25:31)	24:31, 36
All people (25:31)	24:9, 14
Eschatological judgment (25:32–46)	24:37–25:30
The kingdom (25:34)	24:14–25:1
Punishment of the wicked (25:41, 46)	24:51; 25:30

Readers or hearers who experienced the entire Olivet Discourse at one sitting would have probably sensed thematic connections from the repetition of these phrases and ideas. The lines of thought which readers/auditors may have followed into Matt 25:31–46 from the balance of the Olivet Discourse can be traced by identifying these similarities of words and concepts.

The opening lines of the Olivet Discourse record the disciples' questions to Jesus about the time of the future destruction of the Temple as well as about the signs of Jesus' coming and of the end of the age (24:3). Jesus deals with the first of these questions only cryptically through his reference to the "abomination of desolation which is spoken of through Daniel the prophet" (24:15). The rhetorical affect of the Temple's predicted destruction on the balance of the Discourse is a puzzle that is not easily solved. The whole question is related to the identity of the audience and whether or not the audience

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<sup>88</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, III, 417. Davies and Allison could have also mention the reward of the righteous (25:34; cf. 24:47: 25:21, 23).

lived before or after the historical destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. If the audience had heard the prediction before or very shortly after the Temple was destroyed, they may have anticipated the coming “end of the age” in close proximity to the destruction of the Temple. Had they heard the Olivet Discourse many years after the destruction of the Temple, they may well have envisioned a rebuilding of the Temple so that it may be desecrated and destroyed again prior to the “end of the age.” The destruction of the Temple plays only a small role in the logical lines of thought which extend from the beginning to the end of the Olivet Discourse. Emotionally, however, the prospect of its destruction would probably have been felt much more keenly by Jewish Christians who still identified with the Temple than by Gentile Christians who were barred from entering its most sacred places. The readers’ understanding of the other signs of the “end of the age” (24:5–28) would also be affected by their knowledge of the Jewish War, their understanding of apocalyptic discourse, and whether or not they would have understood these signs to be exhausted in the troubles of the Jewish War or whether these troubles would have been understood to only foreshadow a more terrible tribulation to come.<sup>89</sup>

As far as the second question about Jesus’ coming is concerned, all of Jesus’ responses about a coming speak in the third person about the coming of the “Son of Man” (τοῦ υἱοῦ / ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, 24:27, 30, 39, 44; 25:31) or of the coming of their “Lord” (κύριος, 24:42). The clear implication here is that Jesus is the “Son of Man” who will come at the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats.<sup>90</sup> One would also infer that Jesus is

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<sup>89</sup> Davies and Allison give a concise and helpful discussion of this issue. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, III, 328–36.

<sup>90</sup> Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 94. Redaction critics would notice that Mark’s parallel opinion question does not ask Jesus about his coming or about the coming of the Son of Man. Mark’s introductory question only asks when the Temple will be destroyed and what will be the sign (Mark 13:4).



the “master” (κύριος) in the parables (24:46, 48, 50; 25:18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26). The question about the end of the age, would have suggested the time at which the Son of Man will come in judgment (25:31). The concept of this “end” (τέλος) or “end of the age” (συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος) at the arrival of the Son of Man is invoked repeatedly in the Olivet Discourse, leading up to the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats (24:13, 14, 22, 27, 29–30, 35, 38–39). The inference that the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats will be conducted by Jesus at the end of the age would therefore be reasonable.

Davies and Allison notice a narrowing of focus as the “signs” of the end of the age are recounted. In 24:3–8, the whole world is in view, in 24:9–14 the woes of the church is in view, and in 24:15–28 the climax of the woes are upon Judea. Davies and Allison conclude by this that the entire Discourse implies that the end and the coming of the Son of Man are focused upon the Holy Land.<sup>91</sup> Could this mean that readers would have expected the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats to physically take place in the Holy Land as well? This is an interesting question, but even more pertinent to the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 is the mental preparation and emotional momentum which readers would have experienced as they encountered the balance of the Olivet Discourse prior to hearing or reading the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats.

Frahier thinks the warnings Jesus gave His disciples toward vigilance under the threat of false Christs (24:5, 24—ψευδόχριστοι), false prophets (24:11, 24—ψευδοπροφήται), and persecutions (24:9–10) would have placed the readers in a frame of mind to receive the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats as a warning and not as a consolation that God’s justice would reward those who befriended the disciples and

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<sup>91</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, III, 326.

punish those who did not. Accordingly, Frahier thinks that hearing Matt 25:31–46 immediately after the parables would have led the hearers to identify the “least” as other people in need of help, rather than as a narrower symbol for themselves and other persecuted Christians.<sup>92</sup> Sim, on the other hand, thinks the troubles and persecutions mentioned in the Olivet Discourse would have prepared the hearers to understand the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats as a consolation regarding God’s justice. According to Sim, the believing hearers would have identified with the “least” in just the exact way that Frahier rejects.<sup>93</sup>

The phrase “all the nations” (τὰ ἔθνη) in 24:9, 14 also plays differently in the lines of thought leading up to 25:32 in the varied explanations of the commentators. Frahier thinks both these verses imply a clear universality for “all the nations” as persecutors (24:9) and as recipients of the preaching of the Gospel (24:14). This universality includes Jews as well as Gentiles.<sup>94</sup> Harrington, as noted above, thinks the phrase τὰ ἔθνη in Matthew’s Gospel always means “all the Gentiles” and so the repetition of this phrase three times in the Olivet Discourse would have emphasized the idea that only Gentiles will face the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats.<sup>95</sup> Keener, who thinks the “least” in 25:40 (τῶν ἐλαχίστων) are missionary Christians thinks that readers would have understood the justice of the judgment better having already been told that “all the nations” (τὰ ἔθνη) would have encountered a missionary by the time the end

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<sup>92</sup> Frahier, *Le Jugement*, 83–84, 95.

<sup>93</sup> Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 234.

<sup>94</sup> Frahier, *Le Jugement*, 87, 89. Graham Stanton would add 28:19 as another example in which “all the nations” refers to Jews and Gentiles alike. Graham Stanton, “Once More: Matthew 25:31–46,” in *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), 207–231, here 214.

<sup>95</sup> Harrington, “Make Disciples;” “Polemical Parables.”

comes (24:14). However, Keener adds that the thematic momentum of the “Parable of the Wise Slave” (24:45–51) in which an evil slave is severely punished for abusing fellow slaves would have also prepared the Christian hearer to understand that they too would be judged according to their kindness or lack of kindness to each other.<sup>96</sup>

The freshest thoughts, images, and emotions which readers would have carried with them as they passed through the Olivet Discourse into 25:31–46 would have undoubtedly come from the three immediately preceding parables, “The Wise Slave” (24:45–51), “The Ten Virgins” (25:1–13), and “The Talents” (25:14–30). Most commentators recognize that these three parables set the stage for the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats, but the effect of these three parables upon Matt 25:31–46 is described differently from commentator to commentator.

Hultgren thinks that the clear theme of the three parables is that Christians are accountable to God for their behavior. This leads Hultgren to think that the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats should be seen as another passage in a series of passages on Christian responsibility. Therefore, any move in the final pericope toward the consolation of Christians regarding God’s justice against persecutors would be out of character with this more dominant theme.<sup>97</sup> Egon Brandenburger concurs and so labels the entire group of parables along with Matt 25:31–46 as an example of the genre he calls *Gerichtsparänese* (exhortations in the prospect of judgment). For Brandenburger, the clear intent of Matthew was to carry this theme through to the end of the Olivet Discourse. Any turn toward *Trostrede* (consoling speech) would have broken the line of

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<sup>96</sup> Keener, *Matthew*, 605, 606.

<sup>97</sup> Hultgren, *The Parables*, 320. Egon Brandenburger agrees,

thought.<sup>98</sup> Frahier also believes that Matt 25:31–46 radicalizes the exhortation to duty seen in the parables by putting their general description of service (24:45) into concrete actions of charity (25:35, 36).<sup>99</sup>

Weber thinks that the “surprise” of the condemned is a common theme throughout the parables. The foolish virgins were surprised that they could not enter the wedding, and the third servant who hoped his master would reward his conservative behavior was surprised that the master did not. Webber thinks this theme of surprise should lead readers to see the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats as the most surprising judgment of the series. Therefore, any long reach to distant contexts which may lead readers to conclude that the “least” are anything other than the poor of the world in general would be stepping over this very immediate and evident clue to the meaning of the pericope.<sup>100</sup>

Michaels on the other hand thinks the parables emphasize the duty which Christian leaders have toward those who hear them and that a shift toward the duties which the hearers have toward the ministers would not be a surprising move. Michaels therefore believes the “least” are teachers and missionaries.<sup>101</sup> Gundry concurs with Michaels that a clean break of theme exists between the parables and Matt 25:31–46, but Gundry’s adds a grammatical argument which Michaels neglects. According to Gundry, the particle  $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$  at the beginning of 25:31 should be read as an adversative signal similar to the “But” which the NASB puts here. Gundry thinks this  $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$  clearly marks a change in

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<sup>98</sup> Egon Brandenburger, *Das Recht des Weltenrichters: Untersuchung zu Matthäus 25.31–46*, Stuttgarter Bibelstudien, no. 99 (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1980), 100.

<sup>99</sup> Frahier, *Le Jugement*, 94.

<sup>100</sup> Weber, “The Image of Sheep and Goats in Matthew 25:31–46” *CBQ* 59 (1997): 657–79, here 657–58.

<sup>101</sup> Michaels, “Apostolic Hardships,” 30.

theme between the preceding parables and Matt 25:31–46 so that the theme of the three parables is the judgment of Christians while the theme of Matt 25:31–46 is the judgment of the whole world.<sup>102</sup>

This quick survey, displays a breadth of opinion among commentators concerning the lines of thought which run through the Olivet Discourse into Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats. A similar diversity of opinions exists regarding the general structure of the Gospel of Matthew and how that structure should relate to the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46.

#### The Passage As Part of the Whole Gospel

The question of how Matt 25:31–46 relates to the rest of Matthew's Gospel and what this relationship implies for the interpretation of this passage is complicated by two factors. In the first place, there is no unanimity on the general outline for Matthew's Gospel. In the second place, commentators disagree over how much help outlines give in the process of interpretation. Kingsbury especially faults the chiasmic outlines for their lack of help in interpreting Matthew's Gospel, but Kingsbury further notices that many other outlines in the commentaries are given with no suggestion regarding how the outline should be used as an aid to interpretation.<sup>103</sup> Outlines are, after all, just as much the product of interpretation as they are an aid to it. Well-ordered outlines can also be

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<sup>102</sup> Gundry, *Matthew*, 511.

<sup>103</sup> Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 2. Kingsbury specifies the chiasmic outlines of the following: H. B. Green, "The Structure of St. Matthew's Gospel," in F. Cross, ed., *Studia Evangelica IV: Papers Presented to the Third International Congress on New Testament Studies*, Christ Church, Oxford, 1965, Part 1, The New Testament Scriptures (Berlin: Akademie, 1968), 47–59, here 57–59; and J. C. Fenton, *The Gospel of St. Matthew* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963), 16–17.

artificial intruders into the process of reading a text if the lines of thought which the text represents were not verbally displayed in a symmetrical way.

The most regularly seen methods for dividing the Gospel of Matthew into its constituent parts are adaptations of the outline proposed by B. W. Bacon in 1930. Bacon recognized five major discourses in the Gospel each of which is preceded by a narrative section. Each of the five discourses is concluded with a transitional formula which varies only slightly from, “Now when Jesus had finished saying these things...” (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). Each of these formulaic expressions also serves to introduce the following narrative sections. Bacon referred to the combinations of each narrative section and its subsequent discourse as “books”. Following Bacon, these “five books” are sometimes referred to as Matthew’s Pentateuch. The five “books” of Matthew are preceded by the Nativity account (chapters 1–2) and followed by the Passion account (chapters 26–28) for a total of 7 main divisions in Bacon’s outline.<sup>104</sup> In this approach, the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats serves as the concluding pericope in the concluding major discourse. Bacon also noted that each of the other major discourses also contains references to the eschatological judgment in its concluding section even when the discourse itself was not greatly concerned with the final judgment.<sup>105</sup> Some commentators have also noticed that the Evangelist’s own vocabulary and style appears especially concentrated in these eschatological portions. These observations which are tightly connected to Bacon’s outline imply that the Gospel was written to give the final

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<sup>104</sup> B. W. Bacon, *Studies in Matthew* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1930).

<sup>105</sup> In addition to Matt 25:31–46 and the three preceding parables which conclude the final discourse the eschatological sections are for the first four discourses are 7:21–27; 10:32–42; 13:47–50; and 18:23–35. Bacon, *Studies*, 4:12.

judgment a special emphasis and that the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats was meant to play a prominent part.<sup>106</sup>

Bacon's outline has been critiqued on several fronts. Some think there were more than 5 discourses. The separate locations, audiences, and themes of the Jerusalem sermon (chapter 23) and the Olivet Discourse in (chapters 24–25) have led several commentators to list these as two distinct discourses.<sup>107</sup> Austin Farrar calls the resulting six-part division a "Hexateuch."<sup>108</sup> Seven discourses are counted by H. B. Green who thinks that the concentration of so many brief sayings of Jesus in chapter 11 raises this chapter to the status of an independent discourse.<sup>109</sup> David R. Bauer faults Bacon's theory for a lack of consistency and usefulness. According to Bauer, the narrative material is dotted with discourse, and the "discourses" often contain narrative elements. Nor can the moral instruction be confined to the five discourses. The narrative portions give moral lessons too. Neither do the five discourses align neatly with Moses' Pentateuch. Bauer concludes that the divisions are more literary and traditional than theologically significant. The five-fold division is seen in many Jewish texts (books of Moses, Psalms, *Megilloth*, *Pirque Aboth*) and should be seen as little more than stylistic.<sup>110</sup> The only help that Kingsbury

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<sup>106</sup> Lamar Cope, "Matthew XXV: 31–46 'The Sheep and the Goats' Reinterpreted," *NT* 11 (1969): 32–44, here 33–34.

<sup>107</sup> E. J. Goodspeed, *Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1959), 21, 134; A. Wickenhauser, *New Testament Introduction*, trans. J. Cunningham (New York: Herder & Herder, 1958), 182–83; J. Schmid, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (Regensburg: F. Pustet, 1959), 24; R. Walker, *Die Heilgeschichte im ersten Evangelium*, FRLANT, no. 91 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), 146; Joachim Gnilka, *Das Matthäusevangelium* (Freiburg: Herder, 1986); H. N. Redderbos, *The Bible Students Commentary: Matthew*, trans. Ray Togtman (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 13.

<sup>108</sup> Austin Farrar, *St. Matthew and St. Mark* (London: Dacre, 1954), 177–97.

<sup>109</sup> Green, *Structure*, 48. Robert Gromacki also recognizes seven discourses in Matthew, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), 73.

finds in recognizing these five discourses is the emphasis this outline brings to the revelatory character of these sections of the Gospel.<sup>111</sup> Craig Keener also thinks the outline is not helpful for interpreting the contents of the discourses.<sup>112</sup>

Jack D. Kingsbury has promoted an interest in reading the entire Gospel as a narrative. Kingsbury's outline therefore concentrates more on characterization, progression of story line, and turns of plot than did Bacon's analysis. For Kingsbury, Matthew's narrative naturally divides into three sections. Each new section is introduced by the formulaic expression, "From that time on, Jesus began..." (4:16; 16:21). According to Kingsbury, the three sections of this simpler outline more easily produce a thematic coherence than did Bacon's outline. Kingsbury's outline recognizes the following thematic divisions which reflect Matthew's view of salvation history: (1) The Person of Jesus the Messiah (1:1 – 4:16); (2) The Proclamation of Jesus Messiah (4:17 – 16:20); and (3) The Suffering, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus the Messiah (16:21 – 28:20).<sup>113</sup> According to Kingsbury, the Gospel was proclaimed to Israel in the second section, but Israel's rejection of Jesus as Messiah resulted in God's rejection of Israel and the transference of God's divine purposes to the church. The third section displays this transference and the condemnation into which Israel enters. The Gospel is now turned

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<sup>110</sup> David R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew's Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Sheffield: Academic, 1988), 129–32.

<sup>111</sup> Kingsbury, *Structure*, 6–7.

<sup>112</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 38.

<sup>113</sup> Kingsbury, *Structure*, 7–9. Kingsbury credits as precursors for this outline E. Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium des Matthäus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956), 1, 64, 264; and N. B. Stonehouse, *The Witness of Matthew and Mark to Christ* (London: Tyndale, 1944), 129–31. Kingsbury's student, David R. Bauer, has also promoted this outline in his own literary study, *Structure*.



toward the nations, but they too will persecute the church. In Kingsbury's reckoning, the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats reveals God's harsh judgment against the Gentiles who reject the Gospel and Jesus' messengers.<sup>114</sup>

Gundry critiques Kingsbury's three-part outline as too simple. The sections, according to Gundry, are not as neatly divisible as Kingsbury suggests. Jesus' Davidic (Jewish) messiahship continues to be a theme all the way through the third section even though, according to Kingsbury, Jesus had ceased to offer the national promises to Israel at the close of section two. Furthermore, Jesus' teaching, healing, and exorcism ministry also continues into the third section, even though Kingsbury's analysis dedicates section three primarily to Jesus' condemnation, suffering, death, and resurrection. Gundry thinks Matthew's outline was not the pure product of careful planning but was affected by what Gundry calls "editorial fatigue." According to Gundry, Matthew began writing by freely rearranging the Markan material with insertions from other materials. Toward the end, however, as Matthew grew fatigued, he followed Mark's model more closely. While Gundry admits that 4:17 and 16:21 mark turning points in Jesus' life story, he denies that these verses mark major turning points in the Gospel's presentation of salvation history. Gundry's critique implies that the relevance of these three divisions to the theological interpretation of Matthew is not as great as Kingsbury suggests.<sup>115</sup>

A simpler outline was suggested by Frahier with different interpretive results for Matt 25:31–46. Like Bacon before him, Frahier thinks the opening and closing of Matthew's Gospel should form two discreet sections. Chapters 1 and 2 cover Jesus'

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<sup>114</sup> Kingsbury, *Structure*, 155–57.

<sup>115</sup> Gundry, *Matthew*, 10–11.

origin and infancy, while chapters 26–28 describe Christ’s condemnation, his death, and his resurrection. Yet, somewhat more like Kingsbury, Frahier thinks Matthew’s Gospel is best divided into only three parts. According to Frahier, the middle section of Matthew’s Gospel is a relatively long exposé of the deeds and sayings of Jesus (chapters 3–25). In this outline, the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats appears to be designed by Matthew to conclude this long middle section and to prepare for the final section in which all of Jesus’ ethical teaching would be modeled by Jesus in the final chapters of his patient suffering. Frahier argues that Matthew placed the judgment scene here to call people to obedience and to eliminate the eschatological security anyone should claim based on election or a privileged place in the community of Christians. According to Frahier, Christians just like everyone else will be judged according to the practical application of the ethic Jesus taught and modeled. The Judgment of the Sheep and Goats, according to Frahier’s outline and interpretation, is a dramatic warning and an ultimate call for people to activate their faith in understanding, fidelity, and vigilance. The emphasis of ethics in Frahier’s analysis leads to the conclusion that the “least” must be the downtrodden people of the world in general. Any move to recognize in the “least” a symbol for a privileged group would be against the character of Matthew’s Gospel.<sup>116</sup>

Another attempt to relate Matt 25:31–46 to the balance of the Gospel is offered by Francis Watson. According to Watson, the Beatitudes, which form the introductory pericope of the first discourse (5:3–11) should be thematically compared to the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats which serves as the concluding pericope in Matthew’s final major discourse. According to Watson, the themes that are present in the Beatitudes and the

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<sup>116</sup> Frahier, *Le Jugement*, 76–84.

Judgment of the Sheep and Goats should sensitize readers to the presence of these same themes throughout the intervening material. Just as the Beatitudes describe a blessedness that is achievable independently of inclusion in the church, so the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats describes a criteria for eternal life which is not related to a person's membership in any specific faith community. Conversely, a confession of faith which may gain a person entrance into the church will not be enough in the day of judgment. Both the Sermon on the Mount and the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats point out that obedience is essential (7:21–23). The theme of right behavior and attitude expressed in the Beatitudes is further explained in Jesus' other calls for "works of justice and mercy" and his insistence that the kingdom would be given only to a nation producing its fruit (21:43). Further, Jesus never contradicted the Jewish hope of entering the kingdom because of obedience to God. In fact he endorsed it (19:17). Finally, the condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23 concerned the same "weightier matters of the law" which are promoted in the Beatitudes as well as in the most charitable reading of the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats, namely "justice and mercy and faithfulness" (23:23). Watson's conclusion is that the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats demonstrates in narrative form the criteria of the kingdom that are expressed in the Beatitudes. As the blessedness of the Beatitudes is not limited to Christians, so the blessedness of the righteous in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats will be conferred on merciful and charitable people regardless of the religious communities with which they identify.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Francis Watson, "Liberating the Reader: A Theological-Exegetical Study of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25.31–46)," in *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies?* (London: SCM, 1993), 57–88, here 72–74.

David C. Sim, however, critiques such a view as missing the very community-driven context of the word “brother” in 25:40 (5:22–24, 47; 7:3–7; 12:49–50; 18:15, 21, 35; 23:8; 28:10), and the broadly recognized theory that Matthew and his readers were very sectarian in their outlook, even if the exact nature of their sect is difficult to chart along the spectrum running from Christian Jews to Gentile Christians.<sup>118</sup>

In addition to attempts like these to recognize the broad structures in Matthew’s Gospel and to describe their interpretive relevance, many commentators recognize certain correlations of theme and vocabulary across Matthew’s Gospel which seem to be repeated in Matthew’s Judgment of the Sheep and Goats. Some of the more significant passages which appear in this regard among the commentaries include Matthew’s other references to eschatological events such as the “end of the age” (συντέλεια αἰῶνός, 13:39, 40, 49:24:3,) the cosmic “regeneration” (παλιγγενεσία, 19:28,) the activity of angels (ἄγγελοι) in the judgment (13:41; 16:27; 24:31,) Matthew’s use of “nation” and “nations” (ἔθνος / ἔθνη, 4:15; 6:32; 10:5; 10:18; 12:18, 21; 20:19, 25; 21:43; 24:7, 9, 14; 28:19,) and Matthew’s use of Greek words for “least” and “little ones” (ἐλάχιστος—2:6; 5:19; μικρός—10:42; 11:11; 13:32; 18:6; 10, 14). For those who regularly read the Gospel of Matthew, the recollection of these passages would have influenced the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46. It is reasonable to conclude that Matthew intended such a process of recollection to take place in his audience. These and other parallel passages have already been mentioned in the Chapter 3 above which discusses “intratextual considerations,” so there is no need to repeat the discussion here.

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<sup>118</sup> Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 232–33.

### The “Least” As a *Crux Interpretum* and the Classification of Interpretations

The survey in chapters 2, 3, and 4 of interpretive questions which divide the commentators demonstrates that hardly an issue which directly or indirectly affects the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 has achieved unanimity. The divisions concern questions regarding the life setting and motivation of Matthew, the exact shape of the primary text to be studied, its relationship to intratexts inside Matthew’s Gospel and to intertexts outside of Matthew’s Gospel, the genre of the passage, and the general structure or plan of the Gospel of Matthew and the significance of this structure to the meaning of Matt 25:31–46. In spite of this broad diversity, a very strong and broad consensus has been achieved regarding the most important question interpreters face when studying this text.

After surveying the opinions of over 1,400 authors regarding this passage, Sherman Gray concluded that the *crux interpretum* of the entire text is the identity of the “least” (in the genitive plural, τῶν ἐλαχίστων, 25:40, 45.)<sup>119</sup> Frahier called it the “neural (sensitive) point of interpretation” (*le point névralgique de l’interprétation*).<sup>120</sup> Donahue called it “the question most debated.”<sup>121</sup> Lamar Cope’s explanation of the critical role of the word “least” identifies three questions which show how the identity of the “least” affects the interpretation of the whole pericope. According to Cope, “An attempt to answer these questions is fundamental to any explanation of the passage.” The three

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<sup>119</sup> Sherman Gray, *The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25:31–46: A History of Interpretation* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 8–9.

<sup>120</sup> Frahier, *Le Jugement*, 72.

<sup>121</sup> Donahue, “Parable,” 25.

questions which Cope lists are: (1) Who are the least? (2) How are the least understood to be the Son of man? and (3) Why does their treatment result in judgment?<sup>122</sup>

While a broad consensus agrees that the identity of the “least” is a most important interpretive question, scholars who have surveyed the field of opinions are not agreed on how to classify the several opinions that have been offered. Arland Hultgren lists three opinions: (1) the unfortunates of the world; (2) Jesus’ disciples, that is Christians; (3) a subgroup of Jesus’ disciples, namely his missionaries.<sup>123</sup> Davies and Allison subdivide the last group to produce a list totaling five views: (1) everyone in need; (2) all Christians; (3) Jewish Christians; (4) Christian missionaries/leaders; and (5) Christians who are not missionaries.<sup>124</sup> None of these classifications clearly distinguishes the classic dispensational approach which not only identifies the “least” as Jewish Christians but adds the qualification that these will be Jewish Christians who represent the Gospel of the Kingdom during the Great Tribulation and that the judgment will determine who among the Gentiles will be allowed to enter the Millennial Kingdom.<sup>125</sup>

Frahier recognizes a theological motivation both among the Protestants and Catholics that touches upon this *crux interpretum*. For the Protestants, the suggestion that the “least” are all the world’s impoverished people too easily leads to a “salvation by works” and so challenges the Protestant doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone. Catholics, on the other hand, since the time of Thomas Aquinas, have understood

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<sup>122</sup>Lamar Cope, “Matthew XXV:31–46,” 39.

<sup>123</sup> Hultgren, *Parables*, 318–19. Sim has a similar classification of groups, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 232–33.

<sup>124</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, III, 428–29.

<sup>125</sup> Eugene W. Pond, “Who Are ‘the Least’ of Jesus’ Brothers in Matthew 25:40?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159 (2001): 436–48.

alms to be only one good deed among many and insufficient by itself to merit eternal life. Accordingly, Protestants and Catholics have distinct but equally identifiable theological predispositions to identify the least in such a way that service to them implies more than simple acts of charity which any pagan or unbeliever could perform. Frahier describes the effort to restrict the “least” to Christian missionaries as the latest example of efforts which try to solve the tension between Protestants who want to preserve their “faith alone” doctrine and Catholics who think alms are not enough.<sup>126</sup>

Luz’s classification of views regarding the “least” joins to this issue the similarly puzzling identity of “all the nations” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, 25:32). While Luz’s classification is not exhaustive, it is functional and has the added advantage of locating the several major interpretations in the periods of history in which these interpretations took shape and were most popular. According to Luz, the most recently popular view is the “Universal Interpretive Model” which holds that the “least” are all the deprived of the world and that “all the nations” include everyone in the world. Neither group is restricted according to race or religious identification. Luz remarks that this view seldom appeared in the early church, the Middle Ages, or during the time of the Reformation, but that it became important only in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and therefore, in Luz’s perspective, is a typically modern view.

Luz’s “Classical Interpretive Model” says that the “least” are all Christians, and sometimes only a subset of Christians variously identified by commentators as the baptized, the apostles, the perfected Christians, wandering charismatics, or pastors and

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<sup>126</sup> Frahier, *Le Jugement*, 74. The French word Frahier uses to describe this effort is *avatar* which may be translated “misadventure.” One senses a double entendre in Frahier’s “*avatar*” which sarcastically plays on the Hindu belief in the multiple manifestations of the divine being in human form.

teachers. Some commentators who held this view also limited the “nations” to Christians only. This by the way is the view that Luz identifies most with Matthew’s intention.

The third view which Luz identifies is the “Exclusive Interpretive Model”. In this view the “nations” represent only non-Christian people. The “least” are for the most part Christians and occasionally are limited to apostles or missionaries.<sup>127</sup>

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 have shown that interpretations of Matthew’s Judgment of the Sheep and Goats have been affected by the commentators’ views on Matthew’s life setting, views on the textual, intratextual, and intertextual issues which must be addressed, views on the genre of the passage, and views regarding the passage’s relation to Matthew’s Gospel as a whole. Chapter 5 will revisit each of these interpretive issues in turn and will offer an interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 which assumes that the primary locus of meaning for the passage is in the intention of its author.

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<sup>127</sup> Luz, “Final Judgment,” 279–86.



## CHAPTER 5

### THE INTERPRETIVE ISSUES AND AUTHORIAL INTENTION

The three preceding chapters have assimilated the data and questions which have become significant issues in the interpretive history of Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats (Matt 25:31–46). The current chapter will evaluate these interpretive issues from a reading perspective which acknowledges the author's intention as the primary locus of meaning for the passage.

Although Chapter 1 offered a brief review of many opinions regarding the locus of meaning for this passage, no sustained defense was given for any particular perspective on the locus of meaning. The issue of the locus of meaning was also discussed in chapters 2, 3, and 4. These chapters pointed out a few of the ways in which a commentator's opinion regarding the locus of meaning can affect the commentator's approach to interpretive issues regarding Matt 25:31–46. Still, no opinion regarding the locus of meaning was adopted as normative in these chapters. In fact, no opinion regarding any of the interpretive issues identified so far in this study has been decisively accepted or rejected. The questions have all been left open so that the current chapter may address them one at a time in a systematic order.

The order which will be followed here is the same in which the issues were presented in the preceding chapters. The first step will explain the reading perspective adopted here as one that finds the primary locus of meaning in the intention of the author of Matt 25:31–46. The second step will discuss the issues raised in Chapter 2 (the

historical identity of the author and the circumstances of his writing) with the modest goal of adopting a “working” description of the author and his circumstances. The third step will use this adopted description of the author and the circumstances of his writing to elucidate the textual, intratextual, and intertextual issues raised in Chapter 3 which have affected the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46. The fourth step will use all of the conclusions drawn in the preceding steps in an attempt to identify the nuances of the text which are consistent with the kind of genre and rhetorical structure which the author, as described, would have probably used to communicate his intended message to his intended readership. These four steps will be followed by a brief “Epilogue” which will reflect on the strengths and limitations of the resulting interpretation.

### **The Author’s Intention As the Primary Locus of Meaning**

No effort will be made here to argue that the author’s intention is the only valid locus of meaning for interpreting Matt 25:31–46. Current discussions concerning the locus of meaning and its relation to interpretation are complicated by the viciously circular question regarding the “meaning” of “meaning.” A similar vicious circle threatens efforts to interpret the word “interpretation.” Given the complexity of these issues, the diversity of interests which lead people to ponder them, and the tenuous arguments employed by theorists who have different interests in the question, the current study can only handily confess and clarify its working model concerning the locus of meaning and attempt to produce an interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 which is consistent with that perspective. Once this is done, a brief “Epilogue” will discuss some of the strengths and limitations of this method.

The following evaluation of the issues which have affected the interpretation of Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats will pursue the narrowly historical question concerning what the author of Matt 25:31–46 consciously intended to communicate to the readers for which he wrote. This narrowly historical goal must be distinguished from the goals that have guided some of the other interpretations of this passage. Practically speaking, this historical interest in what the author intended will be narrower than the theological or ethical interests which many other commentators have pursued. Chapter 1 briefly discussed the views of many commentators who have believed that theology and ethics are bodies of knowledge which are both informed by and exceed the author's historical understanding. Many commentators have attempted to draw information about theology, Christian duty, and/or ethics from Matt 25:31–46. Some commentators have also explained their confidence in the supposition that this text must be read as compatible with what they have learned about theology, Christian duty, and/or ethics from other sources outside of Matthew's Gospel even if the compatible "meaning" they draw from Matt 25:31–46 is clearly distinct from what the author himself intended. Conversely, the narrow interest in the author's conscious intention which is pursued in this chapter will not use the author's compatibility with theological, moral, or ethical ideas that lie outside of his own writing as an indication of what he meant, unless there is evidence from his writing or other historical means that he probably knew and incorporated those ideas. In other words, any theological or ethical interest which will inform this historical inquiry will be limited to the theological and ethical ideas which can be demonstrated to be the author's own based on the Gospel of Matthew and the description of the author and his times which will be adopted for this project.

This inquiry will also proceed with the very justifiable supposition that the author intended his teaching to be received as an accurate representation of the teaching of Jesus. This point, however, will not be used as grounds for using a compatibility with the broader teaching of Jesus which is available outside of Matthew's Gospel as a litmus test for the intended meaning of Matt 25:31–46. The truth which Jesus historically taught (like the disciplines of theology, morality, and ethics) is a body of knowledge which is both dependent on and broader than what Matt 25:31–46 was intended to say. To use compatibility with Jesus' broader teaching as a litmus test for establishing the author's intention for Matt 25:31–46 would be to place the real locus of meaning in the intention of Jesus rather than in the author of Matt 25:31–46. Conceivably the meaning which Jesus intended for the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats could be identical to the "meaning" which the author himself conveyed. This is at least what the author of Matthew's Gospel implies. For us, however, the process by which Jesus' meaning should be historically discovered would follow a different path than the one proposed here for discovering the author's intention. Jesus said many things that lie outside of Matthew's Gospel which should be taken into account if our inquiry were focused specifically on what Jesus intended concerning the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats. However, since the current study is limited to the intention of the author of Matt 25:31–46, any saying of Jesus which lies outside of Matthew's Gospel will be used to elucidate the author's representation of Jesus' teaching only if it can be argued on historical grounds that the author knew of that saying, understood it as Jesus did, and intended Matt 25:31–46 to be read as compatible to it.

More will be said in the “Epilogue” below about the strengths and limitations of locating the locus of meaning primarily in the author’s intention. For now, however, the admission of one limitation will qualify the reliability of the results of the current chapter, and the recognition of one strength will help explain the process of inquiry. One limitation of this method is that it is merely a historical inquiry. Historical inquiries present results whose strength can only be measured in terms of “probability” (at best only “highly probable”). Historical inquiries are also quite narrow. Answers to historical questions are given only in the indicative mode. Additional steps of discernment and application are needed in order to turn the indicatives of history into ethical imperatives. Historical data, even miracles, must be illumined with faith and insight drawn from a transcendent source so that they can reveal their theological significance.

The early E. D. Hirsch attempted to make a clean and neat break between the historical “meaning” of a text and its current “significance.”<sup>1</sup> Though Hirsch later softened this distinction in response to many criticisms of it, this distinction’s heuristic use in the balance of this chapter will help keep the focus on the “meaning” which the author intended Matt 25:31–46 to have for the audience he had in mind.<sup>2</sup> The “significance” which this text has for readers and commentators today will be treated as a different question. For now, it needs only to be admitted that after all things are said

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<sup>1</sup> E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale, 1967). In a subsequent work, E. D. Hirsch appears to back away from this neat and clean distinction between meaning and significance – especially in the interpretation of texts which Hirsch calls “trans-historical” or “trans-occasional”. These texts include legal documents drafted for broader application than current situations may suggest and certain religious texts which are taken to have general authority. E. D. Hirsch, “Transhistorical Intentions and the Persistence of Allegory,” *New Literary History* 25 (1994): 549–68.

<sup>2</sup> Grant R. Osborne reviews the discussion regarding this distinction and concludes that Hirsch’s earlier work lacks sufficient criteria for discerning either a text’s original meaning or the distinction between a text’s meaning and its significance. *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 293–96.

about what the author probably intended for the audience which he had in mind, the process of application must be engaged before the significance of his historical intention may be realized by readers today.

One of the methodological advantages of focusing on authorial intention is that the recognition of the author's intention as the immediate goal not only narrows the focus of inquiry, it also brings with it a helpful criterion by which to discern which interpretive issues are relevant and how they are relevant. This chapter will demonstrate how helpful this narrow focus will be as an aid in discerning how to evaluate the interpretive issues which have arisen among commentators who have treated this passage.

### **The Historical Identity of the Author and the Circumstances of His Writing**

A clear description of the author of Matt 25:31–46 and of the circumstances of his writing is a basic asset for gaining the clearest understanding of his intention for the things he wrote. In antiquity, the report of Papias seems to be the root of all subsequent claims that Matthew the tax collector turned apostle (Matt 9:3; 10:3) authored the Gospel that bears his name.<sup>3</sup> In modern times, Papias' claim that Matthew originally wrote his account "in Hebrew" (Ἑβραϊδὶ διαλέκτῳ) and that everyone else "translated" (ἠρμήνευσεν) it as he was able has been used to discredit the ancient belief that Matthew wrote the first Gospel because the Gospel of Matthew is written in Greek and does not appear to be translated from any Semitic language.<sup>4</sup> Joseph Kürzinger's translation of Papias' report, however, has produced a new perspective. According to Kürzinger,

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<sup>3</sup> Eusebius, *Hist Eccl* 3.39;

<sup>4</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988, 1997, 2004), I, 8.

Papias' words should be understood in a more technical sense – in the way that rhetoricians of his day used the same terms. Accordingly, Papias' report should be translated to say that Matthew wrote in a “Hebraic style” and that every one “explained” him as well as they could.<sup>5</sup> Since Kürzinger's translation is possible, since it accurately describes Matthew's relatively higher use of Jewish exegetical practices, and since Matthew's Gospel did quickly become the most quoted Gospel of the ancient church, there is little to discredit the revised translation of Kürzinger.<sup>6</sup> All of the ancient manuscripts that include any title at all for the first Gospel describe it as “according to Matthew” (KATA MAΘΘΑΙΟΝ).<sup>7</sup> Therefore it is not unreasonable to conclude that the Gospel of Matthew we have today is at least the fruit if not the very root of Matthew's account.

Most commentators think some degree of editing took place between the Gospel's origin and its current form. The review of this issue in Chapter 2 above shows that opinions about the identity of the Gospel's final editor and of his circumstances are widely varied. In the light of this variety of opinions, historical certainty about the process of writing would be a bold claim indeed. However, it seems reasonable to

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<sup>5</sup> Josef Kürzinger, “Die Aussage des Papias von Hierapolis zur literarischen Form des Markusevangeliums,” *BZ* 21, no. 2 (1977): 245–264. Kürzinger's idea is discussed in Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, I, 15–17 and Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 617–20.

<sup>6</sup> Eusebius' claim that Papias was of little intelligence, if it were accurate, would weigh against the idea that Papias was skilled in rhetoric (*Hist. Eccl.* 3.11–13). However, Robert Grant has shown that Eusebius had theological motivations for discrediting Papias' chiasm and Papias' supplemental support for the apostolic authorship of the book of Revelation. Eusebius may therefore not be a reliable witness of the intelligence or rhetorical understanding of Papias. Robert M. Grant, “Papias in Eusebius' Church History,” in *Mélanges d'histoire des Religions*, ed. Henri-Charles Puech (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974), 209–13, here 211–13. Seán Kealy cites patristic data for Matthew's popularity in *Matthew's Gospel and the History of Biblical Interpretation*, 2 vols. (Lewiston: Mellen, 1997), 5–6.

<sup>7</sup> Davies and Allison, I, 129.

conclude that the Apostle Matthew would not have depended as heavily on intervening sources as appears to be the case for the Gospel that bears his name in the light of a comparative reading of the Synoptics.<sup>8</sup> Beyond this, a more detailed description of the final editor may be achieved through a reciprocal process of reading the Gospel in the light of an initial hypothesis about the editor with the freedom to adjust the hypothesis as the reading of the Gospel sheds more light on the question.

For heuristic purposes, and because one must begin somewhere, the model of authorship which is chosen for the balance of this evaluation is that proposed by the recent and very circumspect work of Craig S. Keener. According to Keener, the final editor—henceforth called the “Evangelist”—of Matthew’s Gospel probably concluded the work of a “Matthean school” which was entrusted with the original teaching of Matthew. He probably finished the work within a decade of the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. He probably wrote in a large city of Syro-Palestine in which some tension could be felt between the influence of the growing rabbinic movement and the call of the church to preach the Gospel among the Gentiles.<sup>9</sup> In Keener’s view, the Gospel of Matthew does not presuppose a complete break between Christians and Jews. Its Christianity was rather engaged with other forms of Judaism for the heart and soul of the Jewish people.<sup>10</sup> As a member of the “Matthean School” the Evangelist shows evidence of the same kind of “scribalism” employed by the emerging rabbinic movement and other

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<sup>8</sup> Ulrich Luz and Helmut Koester, *Matthew: A Commentary*, 3 vols., trans. James A. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989, 2001, 2005), I, 94.

<sup>9</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 38–44.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.



first century Jews.<sup>11</sup> His use of Jewish Scripture and other texts may therefore be illuminated by comparing it to the practices of his Jewish contemporaries. Though the Gospel's call to make disciples of "all the nations" implies that its message was intended to be carried to every society "to the end of the age" (Matt 28:19–20), the work appears to have a primary function (in Keener's words) "as a discipling manual, a 'handbook' of Jesus' basic life and teaching, relevant to a Jewish-Christian community engaged in the Gentile mission and deadlocked in scripture polemic with their local synagogue communities."<sup>12</sup>

The balance of this chapter will assume that the Evangelist portrayed his work as a faithful representation of the tradition he inherited from Matthew. No final claim of accuracy for the speculations offered here about the Evangelist will be made in this section of the study. The historical credibility of the conclusions presented in this chapter will often be dependent upon the historical accuracy of the description adopted for this Evangelist and his situation. The current work only intends to explain the kind of interpretation which would have likely been intended by the Evangelist described above. When the following evaluation of interpretive issues is complete, the need to adjust the "working" description of the Evangelist may become apparent. Other scholars may wish to make these adjustments and push the whole process through an additional round in the reciprocal process of interpreting the text in the light of the Evangelist's identity and the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 45, 51. Keener here recommends Richard Bauckham's "Introduction" and collection of essays which say the Gospels were intended to reach the entire Mediterranean world, in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard J. Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 1–9. Richard A. Burridge in the same work argues for a broadly intended readership in "About People, by People, for People: gospel Genre and Audiences, 113–46. Bauckham makes the same point in *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biographies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 248–49.

Evangelist's identity in the light of his text's interpretation. With these admissions made, a quick run through the interpretive issues raised in Chapter 2 which are related directly to the identity of the Evangelist and his intended audience may be attempted.

The date is an important issue. A date in the AD 70s would not eliminate the possibility that a contemporary of Jesus and Matthew the Apostle edited the text.<sup>13</sup> Very likely contemporaries of Jesus would have heard it read.<sup>14</sup> Bold departures from Jesus' teaching would have discredited the Gospel among the people who could have best vouchsafed its credibility. The Evangelist's intention for Matt 25:31–46 may therefore be illuminated by a modest use of the broader Jesus tradition, as long as the resulting interpretation is not a radical departure from what is discernable in a reading of Matthew's Gospel by itself. The Evangelist's failure to use any "illuminating" parallels in Jesus' sayings outside of Matthew's Gospel (such as the "Good Samaritan," Luke 10:30–37) was either accidental or intentional. If accidental, we cannot assume that Matthew knew the "illuminating" traditions of Jesus or that the Evangelist's intention of Matt 25:31–46 was compatible with those sayings. If the omissions were intentional, we have less reason for assuming that the omitted sayings should help us understand the Evangelist's intention for the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats.

A date in the AD 70s would explain the difficulty scholars have in forming a consensus on whether Matthew's Gospel sided with the Gentile church against the synagogue or with a Christian synagogue against the Gentile church.<sup>15</sup> The Evangelist

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<sup>13</sup> Conceivably, Matthew the Apostle could have still provided some counsel for the development of the document.

<sup>14</sup> Keener, *Matthew*, 26.

<sup>15</sup> Davies and Allison list significant scholars who hold opposite opinions here, *Matthew*, I, 10–11.

and his original audience probably stood at the brink of the growing tension and found solidarity and differences with the forces on both sides which eventually brought a more complete rupture. Accordingly, the warning in Matt 21:43 would have implied God's rejection only of the "chief priests and the elders" to whom the warning was more directly addressed (21:23), rather than the entire Jewish "nation" of Israel.<sup>16</sup> The argument proposed by many that the text may be read as an example of first-century Jewish scribal discourse is also strengthened.<sup>17</sup> This point will be highly relevant in the sections below which treat genre and intertextual issues. The question there will be not whether Matt 25:31–46 may be illumined by other Jewish texts, but which Jewish texts share most thoroughly the views of the Evangelist of Matthew's Gospel.

The Syrian provenance provides some momentum for understanding the tension in the Gospel between the special priority of the Jews (Matthew 10) and the mission to take the Gospel to the whole world (28:18–20). Antioch in Syria is described in the book of Acts as a great missionary sending city (Acts 13). Antioch in Syria was also played a key role in the tensions that arose between Jewish and Gentile Christians over issues related to Jewish purity laws (Acts 15). A Syrian context would also intensify the

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<sup>16</sup> Anthony J. Saldarini points out that *ethnos* in the Hellenistic-Roman period could refer to guilds, trade associations, social classes, a caste or political subdivision. The word refers to groups who carry certain functions in Plato's ideal city (*Republic* 421c). Even orders of priests can be the holy *ethnē*. *Matthew's Christian Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), 59–60.

<sup>17</sup> E. von Dobschütz argued that Matthew was a rabbi of the school of Jochanan ben Zakkai, "Matthäus als Rabbi und Katechet," *ZNW* 27 (1928): 338–48; Krister Stendahl that his work resembles the *pesharim* of the DSS by, *The School of St. Matthew* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 31. Günther Bornkamm and Birger Gerhardsson call Matthew a "scribe." Günther Bornkamm, "End Expectation and Church in Matthew," in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, ed. Günther Bornkamm, G. Barth and H. J. Held (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 49; Birger Gerhardsson, *The Testing of God's Son (Matt 4:1–11 & Par.): An Analysis of an Early Christian Midrash*, trans. John Toy Coniectanea biblica, New Testament 2, no. 1 (Lund: Gleerup, 1966), 79; and Goulder says he was an "expert" on the text of scripture and was responsible for training disciples, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew*, (London: SPCK, 1974), 10.

*Didache's* relevance as an early witness to the pericope's received interpretation. This will be discussed below under intertextual issues.<sup>18</sup>

As the production of a scribal process, Matthew's Gospel would have probably intended a depth and intricacy of argument which would have made its repeated reading a progressively profitable exercise.<sup>19</sup> The enigmatic nature of some of the Gospel's content would have required that public readings be followed by some exposition, probably by an official teacher of the church.<sup>20</sup> For the same reason, the fullest understanding of Matt 25:31–46 should not overlook the intra-textual cross-references between this text and the Gospel as a whole (discussed below).

If the Evangelist was as he is described here, his position regarding relevant theological issues would have been more likely one way than another. The following description of his views on four theological areas is inferred from reading the Gospel of Matthew as if the Evangelist described here is its editor.

#### Salvation History in the Gospel of Matthew

The Evangelist described above would have held a view of salvation history which considered God's special role for Israel as a current and continuing thing, in spite of the failure of many contemporary Jews to receive Jesus as Messiah.<sup>21</sup> The Evangelist

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<sup>18</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels thinks *Didache* 4 supports an alignment of the "least" with Christian teachers: "Apostolic Hardships and Righteous Gentiles: A Study of Matthew 25:31–46," *BJRL* 84 (1965): 27–37, here 31.

<sup>19</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Studies in Matthew*, trans. Rosemary Selle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 3–5.

<sup>20</sup> This was the practice of Jews in the first century. Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (New York: Oxford, 1985), 113; Shinan Avigdor, "Sermons, Targums, and the Reading from Scriptures in the Ancient Synagogue," in *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1987); Luke 4:15–27; and 1 Tim 4:13–14.

<sup>21</sup> Georg Strecker and Rolf Walker's view emphasizes the failure and rejection of Israel more than our author would have. Georg Strecker, "The Concept of History in Matthew," *JAAR* 35 (1967): 219–30,

does not make Christianity a religion which must be foreign to the Jewish synagogues nor to Jewish traditions. Christ's advice given in Jerusalem to follow the scribes and Pharisees is unique to Matthew's Gospel and was given both "to the multitudes and to His disciples" (23:1–3) who in the lifetime of Jesus were almost exclusively ethnic Jews. Our Evangelist would not have believed that the law of Moses has been replaced by the teaching of Jesus, at least not for the Jews. The teaching of Jesus would rather be seen as the proper application of the law which exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:17–20).<sup>22</sup>

A more difficult question concerns the level of freedom given to non-Jewish Christians regarding the particular Jewish laws which were given to teach Israel to be separate from the nations around them. The answer to this question must be found as a resolution to the tension which is apparent between Jesus' command in Matthew to "make disciples of all the nations" and its process of "teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (28:19–20).<sup>23</sup> Did the Evangelist intend the non-Jewish converts to Christianity to observe what the scribes and Pharisees who sit in Moses' seat teach (23:1–3)? The question is relevant to the interpretation of 25:31–46 because of the potentially

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221–23. Rolf Walker, *Die Helsgeschichte im ersten Evangelium* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), 114–227.

<sup>22</sup> As the following imply: H. Frankemölle, "Jahwebund und Kirche Christi," *Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen N.F.* 10 (1974), 351. Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 31–37. David R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew's Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Sheffield: Academic, 1988), 45.

<sup>23</sup> Matthew has no counterpart to the parenthetical comment in Mark 7:19 suggesting that Jesus "declared all foods clean." In the earliest evidence regarding the eating of meat offered to idols, Paul's resolution appears to be more liberal (1 Corinthians 8) than that of James and the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:19–20). If Rev 2:14 has a bearing here, the debate seemed to outlive Paul's ministry. The Gospel of Matthew's broad popularity may have been due to the fact that it does not exhibit a hard and fast answer to this divisive question. Eventually, Paul's example and counsel to let love and sensitivity to others arbitrate the matter won the day (Romans 14).

ethnic connotation of the phrase “all the nations” in 25:2 to describe the ones who will be assembled for the judgment. Did the Evangelist intend this group to signify Gentiles only? The potentially ethnic connotation for the word “brothers” as a description of the “least” (25:40) is also at issue. If the Evangelist intended Christianity to be characteristically Jewish in distinction from the Gentiles, then the potentially ethnic connotation of these two phrases should be given its full voice.

The dispensational view which retains the full ethnic connotation in both “nations” and “brothers” concludes that the “nations” are Gentiles, and the “least” are Jews, the natural kin of Jesus.<sup>24</sup> While such a reading is compatible with the Evangelist as described, the dispensational argument seems to spring more from its effort to place the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats into an elaborate time sequence of eschatological events drawn from a literal interpretation of apocalyptic texts and the role of the 144,000 Jewish witnesses described in Revelation 7 and 14:1–5. It is doubtful that our Evangelist knew the book of Revelation. For historical purposes, our interpretation of his intention must be made without reference to texts he probably did not know.<sup>25</sup>

A better understanding of the salvation history which underlies Matt 25:31–46 may be gained from the insights of the scholars who have noticed that Matthew’s Gospel frequently presents Jesus as adopting, completing and surpassing in his own person and ministry the special role of service to which Israel as a nation was called in the Old Testament. According to this view of salvation history, Christians, both Jew and non-Jew,

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<sup>24</sup> C.I. Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1945), 1036, 1337, 1350–51.

<sup>25</sup> This comment is not intended to challenge the theological viewpoints of dispensationalism, which in any case do not include the idea that the writers of inspired Scripture always understood the full eschatological ramifications of their own writings (Dan 12:8–9).

join Jesus in this role.<sup>26</sup> In this view, Jesus' title as "Son of Man" (Matt 25:31) harks back to Dan 7:13 in which the Son of Man appears to symbolize "the saints" who have been mistreated by the kingdoms of this world (7:18, 21, 22, 25).<sup>27</sup> In Daniel's telling, a court will sit for judgment and the evil powers that oppressed the saints will be annihilated. "Then the sovereignty, the dominion, and the greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Highest One; His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all the dominions will serve and obey Him" (7:27). Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats fits the courtroom scene forecast in Dan 7:27. The word play of Daniel 7:27 allows the "saints of the Highest One" to serve as an antecedent to "his" and "him" (i.e., the Son of Man). This grammatical curiosity may have been the basis upon which a Jewish scribe like the one we presuppose would have argued for solidarity between the Christians and Jesus. In this reading, the "least" who are identified with the Son of Man (Matt 25:40, 45) could be Christians regardless of their ethnic identity.

### The Mission Expressed in Matthew's Gospel

The partnership implied between Jesus and his disciples by the "salvation history" of the proposed Evangelist is explicitly claimed to exist between Jesus and his missionary

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<sup>26</sup> T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge: University Press, 1935), 227; G. B. Caird, *New Testament Theology*, 374, 380, 418–19. C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (London: Fontana, 1965) and *The Founder of Christianity* (London: Collins, 1970) especially "The Founder of Christianity," 81–97, here 90; C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: University Press, 1977), 14, 19, 157–58, 174. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1996), 515–17, 524. Keener, *Matthew*, 68.

<sup>27</sup> G. B. Caird, *New Testament Theology*, completed and ed. by L. D. Hurst (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 380.

disciples in the “Great Commission,” “And Jesus came up and spoke to them saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age’ ” (Matt 28:18–20). The “authority” Jesus claims here is reminiscent of that which was implied for the Son of Man in Dan 7:13-14.<sup>28</sup> Though this intertextual allusion in the Great Commission carries implications regarding a realized eschatology as the church fulfills the Great Commission, the passage cannot be used against the idea of a future eschatology because 28:20 ends by invoking the eschatological “end of the age” which in Matt 24:3 is used in reference to future eschatology. Daniel’s Son of Man figure is invoked also in the Great Commission by Jesus’ tight alignment with the disciples in their missionary work. In Daniel 7, the Son of Man serves as a symbol for the “people of the saints of the Highest One” (Dan 7:17, 21, 22, 27). In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is not only represented by the disciples, he is present with them.

The alignment of Jesus with his disciples in their missionary effort to the entire world is also foreshadowed by Matthew’s earlier missionary discourse regarding the Jewish mission. There, Jesus specifically said that potential converts who received the disciples would be judged as if they had received Jesus himself (10:40). Severe curses were issued upon those who refused to help the missionaries with practical needs as they traveled and preached (10:9–15, 40–42).

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<sup>28</sup> Dave L. Turner, “The Gospel of Matthew,” in Philip W. Comfort, ed., *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Matthew and Mark*, vol. 11, 1-389, here 377.



Another issue related to the mission expressed in Matthew's Gospel which has a bearing on the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 concerns the implied mission field to which the disciples were sent in 28:19–20. Ulrich Luz opined, even to his own disappointment, that the phrase “all the nations” in 28:19 was intended to direct the mission of the church to Gentiles only. The Jews in this reading would be left under God's curse.<sup>29</sup> Luz did not, however, consistently interpret the phrase “all the “nations” in 25:31 as equally exclusive of the Jews so that the Jews would be excluded from the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats.<sup>30</sup> The Evangelist whose perspective is the focus of the current study would have probably understood the phrase “all the nations” both in the Great Commission and in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats to include all peoples whether Jewish or non-Jewish. Under the presupposition of salvation history outlined above, the fuller role in salvation history which Jesus and his disciples play would allow the Christian church to adopt the role of Israel as God's people. All others, even non-Christian Jews would be considered on the outside of this favored group and would therefore be referred to as “the nations”. This seems to be what lies behind the warnings in Matt 24:9 and 14 which contrasts Jesus missionary disciples to “all the nations.” The book of Acts and Paul's letters show us that ethnic Jews as well as Gentiles persecuted Christians. This reality could not have escaped the notice of the final editor of Matthew's Gospel. Just as he believed Jews and Gentiles make up “all the nations” to whom the Gospel was currently being sent (24:14; 28:19), and just as he saw both Jews and Gentiles actively persecuting the Christian missionaries among “all the nations” (24:9),

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<sup>29</sup> Luz, *Studies in Matthew*, 9–11, 243.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

so he would have expected both Jews and Gentiles to be among the “all the nations” in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats (Matt 25:31–46).

The mission of the church is also relevant to the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46 because of the natural expectation for readers to assume that one of the goals of the missionary work is to prepare people for divine judgment. A mission of “social justice” would imply that a criterion of social justice would be used in the final judgment. A lack of general benevolence to the world’s oppressed could result in condemnation. A practice of general benevolence to the world’s oppressed could result in reward.<sup>31</sup> E. P. Sanders’ notion of “covenantal nomism” is compatible with this view. Sanders would argue that Jesus’ invitation of grace (Matt 11:27–30) is the means of initial inclusion in God’s favor, but failure to abide by the commandment to benevolently work toward social justice could exclude those who have been erstwhile received by grace.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, the text may assume that the reception and benevolence given to those who are engaged in Christian mission will be used as a sign of receptivity for the missionaries’ message. This is at least what seems to be implied in the missionary discourse given earlier in Matthew’s Gospel which says, “And whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake off the dust of your feet. Truly I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment,

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<sup>31</sup> The views of Joseph A. Grassi, “‘I Was Hungry and You Gave Me to Eat’: (Matt 25:31–35ff): The Divine Identification Ethic in Matthew,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 11 (1981): 81–89; J. Du Preez, “Social Justice: Motive for the Mission of the Church,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 53 (2001):36–46; and Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, rev. ed. with new intro., trans. Sister Caridad Inda, John Eagleson, and Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Maryknoll, 2006), xxxviii, 66–67.

<sup>32</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 17, 75, 515–17.

than for that city” (10:14–15). These issues will be discussed more fully under the immediately following section which deals with the Evangelist’s view on soteriology.

### Soteriology in Matthew’s Gospel

The fact that soteriology in the Gospel of Matthew was understood to be a curative to the problem of sin is seen in the promise given at Jesus’ birth that Jesus would “save His people from their sins” (1:21). A more difficult question, and one which more drastically affects the interpretation of Matthew’s Judgment of the Sheep and Goats, concerns the means and result of this salvation. Under the assumption that the Evangelist was consistent in treating issues related to this question, the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats should display the Evangelist’s perspective on soteriology. Commentators, however, who carefully analyze 25:31–46 are divided over whether the passage portrays salvation from sin as something achieved by human merit or as something granted by divine grace. Some commentators believe that the “least” in 25:40, 45 represent any and all of the unfortunate people of the world. These commentators tend to see salvation as reformation. The sins from which Jesus saves (or reforms) his people include their indifference and selfishness. In this view, a favorable judgment will be pronounced only upon those people who are reformed by Jesus’ teaching. Those who replace the sins of selfishness and indifference with the virtues of humanity and philanthropy toward the unfortunate will receive salvation’s result – a reward for their good works.

Another group of commentators think that the “least” of 25:40, 45 symbolize not any and all the unfortunate people of the world but symbolize people who serve a similar role as the missionary disciples described in 10:9–15, 40–42. In this view, the “least” proclaim and represent the teaching of Jesus. This view maintains that anyone who

receives these missionaries, here called the “least” of Jesus’ brothers, also receives or believes their word (10:14–15). Salvation for these commentators includes reform, but reform is not the means of salvation. Rather, faith in the message of the missionaries is the means, and reform is a result.

If the matter were decided upon the evidence thus far considered, the Evangelist defined above may have been able to adopt either of these views. However, a consideration of other texts in Matthew’s Gospel which touch upon soteriology may provide a better understanding of the Evangelist’s perspective on soteriology. The Evangelist’s soteriological perspective, in turn, should help identify the intended meaning for Matt 25:31–46. Several important texts which will not be discussed in this section will be discussed in the section below which deals more broadly with intra-textual passages.

Faith in doctrine or theological confession is never cited alone in Matthean texts which describe both final judgment scene and its criteria. However, 10:32–33 clearly shows that Jesus will confess or deny the missionaries before His Father on the basis of whether they have confessed or denied Jesus before men. Another passage says no one can know the Father unless the Son wills to reveal the Father to him (11:27). If these passages are read as suggestive of the Evangelist’s general concept of soteriology, then it is reasonable to conclude that the Evangelist believed salvation is only possible because of the mediating and revealing work of Christ and that a person’s confession of Christ is essential to his salvation.

The rest of the passages considered here have been chosen because they each unite a description of the judgment with a description of the criteria by which the

judgment will be made. These are the passages which should most clearly explain the Evangelist's view concerning the means and result of salvation in the light of the coming judgment. The review of these passages presented here reveals that the Evangelist stressed a person's works as the criterion by which the final judgment will be made. The mercy of God in salvation appears in these texts but less boldly.

An apparently straightforward portrayal of divine judgment in Matthew's Gospel is given in 7:21–23 as an eschatological illustration of Jesus' teaching that false prophets (21:15) may be identified by their works. Here, the false prophets' acclamation or appeal to Jesus as "Lord, Lord" is described as insufficient, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven" (7:21). Jesus describes those condemned at this judgment as "you who practice lawlessness" (7:23). "Lawlessness" is mentioned again as a criterion of condemnation in Jesus' explanation of the Parable of the Wheat and Tares. The description of the judgment given in this passage uses many of the same elements as those which appear in Matt 25:31–46 (given here in boldface), "The **Son of Man** will send forth His **angels**, and they will **gather** out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks and those who commit lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of **fire**; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (13:41–42). Commentators disagree regarding the exact character of the "lawlessness" mentioned here. David Sim thinks it involves a rejection of Jewish traditions which law-free charismatics were neglecting.<sup>33</sup> Davies and Allison think the Evangelist was more like Paul—willing to live as a Jew, but

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<sup>33</sup> David C. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge: University, 1966), 212–15.

not willing to force the same legal tradition upon Gentile Christians.<sup>34</sup> Either opinion would have been possible for the Evangelist so far described in this study, but neither passage which cites “lawlessness” as a criterion of condemnation allows for a favorable judgment on the basis of theological confession alone.

Two other passages in Matthew join a description of the coming of the “Son of Man” with a description of the criterion of judgment. The emphasis in these passages is clearly upon the practical works of those being judged. The Evangelist clearly expresses a criterion of works in 16:27 which warns, “For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels: and will then recompense every man according to His deeds.” The context lists the deeds in question in the clear words of Jesus, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (16:24). The other passage which mentions both the Son of Man’s coming and a criterion of judgment immediately follows Christ’s conversation with the rich young man who asked what he could do to have eternal life (19:16).<sup>35</sup> Jesus’ replied, “keep the commandments” (19:17) and specified the ones directed at murder, adultery, stealing, false witness, and honoring parents. In place of the tenth commandment which prohibits coveting, Jesus gave a positive substitute, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (19:19). Jesus further told the young man, “If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven: and come, follow Me” (19:21). Nothing in this exchange suggests that the poor to whom the man should

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<sup>34</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, I, 492–93; W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: University, 1964) 205.

<sup>35</sup> The NASB translates his request, “Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?” The word “obtain” carries an interpretive nuance which is not required in the Greek subjunctive *σχω*’ of the verb *εχω*. Louw and Nida, vol. 2, *sub. εχω*, 111–12. LN (1988, 1989).

give his possessions should be restricted to poor missionaries or poor Christians. After the young man left in non-compliance, Jesus explained further to his disciples, “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name’s sake, shall receive many times as much, and shall inherit eternal life” (19:28–29).

Though this passage is a bold admonition regarding the necessity of good works, the surrounding text also bears traces of the idea of God’s mercy in the granting of eternal life. To calm the disciples’ fear that no one could be saved under the criteria which Jesus expressed to the young man, Jesus replied, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (19:26). Immediately following this pericope, the Parable of the Vineyard portrays a landowner who grants the same wage to workers regardless of how long they labored in the day. Through this parable, Jesus illustrates that man’s reward is not based solely upon the merit of an individual’s work but rather extends from a generous God (20:15). These two traces of grace bring only a little balance to Jesus’ requirement of obedience to the commandments and of the practical neighborly love exhibited in self denial and giving to the poor. These traces of grace help people realize that no one can be obedient on their own strength, nor is human merit a sufficient basis for God’s generous blessing in the judgment. However, the tenor of Matthew’s descriptions of the judgment must mean at least this: the works of an individual will be a clear indicator in the judgment of the ones through whom God’s power has worked.

Other passages related to this issue more indirectly will be discussed in the section dealing with intra-textual issues below.

### Eschatology in Matthew's Gospel

In this section, a preliminary estimation of the eschatology which the Evangelist probably held will be made from a consideration of texts within Matthew's Gospel alone. More clarity, and perhaps some improvement, regarding the Evangelist's views will be gained as these results are compared to the inter-textual and genre issues discussed below.

So far, a few details have been proposed regarding the Evangelist's views regarding salvation history, mission, and soteriology. It is reasonable to suspect that the Evangelist's views on eschatology will be compatible with these views. For this reason, a concise summary of the Evangelist's views regarding these issues should provide clues for discerning the Evangelist's views regarding eschatology.

The Evangelist as so far described was a Jewish Christian member of a school of scribes who crafted the traditions of Matthew into a Gospel intended to be broadly useful in evangelism but primarily designed as a teaching manual for a community of Christians in a large Syro-Palestinian city within a decade of the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. As both a Jew and a Christian in Syro-Palestine, the Evangelist was affected by the tensions arising from the Christian mission to both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 13). This tension partly arose from the question over Gentile observance of Jewish traditions (Acts 15). As a scribe, his literary exposure was broader than average. His Gospel was designed like other teaching texts among the Jews with intra-textual and inter-textual allusions which



could be best interpreted by an experienced expositor when the Gospel was read at public meetings.

The Evangelist's view of salvation history was affected by Daniel 7 and its references to the "Son of Man" as a representative figure for the nation of Israel. This led to the belief that the promises and vocation which God gave to Israel are recapitulated in and personally adopted by Jesus the Jewish Messiah. The Evangelist believed the teaching of Jesus appropriately interprets the higher righteousness of the law which the scribes and Pharisees did not observe (Matt 5:17–19). The Evangelist believed Jesus' disciples are united with Jesus in his role of fulfilling Israel's vocation and that they manifest that union through their discipleship and service to Jesus. The nation of Israel was not rejected by God, but individual Israelites who rejected the teaching of Christ, both before and after Christ's death and resurrection, would be rejected. The Evangelist recognized that Gentiles as well as Jews may now be joined to Jesus. The Evangelist expected baptism and an acceptance of Jesus' teaching to be part of the process by which people from all nations should participate with Jesus in taking up the vocation of Israel (28:19–20). In spite of this union of Jews and Gentiles as fellow disciples of Jesus, the Evangelist crafted this Gospel to support Jewish Christians in their observance of Jewish traditions (23:1–3) while leaving open the question of Gentile observance of Jewish traditions.

The Evangelist's view of the Christian mission was compatible with his view of salvation history. He believed the mission included the enlisting and baptism of both Jews and Gentiles to become followers of the teaching of Jesus (28:19–20). The world's treatment of missionaries was expected to be severe at times (24:9). The Father would

manifest His jealous care of the missionaries in judgment by severely punishing those who would reject the missionaries or their word (10:14–15). Those who received the missionaries would be treated in the judgment as if they received Jesus himself. This in turn would be seen as if they also had received the Father (10:40).

The Evangelist's view of soteriology recognized salvation as a curative for the problem of sin (1:21). This cure extended beyond forgiveness and included a special knowledge of the Father which Jesus would mediate to those who were yoked with Jesus in service (11: 27–29). The Evangelist also believed that Jesus would serve as an advocate in the judgment for those who confess Jesus before men (10:32–33), but that a person's acceptance with God will also be demonstrated upon an evaluation of the person's works and not his confession alone (7:21; 13:41–42; 16:27). The works which are specified as indicative of a person's salvation include the practical commandments of the second table of the Ten Commandments including brotherly love and benevolence to the poor (19:17–21). The potential emphasis on the merit of good works is slightly balanced by the Evangelist's recognition that only God can make obedience possible (19:26) and that the reward for service extends not from merit but from the generosity of God (20:15).

A description of the Evangelist's view of eschatology may now be ventured by analyzing Matthew's Gospel in a manner consistent with the proposed Evangelist's views on salvation history, mission, and salvation. The frequent and carefully situated references to the final judgment in Matthew's Gospel show that future eschatology was a major concern of the Evangelist.<sup>36</sup> The Evangelist's apparent belief that some aspects of

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<sup>36</sup> Each of the five major discourses ends with a pericope concerning the eschatological judgment. Benjamin Bacon, *Studies in Matthew* (New York: Holt and Company, 1930), 412.

the kingdom of God may be realized in the current age did not cancel the very real expectation he raised concerning the “end of the age” (13:39, 40, 49; 24:3; 28:20), the “day” of final judgment (7:22; 10:15; 11:22, 24; 12:36) and the world’s “regeneration” (19:28).<sup>37</sup> The Evangelist expected the commission to make disciples of all nations to continue until the “end of the age” (28:20). As specified above, the Evangelist believed the final judgment will take into account how people received the missionaries and their message (10:14, 15, 40) as well as how they kept the second table of the law of Moses including the commandment toward neighborly love and benevolence to the poor (19:17–21).

Since the Evangelist was a literate man who may have incorporated motifs that were common in apocalyptic texts outside of his own Gospel, a full description of his views on eschatology cannot be made without reference to the motifs he may have invoked. The question of whether the Evangelist intended his several accounts of the final judgment to cohere into a realistic description of only one final judgment can only be partially addressed by considering the accounts in his Gospel alone. Kathleen Webber has made a good case for recognizing that all of these accounts were intended to portray only one final judgment in which the entire world will be judged by the same criteria.<sup>38</sup> The discordant elements in the several accounts, however, have led others to conclude that more than one judgment was forecast. The theory of Douglas Hare and Daniel J.

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<sup>37</sup> The kingdom of God is portrayed as already active in the person (1:23; 11:6, 27), words (4:17; 7:24–29) and deeds (chapters 8–9; 11:2–6; 12:28) of Jesus as well as in the words and deeds of the apostles in their missionary capacity (10:1–7; 28:18–20). Kathleen Weber, “The Events of the End of the Age in Matthew” (Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of America, 1994), 90.

<sup>38</sup> Weber, “Events of the End,” 49–51, 219, 312. Weber cites Georg Strecker, *Der Weg der Gerechtigkeit: Untersuchung zur Theologie Mattäus*, FRLANT, no. 82 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 236–37 and Daniel Marguerat, *Le jugement dans l'évangile de Matthieu*, Le Monde de la Bible (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1981), 23–25.

Harrington which supposes that three distinct judgments were forecast to accommodate separately the Christian church (7:24–27; 10:32–33; 18:35), Jews (19:28), and non-Christian Gentiles (25:31–46) seems to be in conflict with the proposed Evangelist’s view of salvation history and the groupings of people that he assumes.<sup>39</sup> The Evangelist elsewhere portrays “the nations” to refer to both Jews and Gentiles as persecutors of Christians (24:9, 14) and as potential converts to Christ (24:14; 28:19). The view of Hare and Harrington which eschatologically separates Jewish non-Christians from Gentile non-Christians does not seem to be compatible with the Evangelist’s simpler grouping which ends the Gospel with only two groups: the disciples of Jesus on the one hand and “all the nations” (potential persecutors or potential disciples including Jews and Gentiles) on the other. Robert Gundry’s suggestion that the Gospel portrays the judgment of Christians and non-Christians separately is more consistent with the proposed views of the Evangelist.<sup>40</sup> A final decision between Weber’s single judgment and Gundry’s double judgment will have to await the discussion below concerning the genre of apocalyptic literature and certain apocalyptic texts outside of Matthew’s Gospel which may have directly or indirectly influenced our Evangelist’s view of eschatology.

### **Textual, Intratextual, and Intertextual Issues**

#### **Manuscript Issues**

The slight textual variants in the manuscripts for this pericope have more bearing on the interpretive tradition after the text left the evangelist’s hand than they do on the

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<sup>39</sup> Douglas Hare and Daniel J. Harrington, “Make Disciples of All the Gentiles,” *CBQ* 37 (1975) 359–69, here 365.

<sup>40</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 511–12, 514.

Evangelist's intention. A minority of manuscripts explicitly name the "Father" as the one who "prepared" (ἠτοίμασεν) the eternal fire for the devil and his angels, while most only imply that God is the subject by using an anonymous passive, "has been prepared" (ἠτοιμασμένον).<sup>41</sup> The choice between these two readings only determines a slight difference in emphasis, not of substance. The few variants related to 25:40 and 25:45, however, may be more significant. The most recognized reading of these verses has the Son of Man describe the "least" only in 25:40 as "my brothers" (τῶν ἀδελφῶν), an appellation by which Jesus elsewhere referred to his disciples (28:10). In an apparent attempt to amplify the same connotation for the "least" some manuscripts inserted "my brothers" as an appositive to the "least" in 25:45 as well.<sup>42</sup> Similarly motivated variants appear in some manuscripts which change the Greek words of either 10:42 or 25:40, 45 so that there is a tighter verbal agreement between the descriptions of the missionaries described as "little ones" in 10:42 and the "least" of 25:40, 45.<sup>43</sup> This interpretive effort cannot be the basis of determining the Evangelist's intention, but it would offer some support to an interpretation more solidly based on other evidence.

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<sup>41</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, ed., *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1971), 63–64. The apparatus of the United Bible Societies' Greek text lists the following manuscripts in support of the passive, A D W θ 067<sup>vid</sup> f<sup>1,13</sup> and  $\mathfrak{H}$ . The active appears in D f<sup>1</sup> it mae; Ir<sup>lat</sup> and Cyp. Metzger's current (second) edition of the *Textual Commentary* does not discuss this variant inasmuch as the fourth edition of the Greek New Testament which it explains omits these data in the footnotes. Bruce M. Metzger, ed., *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: American Bible Society, 1994). A most convenient display of the textual variants for Matthew's entire Gospel can be found in Reuben Swanson, ed., *New Testament Greek Manuscripts: Variant Readings Arranged in Horizontal Lines Against Codex Vaticanus: Matthew* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1995).

<sup>42</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, III, 428 cite A. H. McNeile on this point, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (London: Macmillan, 1915), 371.

<sup>43</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, III, 429. Manuscripts Σ and 067 use μικρῶν in 25:40. Manuscripts 10.42 (D latt 1424 pc) use ἐλαχίστων in 25:40. Stanton thinks these changes intentionally brought 10:42 and 25:40, 45 into a tighter intertextual relationship. Graham Stanton, "Once More: Matthew 25:31-46," 230-31.

## Source and Form Critical Issues

C. F. Burney's theory that Matt 25:31–46 was originally a Hebrew Poem is not at all incompatible with the theory of authorship proposed in this study.<sup>44</sup> The text's original integrity would be secure, and the search for its author's intention would be simplified if the whole of it were originally a poem. Its author's intended meaning could be read as mediated through the conventions of Hebrew poetry. Against the original integrity of the text, however, are those commentators who think the passage is best understood if it is dissected into elemental components: some of which are believed to come from Jesus, and other elements which were inserted by tradition or by the Evangelist.<sup>45</sup> The current goal, however, is to offer an interpretation based on the idea that the primary locus of meaning of the text is in its author's intention. The effort here may happily avoid most of the mysteries concerning who may have authored which elements of the text and what a more "original" version of the pericope may have looked like.

For the purposes of the current study, the text as it stands may be assumed to be the intentional representative of the Evangelist's message. The effort to recreate and distinguish Jesus' simple "parables" from the Evangelist's "allegories" (an effort championed by Alexander Bruce and Adolf Jülicher) is out of court.<sup>46</sup> If the Evangelist

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<sup>44</sup> C. F. Burney, "St. Matthew xxv.31–46 as a Hebrew Poem," *JTS* 14 (1913): 414–24. Lamar Cope thinks Burney's theory should be given more credit than it has received. Lamar Cope, "Matthew xxv: 31–46 'The Sheep and the Goats' Reinterpreted," *Novum Testamentum* 11 (1969): 32–44, here 36.

<sup>45</sup> Simon Légasse, *Jésus et l'enfant: "Enfants", "Petits" et "Simples" dans la Tradition Synoptique* (Paris: Gabalda, 1969), 85–100. Other scholars doubt the authenticity of all or some of this pericope including Rudolf Bultmann, *History Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh (New York: Harper, 1963), 123–25; and J. A. T. Robinson, "The 'Parable' of the Sheep and the Goats," *NTS* 2 (1955–1956): 225–37, here 232–34, who argues on linguistic analysis in the absence of clear parallels.

<sup>46</sup> Alexander Balmain Bruce, *The Parabolic Teaching of Christ: A Systematic and Critical Study of the Parables of Our Lord* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1882 and the 3<sup>rd</sup> ed revised, New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1908); A. Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2 vols. (Freiburg: Mohr, 1886, 1888,

intended an allegory, then an allegory is the interpretation which will be sought here. Nor should this goal be distracted by C. H. Dodd's conviction that Jesus subverted the future eschatology of his contemporaries by replacing it with a "realized eschatology."<sup>47</sup> The goal of the current study is the Evangelist's intention. No effort need be made here to confirm or deny Dodd's theory about Jesus' earlier teaching.<sup>48</sup> Other theories used by source and form critics to differentiate the earlier teaching of Jesus from that of the Evangelists and later church are also mostly irrelevant for the current goal. No effort will be made to validate the Evangelist's intention based on how "dissimilar" it is to the opinions of Jesus. For the purposes of the current interpretation, the similarity which the interpretation sustains to today's views of Jesus' teaching is only incidentally relevant. Similarities may increase credibility in the interpretation for the scholars who follow these trends, but dissimilarities cannot by themselves challenge the interpretation this study will produce. The criteria of "multiple attestation" and "coherence" will have to be applied differently in the current study.<sup>49</sup> If they are used at all, they must be used to verify or challenge continuity of thought and theme in the Evangelist's text in Matthew.

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1899, 1910 and Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963, 1969, 1976). This remains untranslated.

<sup>47</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed. (Glasgow: Collins, 1961), 27–35.

<sup>48</sup> Though it must be recognized that other capable historians such as Joachim Jeremias argued that Jesus retained a strong future eschatological element in his teaching. Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., trans. S. H. Hooke from 8<sup>th</sup> German ed. of *Die Gleichnisse Jesu* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 21, 160, 221.

<sup>49</sup> "Dissimilarity," "multiple attestation," and "coherence" are the three most significant tests source and form critics have used to differentiate the teaching of the Jesus from the traditions of the ancient church according to Grant Osborne, "Redaction Criticism," in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Method and Issues*, ed. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 2001), 128–49, here 133–34. Osborne credits this observation to Norman Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970).

### Redaction Critical Issues

Redaction criticism attempts to identify the emphases of a writer by carefully studying the manner in which he crafted his sources into a new text. Presuppositions regarding the author's *Sitz im Leben* heavily influence the process by suggesting motivations for the emphases which redaction analysis discovers.<sup>50</sup> The description given, thus far of the Evangelist, therefore will color the way redaction criticism will be used at this point in the study.

The absence of prior written sources for Matt 25:31–46 prevents redaction criticism from being fully employed as a tool for determining the Evangelist's intention for this passage. However, redaction criticism can illumine the Evangelist's general emphases by isolating the passages in Matthew which appear to be written more directly by the editor and not merely borrowed from other sources and by identifying the themes which appear to be relatively prominent in Matthew in comparison to parallel texts in the other Gospels.

The relatively higher level of eschatological details in Matthew's Gospel may be due to the Evangelist's personal emphasis.<sup>51</sup> David C. Sim sees a greater tendency in Matthew as opposed to the other Gospels to split humanity into two groups: one evil, the other good.<sup>52</sup> This tendency is also recognized in Robert Gundry's observation that the "parables of separation" (of tares from wheat, 13:30; and of good fish from bad, 13: 48)

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<sup>50</sup> Wolfgang Trilling's review of R. Hummel, *Die auseinandersetzung zwischen Kirche und Judentum im Matthäusevangelium* in *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 90 (1964) 433–37, here 36.

<sup>51</sup> Charles H. Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions: The Creative Voice of Jesus* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 22–23.

<sup>52</sup> David C. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge: University, 1996), 81–82.



are unique to Matthew's Gospel. Gundry further argues that the parallelistic style of these parables is repeated in Matt 25:31–46 so that readers should take Matt 25:31–46 to be a direct expression of the Evangelist rather than one mediated through the vocabulary of a prior source.<sup>53</sup> Davies and Allison identify 17 words or phrases in Matt 25:31–46 which appear to belong to the Evangelist's personal vocabulary as opposed to the texts he inherited.<sup>54</sup> None of this data or its interpretation contradicts the working description of the Evangelist given so far in this study.

On the other hand, some have argued that enough “non-Mattheanisms” exist in Matt 25:31–46 to suggest that the Evangelist only employed the text, but did not compose it.<sup>55</sup> Such a conclusion could flatten some of the force of the pericope's potential emphases under the warrant that these peculiarities do not directly reflect the Evangelist's own perspective. Six “non-Mattheanisms” identified by Johannes Friedrich are so consistent with the Evangelist's themes appearing elsewhere in the Gospel that these six details of vocabulary and phrasing do not blunt the force of the passage as a direct statement of the Evangelist.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, Davies and Allison think two other non-

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<sup>53</sup> Robert Gundry, *Matthew, A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 511.

<sup>54</sup> The Matthean phrases are listed by Davies and Allison as, τότε, συνάγω, ἔμπροσθεν, πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, ὥσπερ, μέν. . . δέ, δεξιός, ἐρῶ, βασιλεύς, δεῦτε, πατρός μου, κόσμος γάρ, δίκιος, ἀποκριθεὶς + finite verb, ἀμην λέγω ὑμῖν, ἐφ' ὅσον, ἕως, ἀδελφός, πῦρ, and ἀπέρχομαι, Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, III, 417.

<sup>55</sup> Robert Gundry describes a “non-Mattheanism” as a word or phrase which does not belong to Matthew's favored vocabulary and which cannot be explained as an allusion or quotation from the Old Testament or which does not display Matthew's parallelistic style, or his generally acknowledged theological emphases. Gundry, *Matthew*, xviii.

<sup>56</sup> This summary of Friedrich's argument is from Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, III, 417. The six un-Matthean words are ἔριφος, ἐριφιόν, γυμνός, ἐπισκέπτομαι, καταράομαι, and κόλασις. Johannes Friedrich, *Gott im Bruder? eine methodenkritische Untersuchung von Redaktion, überlieferung und Traditionen in Mt. 25, 31–46*, Calwer Theologische Monographien, no. 7 (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1977), 9–45.

Mattheanisms in 25:31–46 are inconsistent with the balance of the Evangelist’s work. No where else does Matthew’s Gospel give a list of merciful deeds like the one that appears four times in this pericope. Nor is a royal connotation elsewhere given to the phrase “Son of Man.” This pericope alone refers to the Son of Man as “king” (25:34, 40).<sup>57</sup> Since neither of these two “non-Mattheanisms” are incompatible with the Evangelist as thus far described, this observation of Davies and Allison loses much of its significance for this step in the current study.

Finally, Matthew’s unique emphasis concerning the role of the Son of Man as the final Judge has been broadly recognized.<sup>58</sup> Mark and Luke speak only of the Son of Man’s role as Advocate in the final judgment (Mark 8:36, Luke 12:8–9). This weighs in favor of the idea that the ideas expressed in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats should be given their full force as representative of the direct thoughts of the Evangelist. There is no strong argument which suggests the emphases of the text fit awkwardly against the ideas of the Evangelist as he has been thus far described.

#### Intratextual Considerations—Cross References in Matthew’s Gospel

The Evangelist as described above intended his Gospel to be read and reread carefully. Intricate intratextual allusions and lines of thought appear to be crafted into the text which indicate levels of meaning which may not appear at first glance.<sup>59</sup> Lamar Cope

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<sup>57</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, III, 417–18.

<sup>58</sup> Bacon, *Studies*, 419, 430–31. Bultmann’s view was similar, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 112, 115, 151–52. More recently, Geza Vermes has supported this theory, “The Use of BAR NASH/BAR NASHA in Jewish Aramaic” in Geza Vermes, *Post-Biblical Jewish Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 147–68; and in *Jesus the Jew: A Historians Reading of the Gospels*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973).163–68, 188–89; and *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 89–99.

<sup>59</sup> Luz, “Matthew the Evangelist: A Jewish Christian at the Crossroads,” in *Studies in Matthew*, trans. Rosemary Selle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 3–17, here 3.

observed that the failure to read Matt 25:31–46 in the light of this characteristic of its text is “the most glaring mistake” some commentators make.<sup>60</sup> Literary critics and historical critics are not usually guilty here. Though many literary critics are not as concerned about authorial intention as are historical critics, these two methods of interpretation both attempt to read the text as coherent and self consistent. Literary and historical critics therefore sometimes share the same methods.<sup>61</sup> Historical critical scholars, however, are sensitive to issues arising from the *Sitz im Leben* of the text which literary critics may ignore.<sup>62</sup> Some historical critics believe that the Evangelist championed a particular side in the controversies dividing his Christian readership. Others believe he carefully addressed tensions among the Jewish and Gentile Christians by offering potential support to both sides through broad and accommodating language in much the same way that some doctrinal statements use broad wording to invoke unity among factions.<sup>63</sup> The Evangelist as described was both learned and poised between factions and would have had enough skill and motivation to craft a conciliating Gospel. Therefore special care must be used not to draw too sharp a conclusion regarding passages which only subtly

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<sup>60</sup> Lamar Cope, “Matthew XXV:31–46: ‘The Sheep and the Goats’ Reinterpreted,” *Novum Testamentum* 11 (1961): 32–44, here 44.

<sup>61</sup> Wesley G. Olmstead, *Matthew’s Trilogy of Parables: The Nation, the Nations and the Reader* (New York: Cambridge, 2003), 3–5.

<sup>62</sup> Francis Watson, “Liberating the Reader: A Theological-Exegetical Study of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25. 31–46)” in Francis Watson, ed., *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies?* (London: SCM, 1993), 57–84, here 65–66.

<sup>63</sup> Ulrich Luz thinks the Evangelist was more aggressively combative and so disagrees with this view. Luz cites the following who think the Evangelist was more conciliatory and who believe he did offer a more accommodating text: Gerd Theissen, “Aporien im Umgang mit den Antijudaismen des Neuen Testaments,” in *Die Hebräische Bibel und ihre zweifache Nachgeschichte* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1990), 535–53; Kun Chun Wong, *Interkulturelle Theologie und multikulturelle Gemeinde im Matthäusevangelium*, NTOA, no. 22 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1992); and Kenzo Tagawa, “People and Community in the Gospel of Matthew,” *NTS* 16 (1969–70): 149–62.

touch controversies which may have arisen between the Christian Jews and Gentiles who first received this Gospel.

Thematic cohesion is evident in the Gospel. The Evangelist's sustained interest in eschatology is evident even in the narrative portions of the Gospel. Many events mirror or portend eschatological events. The eschatological conversion of Gentiles (Isa 3:2–3; 60:3–7) is modeled in the visit of the Magi (Matt 2:1–12). The eschatological failure of sun and moon (24:28, 40), the general resurrection (22:28, 30), and the Parousia (24:30–31) are proleptically portrayed in the darkness at the cross (27:45), the resurrections at Jesus' death (27:52–53), and Jesus' appearing at the Great Commission (28:16–20).<sup>64</sup> Additional illuminating intratextual allusions to the final judgment appear in other texts in Matthew which discuss the criteria of final judgment or which provide clues to the identity of the “least” (25:40, 45) and the “nations” (25:32).

An exhaustive list of the passages in Matthew's Gospel which mention a criterion of final judgment and its outcome is given above in Chapter 3 (Table 4). A person's faith appears as a criterion in the judgment only slightly and in only a few of these passages.<sup>65</sup> The actions of those being judged are more regularly expressed as the criteria. The passages which mention both a criterion of judgment and the coming of the Son of Man have the most thematic and verbal resonance with Matt 25:31–46. One passage says each person will be repaid “according to his works” (16:27). One passage forbids entrance to

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<sup>64</sup> Weber, “The Events of the End,” 91.

<sup>65</sup> The Roman centurion is commended for his faith and a place in the kingdom was implied for him (8:10–12). The reception of missionaries and heeding their word seems to imply a faith in their message and will be an issue in the judgment (10:14–15). Confessing Jesus implies faith and is necessary for Jesus' advocacy before the Father (10:32–33). Finally, with a measure of theological license, a conversion to childlikeness may imply something about the simple trust which is necessary for entering the kingdom (18:2–6).

the kingdom to “all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness” (13:41). In another, the angels are foretold to “take out the wicked from among the righteous” (13:49). Another only mentions that the angels will gather the Son of Man’s “elect” (24:31).

David Sim has argued that the criterion called “lawlessness” in 13:41 was intended to describe a disregard for regulations which are particularly Jewish and was intended to exclude Gentile Christians who refused to conform to the current restrictions of the synagogue.<sup>66</sup> Earlier in this chapter, it was speculated that the Evangelist could have held such a view. Intratextually considered, however, Sim’s theory seems to be at odds with the commendation of the Roman centurion’s faith and the implication that this Gentile centurion would sit down in the kingdom with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (8:10–12). Neither did the Evangelist include anything particularly Jewish in Jesus’ conversation with a young rich Jewish man who asked what he could do to have eternal life. Jesus required no rituals beyond the second table of the law, the command toward neighborly love, and (in order for the young man to be “complete” and have “treasure in heaven”) the selling off of property for the relief of the poor and following Jesus (19:16–21). For this reason, it is doubtful that the Evangelist believed the practice of synagogue traditions was required for salvation either from ethnic Jews (like the young rich man) or from Gentiles (like the centurion). In any case, there is nothing in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats that hints at the necessity of keeping Kosher.

The necessity of giving to the poor, however, is another question – one which is more significant to the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46. It is possible that the Judgment of

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<sup>66</sup> David C. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 212–15.

the Sheep and Goats was intended to explicate the soteriological and eschatological significance of Jesus' conversation with the rich young Jewish man in 19:16–22. In such a case, the list of merciful actions toward the “least” in 25:35–36 would have been intended to give greater detail to the general benevolence Jesus requested of the rich young man toward “the poor.” Some texts in Matthew, however, promise eternal consequences for benevolence shown to a more tightly defined group than “the poor.” In one text, Jesus is shown telling his missionary disciples that eternal consequences will be meted out to the people they encounter for the benevolence these people will show specifically toward the missionaries. Jesus also personally identifies with the missionaries so that actions done toward them will be judged as if done toward Jesus (10:14–15, 40–42). There is nothing in the Evangelist's current description that indicates whether Matt 25:31–46 was intended to promote the narrower focus of benevolence upon the disciples seen in 10:14–15, 40–42 or whether the passage was intended to promote the broader benevolence Jesus required of the rich young man (19:16–22). A fuller analysis of the missionary passage (10:5–42), however, reveals a deeper level of intratextual resonance with Matt 25:31–46 than does the conversation with the rich young man (19:1–22). This intratextual resonance may imply an interpretive significance which must be taken into account.

Of the two passages, only in the Missionary Discourse (chapter 10) does Jesus personally identify with the people who receive benevolence in the same way that he does in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats (10:40 cf. 25:40). In contrast with the conversation with the young rich man, only the missionary discourse mentions a harsh judgment (10:15) like that described in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats (25:41, 46).

Of the two, only the missionary discourse specifically mentions the “day of judgment” (10:15) which the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats supposedly describes. Of the two, only the missionary discourse specifies the giving of water as a way of compliance (10:42 *cf.* 25:35, 37, 42). Finally, of the two, the missionary discourse more clearly suggests that personal faith, along with works, will be a factor in the judgment. This is seen in the way the missionary discourse equates a rejection of the missionaries with a rejection of their words (10:14) and its warning of the necessity to “confess” Jesus before men (10:32). Admittedly, faith as a criterion in the judgment is less explicitly discussed in Matthew’s Gospel than are works. The discernable presence of the criterion of faith in the Gospel, however, leads one to expect that the Evangelist’s climactic description of the final judgment would include at least some allusion to faith’s relevance. All things considered, the Missionary Discourse appears to have a fuller intratextual resonance with the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats than does the story about the rich young man. Additional intratextual support that the “least” of Jesus’ “brothers” in 25:40 were intended to signify the missionary disciples comes from 10:42 which refers to the missionaries as Jesus’ “little ones.”<sup>67</sup> Further support comes from 28:10 which shows that Jesus elsewhere used “brothers” (25:40) to refer to his disciples.

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<sup>67</sup> Arland Hultgren objects on the basis that the “little ones” of 10:42 is a plural of μικρό” whereas the “least” in 25:40, 45 is a plural superlative of ἐλάχιστο”. *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 321. Davies and Allison make a similar argument, *Matthew*, III, 429. Weber thinks that “little ones” and “least” are “elastic terms” in Matthew and not intended to supply a connotation beyond that discernable in the immediate context. “Events of the End,” 221–22. The objections of Hultgren and Davies and Allison seem to be based on a distinction that makes no real difference inasmuch as the two words considered are quite synonymous. Neither does Weber’s objection eliminate the connotative momentum established by 10:42 and 18:6 that the “little ones”/“least” were intended by the Evangelist to signify members of the believing community. In the light of the other resonances between the texts, it appears probable that the “little ones” of 10:42 imply the same group as the “least” of 25:40, 45.

Intratextual clues for the identity of those being judged (“all the nations,” 25:32) must also be considered. As noted in Chapter 3, the plural ἔθνη, often translated “nations” regularly carried in antiquity a connotation of “outsiders,” “foreigners,” or even “pagans.”<sup>68</sup> Nils Dahl has noticed that in apocalyptic texts such as Matt 25:31–46 ἔθνη more frequently takes on a global connotation which includes all national entities. These observations alone cannot be determinative for the Evangelist’s intended meaning of the word. The connotation of ἔθνη as intended in Matthew’s Gospel is best discerned through its contextual use in the Gospel itself. The intratextual evidence for the connotation which the word carries in Matt 25:32 must consider the two passages in Matthew’s Gospel in which “all the nations” also appears. These passages are in contexts very close to 25:31–32: the Olivet Discourse (24:9, 14), and the Great Commission (28:19). In both passages, the words in which “all the nations” appear are addressed directly to the disciples. In both passages, the disciples are juxtaposed to “all the nations.” In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus warns the disciples, “[Y]ou will be hated by all nations on account of My name” (24:9) This hatred is expected as the disciples preach the Gospel “in the whole world for a witness to all the nations...” (24:14). In his Great Commission, Jesus directs the disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...” (28:19). The contextual evidence drawn from 24:9, 14 and 28:19 is consistent both with the “foreign” connotation described in the lexicons and the global connotation of apocalyptic texts identified by Nils Dahl. If “all the nations” in 25:32 is used with a similar connotation as that which appears in 24:9, 14, and 28:19, then “all the nations” in 25:32 would appear to be juxtaposed to the disciples of Jesus as well. This too would imply that

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<sup>68</sup> This pejorative connotation is recognized in Thayer’s (1972), LS (1976), and BAGD (1979).



the “least” are the disciples and the “nations” are their potential persecutors (24:9) or potential converts (28:19).

The narrowing of the “least” in 25:40, 45 to refer to the disciples of Jesus, especially in their missionary capacity, would not conflict with the Evangelist’s perspectives as they have so far been described. Nor would the recognition that “all the nations” in 25:32 includes the whole world. The criterion of judgment which appears to be so far consistent with the evidence reviewed concerns the way the people among the nations treat the “least” who are missionary disciples as they attempt to fulfill the Great Commission. Some caution against a narrow interpretation of the “least” arises from the Evangelist’s view that giving to the poor results in treasures in heaven (19:21) and the consistent emphasis on a person’s works as the criteria which will be used in the final judgment (16:27, *passim*). A better understanding of the relation between these two potential criteria of judgment may be gained from a consideration of Matthew’s Gospel in light of other texts which may have influenced the Evangelist.

#### Intertextual Considerations—Other Texts Which Affect the Interpretation

There are altogether about 100 quotations and allusions in Matthew’s Gospel to Old Testament texts.<sup>69</sup> Matthew also incorporates with slight changes almost all of the Gospel of Mark, a great amount of other material found in the Gospel of Luke, and some material in the Gospel of John. The twin themes of Christ’s return and the divine judgment which appear in Matt 25:31–46 also appear frequently throughout the entire New Testament. Beyond the material which Matthew shares with other books in the Bible, Matt 25:31–46 also shares many of the same expressions, images, and themes

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<sup>69</sup> Bacon, *Studies in Matthew*, 470.

which appear in other contemporaneous Jewish apocalyptic texts. All the texts from this span of literature which carry themes similar to those in Matt 25:31–46 may be used by commentators to illumine the interpretive tradition of this passage after it was originally written. Reader-response critics may even use all the texts synchronically to reflect on the themes each text touches without reference to the intentions of any of the authors.<sup>70</sup> The current study, however, because it is interested in the intention of the Evangelist will rely mostly on those texts which preceded the Evangelist and which the Evangelist could have consciously invoked or expected his audience to recognize and take into account. A diachronic use of intertextuality can therefore help determine the Evangelist's intended meaning of Matthew's Judgment of the Sheep and Goats.<sup>71</sup> Texts written after the Evangelist's time period, which the Evangelist could not have known directly may still illumine the Evangelist's intended meaning if there are good reasons for thinking that the Evangelist and those texts were influenced by the same forces of culture and tradition, but the fact that the Evangelist could not have expected his readers to consciously invoke these texts must be considered.

By the time the Gospel of Matthew was written, a growing consensus was recognized among Jews that the "Scriptures" (כתובים) which are recognized now by Christians as the Old Testament carried a unique and divine authority.<sup>72</sup> In recognition of

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<sup>70</sup> Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale, 1989), 34.

<sup>71</sup> Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Intertextual Jesus: Scripture in Q* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 2000), ix, x.

<sup>72</sup> Jews in the first century recognized a special authority in Israel's "Scripture" (כתובים) as compared to other books. Daniel Patte, *Early Jewish Hermeneutic in Palestine* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975), 21.

this distinction, the texts to which the Evangelist may have alluded in Matt 25:31–46 will be discussed in two sets: canonical and ancient non-canonical.

### *Canonical Intertexts*

Robert Gundry’s suggestion that Matt 25:31–46 is a prophetic explication, or “targum” of the familial ethic expressed in Isa 58:7 is not contradicted by the description of the Evangelist adopted and so far developed in this study. Such an interpretation is compatible with the narrower definition of the “least” which limits its reference to Christians only.<sup>73</sup>

John P. Heil’s suggestion that the Evangelist composed this passage in agreement with Ezekiel 34 is also possible. In this text, God promised to judge the “fat sheep” because they “push with the side and with the shoulder, and thrust at all the weak” (34:20–21). Heil acknowledges that the Ezekiel passage is focused, like that of Isa 58:7, on the familial responsibilities between Israelites. Such a connotation, if considered by itself, would also be compatible with the narrower definition of the “least.” Heil, however, suggests, upon literary grounds to be discussed below that the Evangelist intentionally subverted this narrower connotation to incorporate all the oppressed among the least.<sup>74</sup>

Dispensationalists suggest that the “least” should be equated with the 144,000 Jewish witnesses of Rev 7:1–8.<sup>75</sup> This interpretation is compatible with the literal

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<sup>73</sup> Gundry, *Matthew*, 513–14.

<sup>74</sup> John P. Heil, “Ezekiel 34 and the Narrative Strategy of the Shepherd and Sheep Metaphor in Matthew,” *CBQ* 55 (1993): 698–708, here 698–99, 705.

<sup>75</sup> Eugene W. Pond, “Who Are ‘the Least’ of Jesus’ Brothers in Matthew 25:40?” *BibSac* 159 (2001): 436–48; “Who Are the Sheep and Goats in Matthew 25:31–46?” *BibSac* 159 (2002): 288–301; and “The Background and Timing of the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats,” *BibSac* 159 (2002) 201–20.

hermeneutic, doctrine of inspiration, and other theological presuppositions of dispensationalism. However, dispensationalists must acknowledge that prophets sometimes wrote texts which would be understood or understood better only later by others (Dan 12:4, 8–9). Even if divine inspiration intended Matt 25:31–46 to be read in the light of Rev 7:1–8, there is nothing in traditional dispensational hermeneutics that would require the Evangelist to have consciously referred to 144,000 Jewish witnesses during a seven year Tribulation Period. In any case, the near certainty that the Evangelist was not familiar with the book of Revelation excludes this text from diachronic consideration.

The Evangelist may have invoked other biblical texts which promote broad generosity as he composed Matt 25:31–46. Catchpole cites in this regard Ezekiel's promise of life to those who give away food and clothing (18:7, 16).<sup>76</sup> However, Ezekiel's text is coupled with a threat of death to one who would rob "his brother" or not do what is good "among his people" (18:18).<sup>77</sup> This familial context is actually more compatible with the narrower definition of the "least" which limits its reference to those in the household of Christian faith. Catchpole's support for a broadly defined philanthropy is more firmly based in Job 31:16–20, 31–32 (which promotes the care of widows and orphans and hospitality to strangers) and a synchronic use of The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37).<sup>78</sup> Further support may also be drawn from Arland

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<sup>76</sup> D. R. Catchpole, "The Poor on Earth and the Son of Man in Heaven: A Reappraisal of Matthew 25:31–46," *BJRL* 61 (1979): 355–97, here 390.

<sup>77</sup> Ezekiel also mentions in this context the sins of idolatry, sexual sins, robbery, and usury (18:6, 12–13).

<sup>78</sup> Catchpole, "Poor on Earth," 390.

Hultgren's long collection of biblical passages which mention here and there one or some of the six acts of charity listed in Matt 25:35–36.<sup>79</sup>

As these examples show, many biblical passages which the Evangelist may have known promote a general philanthropy which transcends familial obligation. However, as is equally clear, biblical texts may also be amassed which promote what Stephen C. Barton calls a “centripetal love”—a kind of sectarian love that was pessimistic concerning relations with the outside world.<sup>80</sup> More evidence is needed to determine which line of Scripture the Evangelist consciously invoked. One of Dale Allison's tests for identifying intertexts consciously invoked by an author states, “In the absence of explicit citation or undeniable tacit borrowing, an allusion will not be credible unless text and intertext share some combination of the following: common vocabulary, common word order, common theme(s), similar imagery, similar structure, similar circumstances(s). One of these alone will not suffice, and the greater the number of parallels, the more probable the allusion and the easier it will be to discern.”<sup>81</sup> For this reason, the biblical texts which display both similar vocabulary and a criterion by which God will judge the entire world would qualify more clearly as intended intertexts than those texts which touch upon ethics alone.

The prophecies of Joel qualify highly on both points. The Olivet Discourse describes the coming of the Son of Man in terms which resonate heavily with Joel's description of the “day of the LORD.” Joel said about the day of the Lord, “[T]here has

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<sup>79</sup> Arland Hultgren, “The Final Judgment, Matthew 25:31–46,” in *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 309–30, 314–17.

<sup>80</sup> Stephen C. Barton, “Early Christianity and the Sociology of the Sect,” in *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies*, ed. Francis Watson (London SCM Press, 1993), 140–62, 146–47.

<sup>81</sup> Allison, Jr., *Intertextual Jesus*, 11.

never been anything like it.” Matthew said it will be a day “such as has not occurred” (Matt 24:21). Joel said on that day, “The sun and the moon grow dark, and the stars lose their brightness (2:10). Matthew said “THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL” (24:29).<sup>82</sup> Finally, Joel described the judgment of God against “the nations” as meted out by God “because of the violence done to the sons of Judah, in whose land they have shed innocent blood” (Joel 3:19, MT 4:19).<sup>83</sup> If the Evangelist invoked this criterion of judgment along with the imagery he shares with Joel’s description of the day of the Lord, then the Evangelist most probably allowed the disciples of Jesus to stand with Jesus as the ones for whom God’s sympathetic anger would be displayed.

Other Old Testament texts also show that God’s judgment against the nations will be based on their treatment of Israel. Isaiah says “in the last days” when God establishes Judah and Jerusalem (2:1–2), that God “will judge between the nations, and will render decisions for many peoples” or as the alternate translation of the NASB reads, God will “reprove many.”<sup>84</sup> Isaiah also mentions the darkening of the sun and stars in the context of God’s punishment of the world (13:10–11) at which time the Lord “will have compassion on Jacob and choose Israel, and settle them in their own land ...” (14:1). Daniel’s apocalyptic vision (chapter 7) speaks of the coming of the “Son of Man” at which time judgment will be passed against four kings or kingdoms which rival the

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<sup>82</sup> The NASB uses capital letters to mark OT quotations. The notes in the NASB cite along with Joel 2:10 the following: Isa 13:10; 24:23; Ezek 32:7; Joel 2:31; 3:15–16.

<sup>83</sup> The phrase “the nations” in Joel 3:11–12 (MT 4:11–12) is from the Hebrew word *גוֹיִם* which is regularly translated by *τὰ ἔθνη* in the New Testament and which in its Greek form is used in Matt 25:32 to describe the recipients of the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats.

<sup>84</sup> The KJV reads, “And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people” (Isa 2:4).

people of the saints of the Most High (7:27) and against “the horn” which waged war against the saints and overpowered them (7:13, 17, 21–22). “Then the sovereignty, the dominion, and the greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Highest One; His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all the dominions will serve and obey Him” (7:27). Finally, Zechariah speaks about a time when God “will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle” (14:2), and “will strike all the peoples who have gone to war against Jerusalem ...” (14:12). Texts like these which are in a context of God’s judgment against the world and which carry the same vocabulary and apocalyptic imagery as that found in Matthew’s Gospel are, according to Allison’s criterion, more credibly diachronic intertexts to Matthew’s Judgment of the Sheep and Goats than are those texts which only touch upon an ethic that Matt 25:31–46 possibly presupposes. If the Evangelist did not intend to invoke the sectarian or “centripetal” ethic that is clearly at work in these Old Testament counterparts to Matthew’s Judgment of the Sheep and Goats, then he would have done his readers a great service by marking his departure from the trend in these texts much more clearly.

### ***Ancient Extra-Canonical Intertexts***

The scribal ability of the proposed Evangelist would have put him in contact with texts and traditions beyond the sacred Scriptures of the Jews and early documents which contributed to the New Testament. The relatively higher apocalyptic interest which Matthew’s Gospel displays above the other Gospels suggests that the editor was exposed to current apocalyptic texts and traditions of Jewish provenance. The Evangelist’s scribal capacity also probably allowed him to be familiar with at least some of the oral traditions which would appear later in rabbinic texts. Though these texts and traditions may not

have carried for the Evangelist the same authority as Scripture, some of them would have been understood to be valid explications of Scripture. Therefore, the most apparent similarities between these texts and Matt 25:31–46 should also be considered as evidence which can shed light on the Evangelists intended meaning for the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats. In each case, only four possible explanations can be given for similarities: (1) coincidence; (2) the intertext was influenced by Matthew’s Gospel; (3) Matthew’s Gospel was influenced by the intertext; or (4) both the Evangelist and the intertext draw upon a common tradition or cultural symbol.<sup>85</sup> A diachronic use of texts for which the third and fourth explanations apply are the most useful in the effort to determine the Evangelist’s intention. A synchronic use of intertextuality is directed at interests other than authorial intention.

The similarities between Matt 25:31–46 and 1 Enoch 61–63 are most interesting. Matthew’s Gospel and 1 Enoch are the only first century texts which speak of the “Son of Man” as both “coming” and as sitting on a “throne of glory.”<sup>86</sup> Catchpole’s fuller list of 12 similarities (see above) between 1 Enoch 62–63 and Matt 25:31–46 is suggestive of at least a common circle of influence between the two.<sup>87</sup> The twelfth point on Catchpole’s list is most significant. Both Matt 25:31–46 and 1 Enoch 62–83 use as a criterion of judgment the manner in which those being judged have treated those with whom the judge associates himself. In 1 Enoch, the judgment is forecast upon the “oppressors of his

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<sup>85</sup> William Stegner made this point in reference to rabbinic influence on the New Testament. William Stegner, *Narrative Theology in Early Jewish Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster, 1989), 9.

<sup>86</sup> Sim points out that John 5:27 lacks the “throne of glory.” The Testament of Abraham describes Abel as sitting on a throne of glory and acting as the final judge (chapters 12–13). Sim suggests this as a possible source because Abel was the son of “Adam” (which in Hebrew is a synonym for “mankind”). Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 36, 119–20.

<sup>87</sup> Catchpole, “Poor on Earth,” 379–82.



children and his elect ones” (62:11).<sup>88</sup> A similar criterion of judgment is seen in many other Jewish apocalyptic texts. Jonathan M. Lunde’s survey of nine such texts demonstrates that Jewish apocalypses regularly held as a criterion of divine judgment the oppression of the righteous.<sup>89</sup> All of this suggests that the Evangelist who shows an interest in apocalyptic symbols and motifs was probably familiar with this theme and would have understood that his composition of Matt 25:31–46 would have suggested a similar criterion to readers who were either already familiar with these motifs or who could be introduced to them by other scribes during the public reading and exposition of Matthew’s Gospel. The Evangelist, therefore, probably at least meant to imply that the “least” in 25:40, 45 would include the righteous disciples of Jesus.

Some rabbinic texts are supportive of such a criterion of divine judgment. *Pesiqta Rabbati* 1 on Isa 66:23 taught that Gentile nations which did not subjugate Israel will be admitted by the Messiah into the kingdom of God.<sup>90</sup> Another rabbinic principle which appears broadly (apart from the context of apocalyptic judgment) may also be seen as compatible to this criterion of final judgment. In rabbinic texts, a messenger or *shaliah* is

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<sup>88</sup> The translation is that of E. Isaac, “1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch (Second Century B.C.–First Century A.D.): A New Translation and Introduction,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigraph: Volume I, Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 5–92.

<sup>89</sup> Jonathan M. Lunde, “The Salvation-Historical Implications of Matthew 24–25 in Light of Jewish Apocalyptic Literature” (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1996), 127. The texts Lunde cites for this conclusion among these apocalypses include texts from Daniel (7:21–23, 25; 8:24; 9:12; 11:21, 28, 30–34), 1 Enoch 22.6–13; the Similitudes of 1 Enoch (38.3–6; 48.8–10; 53.5, 7b; 54.2–6; 55.4a; 62.1–13; 63.1–12), the Book of Heavenly Luminaries in 1 Enoch (81.1–4, 9); the Dream Visions of 1 Enoch (89.65–67, 69, 74b–75; 90.1–5, 8–9a, 11–13a, 16), the Two Ways Apocalypse of Weeks (91.5–7, 8b, 11–12; 94.6a, 9a; 95.5a, 6b, 7; 96.5c, 7a, 8; 97. 1, 6d; 99.11, 15; 100.7; 103.11 [108.10]), 4 Ezra (5. 29; 6.57–58; 8.57; 10.23), 2 Baruch (72.2–5), and the Apocalypse of Abraham (29.14, 19; 31.1–2). Most of the first seven of these apocalypses list the “righteous” as the group for which the judge shows a special concern. The latter two, 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch, specify Israel as treated by the Gentiles. Sim would add the fifth book of the Sibylline corpus which condemns the Romans (5.162–78, 386–96) and other Gentile nations (5.52–93, 11–25, 179–227, 286–327, 333, 359, 434–46) for their oppression (often typified in their destruction of Jerusalem). Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 67.

<sup>90</sup> Kaufmann Kohler, “Eschatology,” in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 12 vols., 1904 ed.

bestowed the same identity (for practical purposes) as the one who sent him so that, “the one sent by a man is as the man himself.”<sup>91</sup> The relevance of this principle for the question at hand may be intensified under the recognition that the traditional Hebrew translation for the word “apostle” (ἀπόστολος) in the New Testament is the word *shaliah* (שליח). Hebraists familiar with the rabbinic *shaliah* principle would have been impressed with the possible connotation carried in this designation for Jesus’ messengers which implies that people will be judged for the way they treat the apostles as if they had treated Jesus himself the same way.

Though the intertextual evidence for a narrower definition of “the least” is strong, the evidence is not exclusively positive. The rabbis often promoted a broad philanthropy manifested by “deeds of lovingkindness” (*gemiluth hasadim*).<sup>92</sup> Rabbis advised, “Show mercy to all men, even though they be sinners” (*T. Benj.* 4.4). More significant is the tradition given as from God, “My children, when you gave food to the poor I counted it as though you had given it to me.”<sup>93</sup> Even more relevant to the current question are the texts which specifically tie these good works to the divine judgment. A rabbinic interpretation of Ps 118:17 says that those who have fed the hungry, given drink to the

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<sup>91</sup> The quote is cited here from Catchpole, “Poor on Earth,” 358, but the principle appears in most of the better commentaries. Keener, *Matthew*, 603, 605 gives its rabbinic reference as Midrash Tannaim. Cope, “Matthew XXV:31–46,” 40 says it also appears in the Talmudic text Kid. 43a and recommends an extensive treatment of agency P. Borgen, *Bread From Heaven* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1965), 158–64

<sup>92</sup> An extensive list of texts promoting these “acts of kindness” is found in H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrash* (Munich: Beck, 1928), 4/1, 559–610. Hultgren’s list partially cited here is briefer: *M. Abot* 1.2; *b. Sotah* 14a; *b. Šabbat* 127a. Giving to the needy is a special concern (*Testament of Issachar* 3.8; *Testament of Zebulun*.7.4; *Vision of Ezra* 7, 31; *Leviticus Rabbah* 34.9–11; *Ruth Rabbah* 5.9 and *Sukkah* 49b). Arland Hultgren, “The Final Judgment,” 314, 324.

<sup>93</sup> David R. Catchpole, “The Poor on Earth,” 391–92, cites this source as *Midrash Tannaim* 15.9. Catchpole here recommends A. Wikenhauser, “Die Liebeswerke in dem Gerichtsgemälde Mt 25.31–46,” *BZ* 20 (1932): 366–77.

thirsty, clothed the naked, brought up orphans, given alms, or otherwise practiced works of love will be shown the gate of Yahweh with the invitation to enter in.<sup>94</sup> Texts like these, though not as numerous and not always given in the context of final judgment, sustain a hesitation regarding a hard and fast conclusion that the Evangelist intended the “least” to include only Jesus’ disciples. A more informed choice between the dominant criterion of centripetal love found in the apocalypses and this rabbinic broadly philanthropic criterion of judgment must await the evidence to be gathered from a consideration of the genre of Matt 25:31–46 and its rhetorical connection to the balance of Matthew’s Gospel (below).

Before leaving the ancient extra-biblical intertexts, the question of the timing of the judgment must be revisited. The Evangelist’s interest in apocalyptic motifs aligns him most naturally with the dominant apocalyptic view which teaches that the judgment would occur after a great eschatological destruction on the eve of the earth’s renewal.<sup>95</sup> This makes the best sense of the temporal designations “in the regeneration” (ἐν τῇ παλιγγενεσίᾳ, Matt 19:28) and the “end of the age” (συντέλεια τοῦ αἰῶνος, 24:3) used in Matthew’s Gospel.<sup>96</sup>

The question concerning how many judgments would occur is a related and more difficult issue. Under an earlier consideration of the Evangelist’s habit of dividing mankind into two groups, it was concluded that the Evangelist would either have

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<sup>94</sup> Davies/Allison, *Matthew*, III, 418.

<sup>95</sup> Sim cites the following examples: *4 Ezra* 7.30–32; 5.55; 7.75; 14.10–11; *2 Baruch* 85.10; 32.6; 44.12; 57.2; *1 Enoch* 45.4–5; 72.1; 91.16; *Jub.* 1.29; *Sibylline corpus* 160–61, 175–79; *1QH* 3.28–33; *1QS* 4.25; *2 Pet* 3:10–12. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 112; and David C. Sim, “The Meaning of παλιγγενεσία in Matthew 19:28,” *JSNT* 50 (1993):3–12, here 11.

<sup>96</sup> The “end of the age” was broadly used to denote the end of the current world order: *1 Enoch* 16.1; *2 Bar.* 13.3; 19.5; 21.8; 27.15; 29.8; *T. Levi* 10.2; *T. Ben.* 11.3; *T. Mos.* 12.4.

expected only one judgment in which all peoples of the world would be divided into two groups (Kathleen Weber's view) or perhaps two judgments: one for Christians and the other for non-Christians (Robert Gundry's view).<sup>97</sup> The theory of Douglas Hare and Daniel J. Harrington which proposed three distinct judgments in Matthew's Gospel seems to be in conflict with the proposed Evangelist's view of salvation history and the simpler groupings of people that he assumes.<sup>98</sup> A review of the intertexts which speak of multiple judgments may now be conducted for additional light on this issue.

Davies and Allison list the following texts which speak of multiple judgments: *T. Benj.* 10:8–10; *T. Abr. A* 13:1–8; *4 Ezra* 12:33–34; *1 Enoch* 91:12–15; and *Rev* 19:17 – 20:15.<sup>99</sup> These must be considered one at a time.

The *Testament of Benjamin* 10.8–10 may or may not forecast distinct judgments for different groups. This passage reads, "Then all shall be changed, some destined for glory, others for dishonor, for the Lord first judges Israel for the wrong she has committed and then he shall do the same for all the nations."<sup>100</sup> This text at least claims that Israel's judgment has some kind of priority with God over and above His judgment of the nations, but this passage alone does not unquestionably predict a temporal priority for the judging of Israel or a distinct time of judgment for Israel as opposed to the nations.

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<sup>97</sup> Weber, "Events of the End," 49–51, 219, 312; Gundry, *Matthew*, 511–12, 514.

<sup>98</sup> Douglas Hare and Daniel J. Harrington, "Make Disciples," 359–69, here 365.

<sup>99</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, I, 423.

<sup>100</sup> H. C. Kee, "Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (Second Century B.C.): A New Translation and Introduction" in, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, I, 775–828.

The *Testament of Abraham* A 13.1–8 speaks of three separate judgments which each person must undergo: one by Abel, one by the “twelve tribes of Israel,” and finally by the “Master God of all.” The text explains, “And thus the judgment and recompense of the world is made through three tribunals. And therefore a matter is not ultimately established by one or two witnesses, but *every matter shall be established by three witnesses*” (italics original).<sup>101</sup> This text clearly does not speak of separate judgments for separate groups. Rather, it speaks of three judgments through which all must pass.

*Fourth Ezra* 12.33–34 portrays part of the explanation God gave Ezra for his fifth vision, the “Eagle Vision.” This explanation says that the Messiah will judge the wicked people represented by the eagle but will preserve the “remnant” of God’s people until a “day of judgment.” The idea that the remnant will be judged on a separate occasion after the judgment of the wicked is compatible with its wording, “For first he will set them [the wicked] living before his judgment seat, and when he has reprovved them, then he will destroy them. But he will deliver in mercy the remnant of my people, those who have been saved throughout my borders, and he will make them joyful until the end comes, the day of judgment, of which I spoke to you at the beginning” (12.33–34, bracketed words added for clarity).<sup>102</sup> *Fourth Ezra* 12:33–34 does suggest distinct judgments, but the order is opposite of that possibly suggested by *T. Benj.* 10.8–10. *Fourth Ezra* 12:33–34 has the wicked judged first, then the remnant of God’s people.

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<sup>101</sup> E. P. Sanders, “Testament of Abraham” (First to Second Century A.D.): A New Translation and Introduction,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, I, 871–902.

<sup>102</sup> B. M. Metzger, “The Fourth Book of Ezra (Late First Century A.D.) With the Four Additional Chapters: A New Translation and Introduction,” in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, I, 517–60.

*First Enoch* 91:12–15 follows a description of the coming of the “righteous one” who will cut off the roots of oppression, and destroy sinners and blasphemers with the sword (91:10–11).<sup>103</sup> This martial context of divine judgment extends through 91:12 which forecasts that the righteous will participate in executing judgment with the sword upon the oppressors during a period called “the second eighth week.” After that, the “ninth week” reveals “the righteous judgment” to the whole world during which time the deeds of the sinners will depart from the world to eternal destruction, and “all people shall direct their sight to the path of uprightness” (91:14). After this, the “tenth week” sees the “eternal judgment” executed by angels during which the first heaven passes away and a new heaven appears (19:15). This text clearly speaks of several judgments. The text implies that only the wicked will be judged with the sword of the “righteous one.” The “righteous judgment” of the “ninth week” seems to include both the wicked and the righteous. The “eternal judgment” of the “tenth week” may be directed more at renewing the cosmos than at weighing the standing of individual human beings. The chief relevance of *1 Enoch* 91:12–15 for the current study is its witness to a belief that at least some wicked people will be judged cataclysmically and separately from a more world wide judgment which comes at a later time.

Finally, a sequential reading of the visions found in the canonical book of Rev 19:17–20:15 also suggests multiple judgments—some of them separated by a long period of time. A sequential reading of the events forecast by this text shows the King of Kings first descending from heaven to defeat and condemn the beast, the kings of the earth, and their armies. Those who are defeated here are condemned to the lake of fire (19:16–21).

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<sup>103</sup> The summary here is based on the translation of E. Isaac, “1 Enoch,” 5–90.

Apparently at the same time, Satan is also defeated and consigned for a thousand years to the abyss (20:1–3). Next, the martyrs of Jesus come to life and reign with Christ for the same thousand years (20:4), and the rest of the dead remain dead for the thousand years (20:5). At the end of the thousand years the dead small and great are summoned to stand before a great white throne to be judged for their works. Those whose names are not in the book of life are cast into the lake of fire (20:11–15). If the military defeat of the beast, kings of the earth, and their armies is taken as their judgment, if the martyrs' resurrection and subsequent reign on earth is marked as their judgment, then the "rest of the dead" who are raised to judgment after the 1,000 years would represent the third judgment. People in the first group are all the condemned. People in the second group are the blessed martyrs. The third group includes people whose judgment will depend upon the content of the books. This group could include both the blessed and the condemned, but the text only specifies the destiny of those whose names are not written in the book of life (Rev 20:15).

None of these texts bears a strong resemblance to Matt 25:31–46. The passages from *T. Benj.* and *T. Abr.* do not strongly support the idea that separate groups will be judged at separate times. The latter three texts allow for distinct judgments. The wicked alone are judged first in each of these texts. The military context of this judgment which is explicit in *1 Enoch* and the book of Revelation may also be implied in *4 Ezra*. Each of these passages say that the wicked will be defeated and condemned eternally by the Messiah (*4 Ezra*), the "righteous one" (*1 Enoch*), or the "King of Kings" (Rev). After that, and after a period of time, a broader judgment is given, the outcome of which could

place people in condemnation or in blessing (if the Great White Throne admits such a description, Rev 20:11–20).

George Wesley Buchanan suggests that the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats resembles the kind of judgment that traditionally took place after a great battle. In such judgments, the general would render verdicts upon the surviving enemies and would grant commendations and awards upon those valiant in battle. Buchanan thinks the setting originally intended for the pericope was Jesus' personal judgment of his countrymen for the way they treated his missionary disciples prior to the cataclysmic judgment of the Son of Man against the Romans to which Jesus alluded in Matt 10:23.<sup>104</sup> Such an interpretation would be compatible with the sequence of judgments in the latter three apocalyptic texts. However, if this was the intention of the Evangelist, he would probably have said something more explicit about the defeat of the Romans in battle prior to the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats. The Olivet Discourse only forecasts "wars and rumors of wars" and that "nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom" (Matt 24:6–7). No mention is given of the Son of Man's military-like defeat of the enemies of the righteous as it appears in *4 Ezra 12*, *1 Enoch 91*, and Rev 19. The most we can conclude in the light of these multiple judgments is that the Evangelist, interested as he was in using apocalyptic motifs, could have intended distinct judgments for distinct groups. This issue must be reviewed again in the next section of this chapter which considers the genre of Matt 25:31–46 and its rhetorical relationship to the balance of the Gospel.

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<sup>104</sup> George Wesley Buchanan, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 2 vols., The Mellen Biblical Commentary Series, no. 1 (Lampeter, Mellen, 1996), II, 943–46.



### Literary Issues of Genre and Rhetorical Structure

Thus far, this study has sharpened its description of the Evangelist and his intended meaning for the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats by a careful consideration of the interpretive issues that have arisen concerning the life setting of the Evangelist and a review of the textual, intratextual, and intertextual questions that are relevant to an interest in authorial intention. Some preference has been shown concerning the narrower definition of the “least” in Matt 25:40, 45 which holds that the judgment was intended to forecast the way the Son of Man will judge all people of the world for the way they have treated Jesus’ disciples who were commanded to make disciples of “all the nations” (28:19). A hesitancy to rule out a broader definition of the least has been admitted due to the texts in Matthew’s Gospel and other contemporaneous texts or traditions which attach eternal consequences and heavenly rewards for one’s deeds (Matt 16:27) or giving to the poor (19:21). The last section of this chapter will attempt to more tightly define the genre which the Evangelist would have implied for this passage as well as the way the Evangelist intended this passage to function rhetorically as a distinct pericope and as connected to the rest of the Gospel. Hopefully, this process will lead to greater clarity about the Evangelist’s intention concerning the identity of the “least.”

#### The Literary Issue of Genre

The following remarks are built upon the literary opinion that an author’s selection of genre is intentional and should be seen as an indicator of the author’s intended meaning for a passage.<sup>105</sup> A historical review of the use of genres reveals that

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<sup>105</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 336–42. The passage in Bakhtin to which

they are not static in form or function. Genres evolve over time and may be combined with other genres to form composite texts.<sup>106</sup> The identification of the Evangelist's intended genre for Matt 25:31–46 is complicated by the fact that the passage appears to be a composite of three genres. The passage begins with something very much like a parable regarding a shepherd and his flocks. The passage incorporates apocalyptic imagery. And the passage seems to predict future events as many prophecies do. For this reason the genres of “parable,” “apocalyptic,” and “prediction” must be considered for their relative influence upon the intended meaning of the text. That meaning, and the use of the genres by which it was deliberately intended, will be assumed in the following review to be compatible with the Jewish scribal tradition in which the Evangelist as described was a participant.<sup>107</sup> The chief question which must be decided here concerns the level of referential precision which the Evangelist intended the passage to convey concerning future events and the groups of people involved. Did the Evangelist intend to forecast a detailed description of the final judgment, or did he rather intend a parabolic dramatization of principles which would be active in the divine judgment so that readers could find for themselves the lesson best suited for them? Commentators are divided today over whether the text should be read today as a precise prediction or as an

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Vanhoozer alludes comes from M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, ed. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>106</sup> Alastair Fowler, “The Life and Death of Literary Forms,” *New Literary History* 2 (1971): 199–216, 204–5; Brent Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 2002), 107.

<sup>107</sup> E. von Dobschütz, “Matthäus als Rabbi und Katechet;” Krister Stendahl, *School of St. Matthew*, 31; Bornkamm, “End Expectation,” 49; Gerhardsson, *Testing of God's Son*, 79; Goulder, *Midrash and Lection*, 10.

evocative story. The question which drives the current study is whether the Evangelist intended the passage to be read one way or the other.

***Matthew 25:31–46 Considered As Parabolic***

The Evangelist portrayed speaking “in parables” as a distinct form of discourse (Matt 13:3, 10, 34, 35; 22:1) which concealed mysteries of the kingdom from the obstinate but conveyed truth to the disciples who were given the ability to understand (13:11–15). While the enigmatic quality of some of the parables may have concealed their deepest truths from the masses, the Evangelist shows that Jesus’ private conversations with the disciples were intended to clarify the enigmas for them (13:36; 15:15; 16:5–12). The fact that the Evangelist includes the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats as part of Jesus’ private instruction to the disciples (24:3) suggests that the passage was intended to communicate clearly. The passage in context was not intended to conceal the truth from the obstinate.

The tendency in Matthew’s Gospel to interpret the parables as allegories is consistent with Jewish practice both in the Old Testament (Jdg 9:16–20; 2 Sam 12:7–9) and rabbinic literature.<sup>108</sup> The Evangelist’s method of interpretation would therefore have been consistent with that of most pre-modern commentators.<sup>109</sup> He would not have commended the more recent aesthetic approach of interpreting parables promoted by Dan O. Via which claims that Jesus’ parables are works of art which may be interpreted

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<sup>108</sup> Keener, *Matthew*, 381–384 citing Robert Morris Johnston, “Parabolic Interpretations Attributed to Tannaim” (Ph.D. diss., Hartford Seminary Foundation, 1978), 561–62, 565–66, 638; Geza Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1993), 92–99. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr. make the same point, but attribute some of the allegorical application of Jesus’ parables to the Evangelists, *Matthew*, II, 378–82.

<sup>109</sup> Hedrick, *Parables*, 8–10.

without notice of the historical context in which they were created and without going outside of the stories to some hypothetical referent.<sup>110</sup> It is reasonable to conclude, given the Evangelist's interest in clarifying the parables for the disciples, that the Evangelist would have left contextual clues regarding the way he thought any parabolic element in Matt 25:31–46 should be interpreted.

Formally considered, the brief simile about the shepherd and his flocks in 25:32 is not sustained throughout the entire pericope. The clearest implication which this small parabolic element makes is that the separation of the righteous and the wicked will occur at the time God chooses and that it will not be difficult. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the imminent separation of people into two groups at the judgment is a recurring theme in the Olivet Discourse (24:31, 40–41, 45–51; 15:1–13). Beyond this, there is nothing particularly enigmatic about the parabolic allusion to a shepherd and his flocks, nor does the shepherd motif color the whole passage. Therefore the passage, generally considered, was not intended to be a parable. The passage is only introduced by a brief parabolic element.<sup>111</sup>

### ***Matthew 25:31–46 Considered As Apocalyptic***

Many scholars have noticed a higher concentration of apocalyptic symbols in Matthew's Gospel than any other.<sup>112</sup> The life setting assumed for the Evangelist and his readership may have been similar to the disenfranchised status which is broadly believed

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<sup>110</sup> Dan Otto Via, *The Parables of Jesus: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) as summarized by Hedrick, *Parables*, 10.

<sup>111</sup> John P. Heil is one of only a few who call the entire passage a parable in "the strict sense." "The Double Meaning of the Narrative of Universal Judgment in Matthew 25:31–46," *JNST* 69 (1998): 3–14, 13.

<sup>112</sup> Lunde's and Webber's recommendations are listed in Chapter 4, note 38.

to be a social catalyst for the origin and development of apocalyptic discourse.<sup>113</sup>

Tensions in families between Christians and non-Christians (10:21), tensions between Christian Jews and the non-Christian synagogues (10:17), and tensions between Christians and the non-Christian Gentile world (10:18; 24:9, 14) were all predicted by Jesus to occur during the disciples efforts to preach the Gospel to the Jews and to all the nations. By the time the Gospel of Matthew was written, these tensions could have resulted in the disenfranchised social status which was typical for communities which adopted and developed apocalyptic discourse. Common also among these communities was the belief that God's eschatological judgment will be the critical point of history in which God will display his wrath against those who persecuted His faithful people.<sup>114</sup> Such a social situation would easily be compatible with a narrow definition of the "least" (25:40, 45) in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats. This would mean that the Evangelist intended the "least" to refer to Christians, perhaps the missionary disciples of Jesus especially.

Another line of argument for a narrow definition of the "least" stems from the tendency of the Evangelist to interpret Jesus' parables as allegories in which elements in Jesus' stories are given clear and distinct referents (13:18–23, 36–43). If the Evangelist were consistent, this tendency to provide clear, distinct, and consistent referents to the

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<sup>113</sup> Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 54 lists the following in support: D. S. Russell, *Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 16–18; John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroads, 1984), 29–30; David Edward Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 110–12; and Mitchell Glenn Reddish, *Apocalyptic Literature: A Reader* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 24. Graham Stanton also believes Matthew's social setting was like that among other apocalypticists. Graham Stanton, "Once More: Matthew 25:31-46," 222-23.

<sup>114</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish & Christian Apocalypses*, SupNT, no. 93 (Boston: Brill, 1998), 134–35.

elements of Jesus' parables would have manifested itself in a similar way in the Evangelist's interpretation and application of Jesus' apocalyptic discourse. Though ancient apocalypses are increasingly recognized to include many images which were not intended to be referentially precise, the tendency of the Evangelist to be referentially precise can not be disregarded in an interpretation focused on authorial intention.<sup>115</sup> For this reason, the several groups in Matt 25:31–46—the “sheep,” the “goats,” the “nations,” and the “least”—need not be seen in the Evangelist's perspective as mere stage props used in a story to convey a very simple message about God's general benevolence to all people and God's judgment against people who do not share this value. The Evangelist's generally displayed habit of being referentially precise should be taken into account.

This habit of referential precision seems to be displayed in the Evangelist's use of apocalyptic discourse. A richer mix of apocalyptic details appears in Matthew's Gospel than in Mark, Luke, or John.<sup>116</sup> The Evangelist seems to have made an attempt to arrange the apocalyptic elements of his Gospel so that readers would be more prone to notice the narrative consistency of its eschatological references than the few odd elements here and there which do not easily cohere.<sup>117</sup> The evocative lesson the Evangelist intended to convey through the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats would not have been lost if he added to it a referentially precise interpretation of its several groups and the roles each

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<sup>115</sup> Brent Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 114–16, 124–25. Apocalyptic descriptions of judgment scenes are among the apocalyptic texts which lack referential precision as Richard Bauckham illustrates in his discussion of the *Apocalypse of Peter*. Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 176, 202, 203. According to Bauckham, this eclectic grasp allowed “particular images and ideas to move from the apocalyptic of one religion to another” (p. 209).

<sup>116</sup> Weber, “Events of the End,” 2–3. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 50.

<sup>117</sup> Weber, “Events of the End,” 105–7.

would play in the eschatological event the passage portends. For these reasons, the Evangelist should be understood to have intended a relatively precise predictive quality for this passage. However, the level of precision which is implied in the prediction and the implied identity of the groups are two questions which are more complex.

***Matthew 25:31–46 As a Prediction***

If the Matt 25:31–46 is taken to be a very precise prediction so that the several groups listed in the passage are mutually exclusive groups, certain interpretive dilemmas appear. The existence of three groups in the judgment (the sheep/righteous, the goats/wicked, and the “least”) would contradict the Evangelist’s contextually displayed habit of dividing humanity into only two groups in the judgment (24:31, 40–41, 45–51; 15:1–13). If the righteous sheep are distinct from the “least,” and yet both pass through the judgment with divine favor, then a possibility arises that the groups will receive divine favor upon differing criteria. Such a conclusion would contradict the Evangelist’s clear teaching elsewhere that a person’s intimacy with God the Father is possible only through the revelatory ministry of the Son and that peace for the soul comes by being yoked with Jesus (11:25–30). Under such a presupposition, how would the “least” who appear to be intimately received by the Son of Man be distinguished from the righteous sheep who will also be accepted by the Son of Man?

The Evangelist may have avoided these dilemmas in any of several ways. The question at hand concerns which way would be most consistent with the Evangelist as so far described. He could have avoided the dilemma, on the one hand, by intending the passage to be read less like a precise prediction and more like a parable or like the evocative apocalypses of his day so that the passage’s several groups should not be taken

to symbolize distinct categories of people.<sup>118</sup> On the other hand, he could have intended a high degree of referential precision which would have destined “all the nations” for judgment at the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats, while allowing the “least” to be judged separately on another occasion.<sup>119</sup> A mediating position regarding the intended precision of the passage has been proposed by Ramsey Michaels who does not think that Matt 25:31–46 speaks with complete precision about the final judgment, but rather thinks that this passage was intended to serve as a thematic counterpart to the preceding parables which evoke lessons for church leaders concerning their own final judgment. For Michaels, the “least” in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats symbolize the same church leaders. Michaels concludes that the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats was intended not to be a prediction of a distinct judgment but rather was intended to warn everyone else in the world regarding their treatment of church leaders.<sup>120</sup> The difference between these several attempts to resolve the interpretive dilemmas comes down to the question of how precisely the passage was intended to make its prediction of the judgment.

The fact that prophetic prediction is a special emphasis in Matthew’s Gospel can hardly be questioned.<sup>121</sup> The Gospel’s frequent description of events as the fulfillment of

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<sup>118</sup> John R. Donahue, “The ‘Parable’ of the Sheep and the Goats: A Challenge to Christian Ethics,” *TS* 47 (1986): 3–31, 11.

<sup>119</sup> Hare and Harrington suggest separate judgments for Jews and Gentiles in, “‘Make Disciples of All the Gentiles,’ 364–65; and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*. Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 1 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991), 358–59. Jeremias suggests separate judgments for Christians and non-Christians. Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, trans. S. H. Hooke from the 6<sup>th</sup> German ed. of *Die Gleichnisse Jesu* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963), 209–10.

<sup>120</sup> Ramsey Michaels, “Apostolic Hardships and Righteous Gentiles,” *JBL* 84 (1965): 27–37.

<sup>121</sup> James Kugel maintains that Matthew emphasized the “predictive aspect of Scripture” more strongly than other New Testament writer. This is evidenced in the many uses of “fulfilled” to describe events in the light of Old Testament texts (1:22–23; 2:5–6, 15, 17–18; 3:3; 4:14–16; 8:17; 12:17–21; 13:14–15; 13:35; 21:4–5; 27:9). James L. Kugel and Rowan A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 135.



Old Testament texts strongly suggests that the Evangelist had a proclivity for attaching inspired utterances to events. This strongly suggests he would have also intended his readers to expect certain eschatological events to fulfill the apocalyptic description of the divine judgment given in Matt 25:31–46. A more difficult question concerns the level of precision which the Evangelist intended for this prediction. This question can be illuminated by intertextual evidence which reveals a relative lack of cohesion and consistency in the apocalyptic literature of the Evangelist's day, but, since genres develop over time, and since distinct examples of any one genre may differ in character according to their authors' emphases, the level of precision which the Evangelist intended for Matt 25:31–46 can only be determined upon evidence drawn from Matthew's Gospel itself.

Evidence that the Evangelist intended a relatively high level of eschatological precision for the Matt 25:31–46 is fairly strong. All five of the traditionally recognized major discourses in Matthew's Gospel end with a strong warning about the eschatological judgment.<sup>122</sup> Since Matt 25:31–46 is the last of these eschatological passages and serves as the climactic pericope in the climactic discourse of Matthew's Gospel, the eschatological content of Matt 25:31–46 appears to be emphasized very much. The precision of the passage's description of the final judgment is a bit more difficult to determine. Evidence for its precision is tenuous but sustainable non-the-less.

The challenges against precision in the eschatological portions of Matthew proposed by John Donahue are not insurmountable. The active role of the angels in gathering the elect or culling out the wicked (13:42, 49; 24:31) is not contradicted, as Donahue suggests, by the silence regarding these duties in 16:27. Nor is the role of the

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<sup>122</sup> Benjamin Bacon, *Studies in Matthew* (New York: Henry Holt, 1930), 412. The texts are: Matt 7:21–27; 10:32–42; 13:47–50; 18:23–35; and 25:31–46.

angels compromised by 25:32 which says the Son of Man will separate “all the nations.” The apparent conflict of roles is resolved upon recognizing that the attending angels could serve at the pleasure of the Son of Man as bailiffs of the court (25:31). The promise of Jesus that the twelve would serve as judges in the kingdom (19:28) could designate to the twelve the ongoing management of the kingdom. Jurisdiction concerning entrance into the kingdom could therefore be left with the Son of Man (25:31).<sup>123</sup> Finally, precision in the eschatological portions of Matthew’s Gospel is not compromised by the different ways the defendants are described in each account of the judgment.<sup>124</sup> A moderate recognition of precision, something similar to that proposed by Michaels, could retain the distinct identity of the groups while allowing a measure of apocalyptic latitude to the Evangelist so that he could portray one final judgment from varying perspectives. In this way, the several groups which are named in the several accounts could retain, for purposes of exhortation, their unique identity in the various portrayals of the judgment.

Positive evidence for the precision of the apocalyptic predictions of the Gospel can be found in the Evangelist’s consistent use of apocalyptic themes and imagery across the seven eschatological parables which precede the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats in Matthew’s Gospel. The very first of these, the Parable of the Wheat and Tares (13:24–30) includes eight eschatological elements which also appear here and there in the subsequent eschatological parables. These are the following: Son of Man, dualism between good and evil, the devil, the end of the age, angels as agents of the Son of Man, separation in the

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<sup>123</sup> Donahue, “Parable,” 11.

<sup>124</sup> These include false disciples who practice lawlessness (7:21–23; cf. 13:41); the “wicked” and the “righteous” (13:49); “every man” (16:27); “all the tribes of the earth” (24:30); and “all the nations” (25:32).

judgment, severe punishment, and splendid reward. Only three additional elements appear in subsequent parables: the imminence of judgment (24:42, 50; 25:13), the concept of determinism (22:14), and the uninterpreted “wedding clothes” peculiar to the Parable of the Wedding Feast (22:11–12). Of these eleven eschatological elements, all but the “wedding clothes” appears in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats. This gives Matt 25:31–46 the appearance of a summation. The Evangelist’s intention to be consistent with these elements suggests at least a moderate level of precision in his portrayal of end time events.

If the Evangelist did intend at least a moderate precision for the details of the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats, then the likelihood increases that he intended the “least” to represent a special class of people distinguishable from “all the nations” of the world. Two groups have been suggested by the intratextual data. The “least” could represent all the poor and disadvantaged people of the world. Or the “least” could represent the disciples of Jesus, especially in their missionary capacity. The former interpretation sustains a strong thematic resonance but a slight verbal resonance with Jesus’ instruction to the rich young man to give his money to the poor to have treasure in heaven (19:22). The latter interpretation sustains both a strong thematic resonance and a very strong verbal resonance with Jesus’ instructions to the disciples when he sent them out to preach to the Jews (10:14–15, 23, 40–42). Either interpretation at this point in the study could be attributed to the Evangelist so far described, but the stronger evidence appears to support the idea that the Evangelist intended the “least” to represent the missionary disciples. The last section of this chapter will evaluate these two

interpretations in the light of the rhetorical dynamics which seem to be at work both in the immediate and extended contexts of Matthew's Gospel.

#### Issues Regarding Rhetorical Structure

This last section of Chapter 5 will analyze the interpretive issues which commentators have raised concerning the lines of argument discernable both in the passage itself, in the Olivet Discourse, and throughout the entire Gospel. The goal here is to identify those lines of argument which are most consistent with the working model of the Evangelist. One of the first things that must be done to accomplish this goal is to address the question of whether or not the Evangelist intended his text to display cohesive lines of thought across its breadth. Current opinions vary.

Soares Prabhu opined that the Evangelist employed some discordant traditions which the Evangelist personally opposed.<sup>125</sup> Gerd Thiessen and Kun Chun Wong argue that the Evangelist crafted an intercultural theology mediated through intentional ambiguities in order to consolidate the opposing Jewish and Gentile factions of his immediate readership.<sup>126</sup> John P. Heil believes that Matt 25:31–46 was intended to give alternate applications simultaneously. Heil's opinion may be ruled out of consideration inasmuch as Heil's argument is dependent on a pronounced parabolic quality of the

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<sup>125</sup> M. Soares Prabhu, *The Formula Quotations in the Infancy Narrative of Matthew: An Enquiry into the Tradition History of Mt 1–2* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1976), 43.

<sup>126</sup> Gerd Thiessen, "Aporien im Umgang mit den Antijudaismen des Neuen Testaments," 535–55; Kun Chun Wong, *Interkulturelle Theologie*, 144–54 specifically treats Matthew's discussions of the final judgment. Another writer who followed a similar concept of sociological conflict is Kenzo Tagawa, "People and Community in the Gospel of Matthew," *NTS* 16 (1969–70): 149–62. These all cited by Luz, "Anti-Judaism in the Gospel of Matthew, 243–61, 250–51.

passage which does not recognize the “least” to represent a precise category of people.<sup>127</sup>

Conversely, George B. Caird believed that the Gospel accurately reflects the personal theology of the Evangelist and that the Gospel’s apparent contradictions are due to the Evangelist’s Semitic habit of promoting balance and wisdom in the light of opposing tensions.<sup>128</sup> Ulrich Luz would concur with Caird and concludes that the Evangelist intended his Gospel to be read and reread so that its lines of thought would become more apparent with each reading.<sup>129</sup>

Of these several opinions regarding the thematic cohesion of the Gospel, none are completely incompatible with the adopted description of the Evangelist, but the opinions of Caird and Luz seem to most compatible with the text itself. The structure of the Gospel is carefully planned, and its recurrent phrases and themes suggest an intended intratextual hermeneutic bent toward thematic cohesion and persuasion. For these reasons, the structure of the passage itself as well as its placement in the Olivet Discourse and in the whole Gospel should be seen as important clues for discovering the intended meaning of the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats.

### ***The Structure of Matthew 25:31–46***

The passage easily divides into five sections. The introduction (25:31–32a) sets the scene as the cataclysmic appearance of the Son of Man with his angels. The fact that the Son of Man sits on “His glorious throne” (ἐπί θρόνου δόξης) suggests an

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<sup>127</sup> John P. Heil, “Double Meaning of the Narrative,” 13–14. Heil’s interpretation does not suggest a real lack of cohesion, but the fluidity of intention which he proposes adds a complexity to the issue that would make the tracing of lines of thought through the Gospel a more difficult enterprise.

<sup>128</sup> G. B. Caird, *New Testament Theology*, 56, 262.

<sup>129</sup> Ulrich Luz, “Matthew the Evangelist: A Jewish Christian at the Crossroads,” in *Studies in Matthew*, trans. Rosemary Selle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 3–17, 3.

inauguration and/or a judgment. A smile (25:32b–33) which immediately follows narrows the context to that of a judgment scene. The plural masculine pronoun in the clause “He will separate them (αὐτούς)” reveals that the judgment is intended not for nations as wholes (“nations”—τὰ ἔθνη—is neuter), but of individuals among the nations.<sup>130</sup> This separation is metaphorically described as a shepherd’s act of separating his sheep and his goats from each other into two groups: the sheep on the right, the goats on the left. The third and fourth sections of the passage depart from the shepherd analogy and replace it with a realistic description of the judgment of the “blessed / righteous” (οἱ εὐλογημένοι / οἱ δίκαιοι, 25:34–40) and the judgment of the “accursed” (οἱ κατηραμένοι, 25:41–45). In both the third and fourth sections, the royal connotation of the Son of Man’s “glorious throne” of 25:31 is manifest. The narrator consistently calls the judge “the King” (ὁ βασιλεὺς, 25:34, 40) while both groups of defendants call him “Lord” (κύριε, 25:37, 44). Aside from the different verdicts pronounced upon each group and the effective use of concision in subsequently repeated lines, the third and fourth sections are virtual mirrors of each other. They each open with the King’s verdict (25:34, 41), followed by the King’s explanation of the criterion for reward or punishment (25:35–36, 42–43), followed by each group’s apparent surprise and their requests for further clarity (25:37–39, 44), and both sections conclude with the King’s concise answer to each group (25:40, 45). A fifth and final section of the passage concludes the whole with a concise summary which denotes the eternal destiny of each group: one “into eternal

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<sup>130</sup> Hultgren, *Parables*, 311, notices a similar construction is in 28:19 which says to baptize “them” (αὐτούς) even though the antecedent is the same neuter plural “all the nations” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη).

punishment,” the other “to eternal life” (εἰς κόλασιν αἰώνιον / εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον, 25:46).

The most prominent structural feature of the entire passage is the fourfold repetition of the criteria of judgment given in progressively concise wording which lists six acts of charity either granted to our withheld from the King when he was in need. The charitable acts include feeding the King, giving drink to the King, housing the King, clothing the King, visiting the King in his sickness, and visiting the King in prison (25:35–36, 37–39, 42–43, 44). The fourfold repetition and consistent order of these charitable acts seems to codify them as an important list.

The second most prominent structural feature of the entire passage is the twice repeated request for further explanation made by both the “righteous” (οἱ δίκαιοι, 25:37, 40) and the “accursed” (οἱ κατηραμένοι, 25:41, 45) and immediately given by the King to both groups. Both the “righteous” and the “accursed” show surprise that the “King” could have received their service or neglect regarding the six charitable acts. The King explains to the “righteous” that their service “to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them” (ἐνί τούτων τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου τῶν ἐλαχίστων, 25:40) was actually done to the King. The King more concisely tells the “accursed” that their lack of service “to one of the least of these” (ἐνι τούτων τῶν ἐλαχίστων, 25:45) was a lack of service to the King.

The immediate surprise shown by both groups is sometimes used to rule out any quick alignment of the “least” with the missionary disciples of Jesus on the supposition that neither the “blessed” nor the “accursed” would have been surprised at the King’s explanation had their actions been motivated by religious sympathy or animosity toward

the missionaries of the Son of Man.<sup>131</sup> While this interpretive application of the surprise appears at first to be reasonable, such an intended application is not completely certain. The surprise could also have been intended to mark the non-calculating simplicity of the “blessed” on the one hand, and the calculating obduracy of the “accursed” on the other.

Further support drawn from the passage alone for identifying the “least” with Christians may be taken from the description of the defendants in 25:32. People in the first century used the phrase “the nations” (τὰ ἔθνη) to connote foreigners or outsiders who were not part of their own groups or class.<sup>132</sup> The phrase τὰ ἔθνη used here in a Christian setting could easily and naturally connote non-Christians. This would provide an incentive for aligning “the least” who the Son of Man calls his “brothers” (τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου, 25:40) as Christians. This would be a natural way to understand the identity of the Son of Man’s “brothers” given the Christian understanding of the “Son of Man.”

On the whole, an isolated reading of the passage is capable of sustaining either a broad application of “the least” or a narrow application of “the least.” There is nothing in what we speculate regarding the Evangelist which would tip the scales in either direction if the passage is considered in isolation from the rest of the Gospel. If the narrow definition sustains any advantage upon such a reading as Hultgren suggests, Hultgren’s

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<sup>131</sup> J. M. Court, “Right and Left: The Implications for Matthew 25:31–46” *NTS* 31 (1985) 223–33, here 229, 231.

<sup>132</sup> The pejorative connotation of ἔθνο” in the plural form τὰ ἔθνη is recognized in J.H. Thayer’s (1972); LS (1976); and BAGD (1979). The latter’s comment is most telling, “Somet. the word has the connotation of relig. and moral inferiority which was taken for granted by the Jews....”



admission that the broader application of “the least” finds intratextual support in Matthew’s Gospel is telling.<sup>133</sup>

### *The Passage As Part of the Olivet Discourse*

Many commentators believe the close proximity of Jesus’ Jerusalem sermon against the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23) with the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24 – 25) was intended to forge the two together to comprise the fifth and final discourse in Matthew’s Gospel. The scribal sensitivities of the Evangelists may have even led him to combine these two speeches to foster a similarity between the Gospel of Matthew and the five-fold division seen in the biblical books such as the Pentateuch, the speeches of Moses in Deuteronomy, and the Psalms.<sup>134</sup>

Daniel Harrington argued that this juxtaposition of the Jerusalem sermon with the Olivet Discourse was intended to extend the harsh invective against the scribes and Pharisees (chapter 23) into the parables of the Olivet Discourse (chapters 24–25) which Harrington argued were directed against the synagogue and not the church.<sup>135</sup> This opinion of Harrington is not only out of step with the consensus of scholars, but Harrington’s insinuation that Jesus’ condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees was intended to extend generally to the Jewish people is incompatible with a Jewish Christian Evangelist who still hoped that Jewish Christians could function in society as Jews. For

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<sup>133</sup> Hultgren, *Parables*, 321. The same point is made by Francis Watson, “Liberating the Reader: A Theological-Exegetical Study of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt 25:31–46),” in *The Open Text: New Directions in Biblical Studies?* (London: SCM, 1993), 57–84, 65.

<sup>134</sup> David R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew’s Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Sheffield: Academic, 1988), 129–132. Bauer demonstrates the persistence of this attraction to fivefold divisions in the later rabbinic work *Pirque Aboth*.

<sup>135</sup> Harrington, “Make Disciples;” and “Polemical Parables in Matthew 24–25,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 44 (1991): 287–98.

this reason, the most relevant context for tracing the Evangelist's line of thought and argument up to the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats consists of the Olivet Discourse proper, chapters 24 and 25, of which the judgment scene is the concluding pericope.

The outline of the Olivet Discourse proposed by Louis-Jean Frahier is both reasonable and compatible with the Evangelist's habit of topically arranging texts. According to Frahier, the discourse contains four sections. The first three include a brief opening dialogue in which the disciples pose questions to Jesus both concerning the timing of the destruction of the Temple and concerning the signs of Jesus' coming and of the end of the age (24:2–3), a mixture of direct and picturesque speech in which Jesus addresses those questions (24:4–44), and three parables all of which warn the disciples toward faithfulness in the light of his coming and the judgment they will face. The final section is the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats (25:31–46) which appears to extend the direct teaching of 24:4–44 and seems particularly to be an expansion of the concise description of the coming of the Son of Man given in 24:30–31.<sup>136</sup>

The many verbal and thematic similarities between the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats and the balance of the Olivet Discourse appears to have been intended by the Evangelists to prompt the readers/hearers to carry lines of thought from the earlier parts of the discourse into Matt 25:31–46.<sup>137</sup> Two schools of thought exist among the

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<sup>136</sup> Louis-Jean Frahier, *Le Jugement Dernier: Implications Éthiques sur le Bonheur de L'Homme* (Paris: Cerf, 1992), 56. The verbal and thematic resonance between 24:30–31 and 25:31–46 is high. The more concise description mentions the “the Son of Man coming” (cf. 25:31), in view of “all the tribes of the earth” (cf. “all the nations,” 25:32), with “great glory” (cf. 25:31), assisted by “angels” (cf. 25:31), who will gather the “elect” (cf. 25:34 in which the Son of Man declares to “blessed” the kingdom was “prepared for you from the foundation of the world”).

<sup>137</sup> Davies and Allison list the coming of the Son of Man (25:31) – 24:27, 30, 37, 39, 44; eschatological glory (25:31) – 24:30; angels (25:31) – 24:31, 36; all people (25:31) – 24:9, 24; eschatological judgment (25:32–46) – 24:37 – 25:30; the kingdom (25:34) – 24:14 – 25:1; and punishment

commentators regarding how these lines of thought should affect the identity of the “least” in 25:40, 45. The goal of the current section is to approach this question from the perspective of the Evangelist who has been described as a man with a Jewish literary (“scribal”) training, most likely Jewish by ethnicity, and who wrote within a decade of the destruction of the Temple to a group of Jewish and Gentile Christians who had already experienced or were experiencing the kinds of persecutions from Jews (10:17) and Gentiles (10:18) which Jesus said his disciples would face in their effort to preach his Gospel to “all the nations” (24:9, 14).<sup>138</sup>

The fact that Jesus is presented as the Son of Man in 25:31 cannot be seriously challenged. The entire discourse opens with the disciples’ question to Jesus about the sign of his own coming and of the end of the age (24:3). It is clear that Jesus’ many references to the “Son of Man” (24:27, 30, 39, 44) including the opening verse of the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats (25:31) were intended by the Evangelist to portray Jesus as the “Son of Man” who acts as judge in 25:31–46. Whoever the “least” were intended to be, this much is incontrovertible: they were intended to be aligned in some way with Jesus.

Beyond this, two schools of thought make reasonable arguments regarding how the Olivet Discourse should affect the interpretation of the “least.” Some argue that Matt 25:31–46 should be read as a warning to Christians in the spirit of Jesus exhortations to faithfulness in the prospect of “false Christs” (24:5, 24—*ψευδοχρίστοι*), “false

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of the wicked (25:41, 46) – 24:51; 25:30. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, III, 417. Davies and Allison could have also mention the reward of the righteous (25:34; cf 24:47; 25:21, 23).

<sup>138</sup> The destruction of the Temple (24:2) which Jesus probably alluded to by the phrase “abomination of desolation” (24:15) would have been very important to Jewish Christians who still maintained their social and many religious ties to the customs of their people, the Temple’s condition may not have been felt as deeply by the Gentile Christians for whom the Evangelist also wrote. Neither is the issue a clear factor in the interpretation of the “least” in 25:40, 45. For this reason, the current section will focus on more relevant portions of the Olivet Discourse.

prophets" (24:11, 24—ψευδοπροφήται), and persecutions (24:9–10).<sup>139</sup> Some say the dominant context is the warning of the three immediately preceding parables to Christians to be ready or alert because of the imminent coming and judgment of the Son of Man (24:44; 25:13).<sup>140</sup> The momentum of such a context could lead Christian readers to assume that they will be included among “all the nations” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, 25:32) as defendants in the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats. According to this interpretation the “least” could be any group, perhaps all the oppressed of the world, to whom Christians and others owe service.<sup>141</sup>

Other commentators argue that Matt 25:31–46 should be read as a consolation to Christians in the light of the persecutions which were forecast for them in the more direct discourse of 24:4–41, especially 24:9–14.<sup>142</sup> Here, the disciples are told that they will be hated and killed by “all the nations” (24:9) so that many among them will fall away, deliver up one another, and hate one another (24:10). The love of many people will grow cold (24:12). “But the one who endures to the end shall be saved” (24:13).<sup>143</sup> During this time, the disciples will preach the gospel of the kingdom “in the whole world for a witness to all the nations (πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν), and then the end (τέλος) shall come”

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<sup>139</sup> Frahier, *Le Jugement*, 83–84, 95.

<sup>140</sup> Hultgren, *The Parables*, 320; Egon Brandenburger, *Das Recht des Weltenrichters: Untersuchung zu Matthäus 25,31–46*, Stuttgarter Bibelstudien, no. 99 (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1980), 100; Kathleen Weber, “The Image of the Sheep and Goats in Matthew 25:31–46,” *CBQ* 59 (1997): 657–79, here 657–58.

<sup>141</sup> Gray’s survey of 20<sup>th</sup> century commentators shows that of the 440 commentators who concluded that Christians will be included among the “the nations” 305 believed the “least” to represent all the poor and oppressed of the world. *The Least of My Brothers*, 255.

<sup>142</sup> Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 234.

<sup>143</sup> Michaels especially focuses upon the duty implied in these warnings that Christians should support those among them engaged in preaching to the world. Michaels, “Apostolic Hardships,” 30.

(24:14). This passage places the disciples in one category and “all the nations” in another. The disciples are told that they will be hated by “all the nations” (πάντων τῶν ἐθνῶν, 24:9) as they preach the Gospel of the Kingdom “to all the nations” (πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, 24:14). If the Evangelist intended this context to color the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats, then he would have expected his readers to understand that “all the nations” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη) in 25:32 represent people who were the potential persecutors of the disciples and the ones to whom the disciples were sent to preach. This would lead the disciples to align themselves with the “least” who are also called the brothers of the Son of Man (i.e., of Jesus, 25:40). Consolation would come both from the revelation of the disciples’ intimate connection with Jesus who was known to have suffered for them and from the recognition that justice will be done at the divinely appointed time.

The verbal and thematic evidence for either approach is strong. If the Olivet Discourse were considered simply on literary grounds, without reference to the life setting of the Evangelist, the proximity of the three parables would naturally allow the context of warning to be sensed more heavily in 25:31–46 than the slightly more distant context for consolation gathered from 24:9–14. However, the goal of the current study is to determine the intention of the Evangelist. All things considered, the option that presents 25:31–46 as a consolation for persecution seems to be more compatible with the Evangelist’s life setting.

Some commentators think Matt 25:31–46 was intended to be read according to both approaches. John P. Heil’s argument for reading both a warning and a consolation from the passage has already been discussed and dismissed as too heavily dependent on

the “parabolic quality” of the passage.<sup>144</sup> Keener’s argument for a double application is simpler and more compatible with the life setting of the Evangelist. Keener recognizes the theme of consolation drawn from 24:9–14, but Keener also believes that the warning given in the Parable of the Wise Slave (24:45–51) against servants who abuse fellow servants should lead Christians to understand that they too are accountable for their treatment of each other. If this lesson were intended to color Matt 25:31–46, then a double application of warning and consolation could be inferred that would still present the “least” in 25:40, 45 as Christian disciples and the “nations” as both Christians and non-Christians. Such an interpretation displays a measure of polyvalent references because it recognizes that all of the “least” are Christians and that some people among the “nations” are the same Christians. Keener’s double application, however, is more consistent with the referential precision of the Evangelist because it at least assumes only one criterion of judgment, i.e., the way all people treat the disciples of Jesus.

***Matthew 25:31–46 As Part of the Whole Gospel***

The life setting for the reading of the Gospel of Matthew which has been adopted for this study proposes that the Gospel was intended to be read aloud to groups of Christians accompanied by the comments of recognized expositors. These expositors would have been familiar enough with the entire text of Matthew so that they could draw intratextual allusions between texts in Matthew’s Gospel. The texts in Matthew’s Gospel which carry similar wording and themes has already been discussed earlier in this chapter. The conclusion drawn from that exercise is that Matt 25:31–46 sustains its fullest

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<sup>144</sup> Heil, “The Double Meaning,” 13–14. The Evangelist’s habit of referential precision is not very compatible with readings that require polyvalent referents for the “least” and two different criteria of judgment as that suggested by Heil.

verbal and thematic resonance with the Missionary Discourse of chapter 10. The Missionary Discourse promises the disciples that the cities which do not receive them or their word will be severely punished (10:14–15), it equates receiving the missionary disciples with receiving Jesus (10:40), it promises a reward to those who give “water” to the disciples (10:42), and it refers to a missionary disciple as “one of these little ones” (ἐνι τῶν μικρῶν τούτων, 10:42)—a phrase which strongly suggests the same reference as “the least” (τῶν ἐλαχιστῶν) of 25:40, 45.<sup>145</sup> These lines of thought could have hardly been isolated from the Olivet Discourse which also carries the command to preach to potential persecutors (24:9, 14). A second and lesser verbal and thematic resonance was identified between Matt 25:31–46 and Jesus’ instruction for the rich young man to give to the poor (19:21). The broad philanthropy which this text promotes may also have been invoked by the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats, but such a broad reading seems to miss the themes of persecution and mission which are clearly part of the Olivet Discourse and would have been sensed by the readers engaged as they were in evangelism under the threat or the burden of social isolation and persecution.

The several suggestions of commentators for outlining the Gospel of Matthew do not equally suggest that lines of thought run from one section to the other which would affect the interpretation of Matt 25:31–46. The recognition of five major discourses stemming from Bacon’s proposal has been criticized for a lack of interpretive usefulness.<sup>146</sup> Bacon’s outline, however, does recognize a distinct prominence for the

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<sup>145</sup> The phrase “little ones” in 10:42 is the genitive plural of the Greek μικρός. The “least” in 25:40, 45 is the genitive plural superlative of ἐλάχιστος. The difference in exact wording would not have prevented careful expositors from recognizing the thematic resonance between these texts.

<sup>146</sup> Bacon, *Studies in Matthew*; David R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew’s Gospel*, 129–32.

Judgment of the Sheep and Goats as the concluding pericope in the concluding discourse. Kingsbury's three-part outline based on well marked turns in the narrative of Jesus' life (4:16; 16:21) places such an emphasis on the abandonment of the Jewish people by Jesus in the final stage of his ministry that Kingsbury's conclusions appear incompatible with the Evangelist who, as described, still identified with the Jewish people and did not wish to abandon this identity.<sup>147</sup>

The outlines of Fraher, and Watson show more promise. Fraher writes with an ethicist's interest. Fraher offers a cogent proposal that the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats, poised as it is at the end of Jesus' teaching career, was intended to act both as a summary of Jesus' ethical instruction and as a transition to the moral example Jesus would set in his suffering and death. Fraher believes Matt 25:31–46 was intended to reinforce Jesus' earlier warning that religious confession is not enough (7:21–23) and that Christians like everyone else will be judged by the practical application of the ethic Jesus taught and modeled.<sup>148</sup> Watson's argument is similar. According to Watson, the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats (as the last pericope in the final discourse) was meant to recall the Beatitudes (the first pericope in Jesus' initial discourse). Neither pericope, according to Watson, grants any privilege or exclusion based on a person's religious confession. The keeping of God's commandments is essential (19:17), as are the "weightier matters of the law," the "justice and mercy and faithfulness" which the scribes and Pharisees omitted to their own undoing (23:23). As the blessedness of the Beatitudes is not limited to Christians, so the blessedness of the merciful and charitable people will

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<sup>147</sup> Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure*, 7–9. Gundry thinks Kingsbury draws more from his outline than the Evangelist intended. Gundry, *Matthew*, 10–11.

<sup>148</sup> Fraher, *Le jugement*, 76–84.



be recognized at the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats whether a person is within our outside of the church.<sup>149</sup>

The ethical and theological point of Frahier and Watson could find greater support in texts outside of Matthew's Gospel such as the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37) and other rabbinic texts which promise eternal blessing for the righteous deeds of Gentiles.<sup>150</sup> The goal of the current study, however, is not primarily ethical or theological but is historical. The primary goal of the current study is to determine the intended meaning of the Evangelist who is responsible for the final form of Matthew's Gospel. David Sim rightly points out that works like that of Frahier and Watson downplay the very community-driven context of the word "brother" (ἀδελφός) which appears as a description of the "least" in 25:40 and which carries a similar familial connotation across Matthew's Gospel (5:22–24, 47; 7:3–7; 12:49–50; 18:15, 21, 35; 23:8; 28:10). Nor do the views of Frahier and Watson comport well with the sectarian outlook broadly recognized for the Evangelist's reading community which has been part of the presupposition of this study.<sup>151</sup>

### Conclusion

All things considered, if the Evangelist resembled the definition given him in this study, if he were a scholarly Christian of Jewish literary training who intended his work to be read and reread, if he wrote in a place like Syria with a mixture of Christian Jews and Gentiles, if he wrote within a decade of the fall of Jerusalem so that the tensions that

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<sup>149</sup> Francis Watson, "Liberating the Reader," 72–74.

<sup>150</sup> Davies and Allison cite "t. Sanh. 13.2b and Sanh. 105a" *Matthew*, III, 423.

<sup>151</sup> Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 232–33.

his life setting brought him included recent or current persecutions, if he were familiar with apocalyptic themes which often carry the idea that God's final judgment would take into account the persecutions wrought by outsiders upon God's people, if he intended readers to read 25:31-46 as part of the Olivet Discourse which warned the disciples that they would be hated by "all the nations" (24:9) in their effort to preach the Gospel as a witness to "all the nations" (24:14), and if he intended his readers to read similar passages in the Gospel in the light of each other, so that Jesus' tight association with the missionaries or "little ones" of 10:40-42 should be read as a clue to the identity of the "least" with whom Jesus also identifies himself in 25:40, 45, then there is a definite probability that the Evangelist's primary intention for the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats upon "all the nations" (25:32) was to console, and encourage Christians who stood open to persecution as they were busy in fulfilling the Great Commission to make disciples of "all the nations" (24:14; 28:19)—Jew and Gentile alike. A secondary intention would be an exhortation to Christians concerning the harsh judgment they could receive for the way they themselves have treated their fellow servants (24:48-51).

If the Evangelist were remarkably different in background and training, if the people to whom he wrote were also different from those presupposed in this study, and if the circumstances under which he wrote and the conditions under which he expected his Gospel to be read were greatly different than the working model of the life setting adopted for this study, then the conclusions of this study would have to be adjusted to account for these differences.

## EPILOGUE

A few admissions regarding the limitations of this study and the potential for its further use are in order. This study produced an interpretation of Matt 25:31-46 which recognizes that the locus of meaning of this text is in its author's intention. An essential step in the process of producing this interpretation was the adoption of a "working" definition of the Evangelist. Many answers to critical interpretive questions regarding Matt 25:31-46 were decided one way and not another in order to produce an interpretation which would be consistent with this "working" definition of the Evangelist. The definition of the Evangelist that was adopted has not received universal approval from scholars who study Matthew's Gospel. Those who prefer the ancient traditional ascription of the first Gospel to Matthew the apostle may find the interposition of an editing "Evangelist" hermeneutically complicating. Ultimately, however, the hermeneutical issue is not the exact identity of the Evangelist but is rather the intention of the Evangelist or whoever is responsible for the extant text of Matt 25:31-46. According to D.A. Carson, little interpretive difference—either in authority or in meaning—depends on the apostolic authorship of Matthew's Gospel alone. The main hermeneutical question relates to the matrix of thought that is drawn from the life setting of the Gospel and the purpose for which it was originally written.<sup>1</sup> Inasmuch as the life setting and date that was speculated for the production of Matthew's Gospel in this study is not greatly later

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<sup>1</sup> D.A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 74.

than the destruction of the Temple and is sufficiently like that which the Apostle himself could have experienced, the results of this study need not be significantly altered if the Apostle Matthew proves to be the direct author of the Gospel. The heuristic use of an intervening Evangelist in the production of this study is not intended here to be an endorsement of Keener's theory of authorship. The traditional view of authorship also enjoys scholarly support and should not be easily set aside.<sup>2</sup> If, however, a vastly different description of the "Evangelist" and his times were to be adopted, different answers to at least some of the interpretive questions addressed in this study would be produced, especially if the interpretive goal remained the author's intention. The entire interpretation could have taken a different course.<sup>3</sup>

In a similar way, a different description of the genre of the text would have produced a different result. If Burney was correct in his opinion that Matt 25:31-46 is a poem translated directly from Hebrew into Greek, then the entire passage may need to be evaluated not only in the light of its parabolic and apocalyptic qualities but also according to the interpretive inferences which should stem from its poetic quality.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the first admission that must be made is that the historical accuracy of this interpretation is

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<sup>2</sup> W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr. list the following modern scholars who accept the apostolic authorship of Matthew's Gospel: T. Zahn (1899), A. Wikenhauser (1953), E. J. Goodspeed (1959), N. B. Stonehouse (1963), W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann (1971), and R. H. Gundry. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, I, 10-11. To these may be added Leon Morris (1992), and R. T. France (2007), though both Morris and France acknowledge the issue is difficult to settle with certainty. Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 15. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 15, 18-19.

<sup>3</sup> Wolfgang Trilling made a similar point in his review of R. Hummel's evaluation of Matthew's *Sitz im Leben*, *Die auseinandersetzung zwischen Kirche und Judentum im Matthäusevangelium* in *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 90 (1964): 433-37, 36.

<sup>4</sup> C. F. Burney, "St. Matthew xxv. 31-46 as a Hebrew Poem." *JTS* 14 (1913): 414-424.

necessarily affected by the historical accuracy of the descriptions adopted for the Evangelist and the genre of Matt 25:31–46.

A second admission is that a variety of descriptions of either the Evangelist or of the genre of the text may have produced a variety of interpretations that could rival the coherence and consistency of the one offered here by this study. Now that this study has been executed, its results may be evaluated and perhaps improved. In the event that the "working" description of the Evangelist has proven to be incompatible with some of the data encountered along the way, or if the interpretation produced here retains incoherent elements, then a revision of the Evangelist's description or a re-evaluation of the genre of the text would be advisable so that a second run through the interpretive issues might produce a more coherent and consistent outcome.

A third admission is that the interest shown in this study for the intended meaning of the Evangelist should not be considered the only scholarly interest which may be pursued in the study of Matt 25:31-46. Commentators who privilege Matthew's Gospel as part of the divinely inspired canon of Scripture may contribute to systematic theology when they read Matt 25:31-46 in the light of the balance of the canon. Historians may use the text to help clarify the preceding and subsequent traditions, beliefs, and practices, which either affected the Evangelist's intention on the one hand or were affected by the Evangelist's text on the other. Commentators who do not believe the Bible is infallible attempt to understand this text's significance to contemporary Christians in the light of the balance of Scripture, tradition, conscience, current social mores or whatever other influences they find to be illuminating or normative. Even secular ethicists or secular literary theorists who admit no commitment to God find this text illuminating in some

way. The Judgment of the Sheep and Goats is studied by scholars in various disciplines for a variety of religious or secular reasons, but each discipline should not confuse its jurisdiction or legitimate purview with that of the others.

The systematic theologian must recognize that a theological interpretation is not always the same as a historical one. A systematic theologian who accepts the inspiration of the Christian Bible should not assume that the Evangelist consciously intended Matt 25:31-46 to communicate an interpretation which could be explicated only in the light of other biblical passages to which the Evangelist had no conscious access. For this reason, the dispensational theologian who thinks Matt 25:31-46 is best understood only in the light of the 144,000 Jewish witnesses in Revelation 7, must still reckon with the historical probability that the Evangelist himself did not foresee this interpretation inasmuch as there is hardly any evidence that he was familiar with the book of Revelation.<sup>5</sup>

Conversely, the historian who believes in the inspiration of the Christian Bible must recognize that divinely inspired texts have two authors with compatible but distinct intentions—one human and One divine. A belief in the inspiration of the Bible should lead Christian historians to recognize that the theological interpretation of Matt 25:31-46 cannot be limited to the historical perspective of its human author. Since the same God Who moved the Evangelist to write Matt 25:31-46 also moved John to write Revelation 7, both texts must be theologically interpreted in the divine light they each cast upon the other (2 Pet 1:20-21). This does not necessarily mean that apocalyptic texts which are filled with picturesque images like Matt 25:31-46 and Revelation 7 must be read with the

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<sup>5</sup> C.I. Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1945), 1036, 1337, 1350-51.

exacting level of referential precision assumed in dispensational interpretations.<sup>6</sup> It does mean, however, that theologians who read biblical texts in the light of each other may be consistent with their belief in the inspiration of the Bible even in those occasions when this process leads them to theologially interpret a passage in a way that its human author may not have foreseen. The human authors of the separate parts of the Bible could not have known exactly how their texts would eventually come together to signify the truths that can only be seen in the balance of the whole canon. If, however, the same God inspired all the biblical authors toward the truth, then their separate texts contribute coherently to God's intended message. For this reason, the historian's discoveries of a biblical author's intention must in some way be recognized and accommodated in the theologian's interpretive application of those same texts. The theologian may run past the historical intention of a biblical author in the light of the balance of Scripture, but he may not run against the historical intention of a biblical author without risking the doctrine of inspiration itself.

An historical interest in Matt 25:31-46 may legitimately extend beyond the historical intention of its author. A historical interest in the text's pre-history or in its subsequent affect upon Christian belief and practice is as historically legitimate as the interest shown by this study in the intention of the Evangelist himself. The pre-history of this text may also shed light on the Evangelist's intention. For this reason, the theologian who believes the text is inspired by God should not feel threatened by the historical data surrounding its composition. The doctrine of inspiration confesses a divine origin, intention, and truthfulness for the text. Many who confess the inspiration of Scripture are

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<sup>6</sup> Brent Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002).

content to recognize that the manner in which God's word was delivered through human beings "remains largely a mystery to us."<sup>7</sup> If accurate history may be discovered about the text's earlier forms or sources, this information would certainly be useful in the effort to accurately describe the Evangelist's intention. For this reason a measured use of source, form, and redaction criticism is not antithetical to the interest of the theologian who should also be interested in the intention of the Evangelist. However, the lack of any known *Vorlage* for Matt 25:31-46 makes the use of form, source, and redaction criticism a more speculative exercise for interpreting this text than this method already is. Conceivably, the study of this text's interpretive tradition among later generations could illumine the intention of the Evangelist. If so, such a study would also be helpful to the theologian who is interested in the Evangelist's intention. In any case, the historical interpretations of this passage are a legitimate focus of history, and such an exercise is valuable for the insights it could provide concerning human behavior, faith, ethics, and a variety of other worthwhile subjects.

Historians, however, who do not privilege the canonical text or the intention of the Evangelist for Matt 25:31-46, sometimes pit the results achieved in historical critical studies against the intended meaning of the Evangelist. Some source and form critics have been critical of the Evangelist's intention because they believe that the Evangelist departed from the intention of Jesus.<sup>8</sup> Subsequent interpretations of Matt 25:31-46 are sometimes also given priority over the intention of the Evangelist on the grounds that God's revelation to the church continues to manifest itself in fresh ways through the

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<sup>7</sup> This is confessed in the third section, paragraph VII of "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy."

<sup>8</sup> J.A.T. Robinson, "The 'Parable' of the Sheep and the Goats," *NTS* 2 (1956): 225-237, 227.



voices of the interpreting community of believers who may when necessary correct the Evangelist's intention as obsolete in the light of a more enlightened or consistently Christian community.<sup>9</sup>

Commentators who interpret Matt 25:31-46, for any reason, against the meaning intended by the Evangelist should at least candidly admit that they are doing this, and they should not represent their interpretations as if they explain what the Evangelist was saying. It is one thing for theologians to attempt a greater clarity for the intended meaning of a biblical author or to recognize an additional theological application of an author's text when the text is read in the light of the Divine intention revealed in the balance of the canon. It is a different thing to contradict the Evangelist under the guise of interpreting what he wrote. The former, since it seeks the intention of the divine Author, and since it seeks to be compatible with the human author may legitimately be called a process of theological "interpretation." The latter, since it seeks to understand the author's intention only to subvert it if necessary, deserves more appropriately to be called "criticism." Criticism should not masquerade as interpretation. Critics who juxtapose Jesus' speculated intention for Matt 25:31-46 against the Evangelist's are practicing a kind of Christological criticism. Critics who privilege subsequent interpretations against the Evangelist's are practicing a kind of tradition criticism. Critics who believe that a proper view of ethics should be used to criticize the Evangelist's intention are practicing a kind of ethical criticism. Christians who believe on Christological, traditional, or ethical grounds that they must oppose the Evangelist's intention for Matt 25:31-46, however, can

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<sup>9</sup> Ulrich Luz, "Reflections on the Appropriate Interpretation of New Testament Texts" in *Studies in Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 265-289, 277; Ulrich Luz, "Final Judgment (Matt 25:31-46): an Exercise in 'History of Influence' Exegesis." In *Treasures New and Old: Recent Contributions to Matthean Studies*, ed. David R. Bauer and Mark Allan Powell (Atlanta: Scholars, 1996), 271-310, 293-295.

only with great irony call the theological or ethical ramifications of those disagreements "interpretations." Much less can a secular ethicist who disagrees with the Evangelist call his reactions to the Evangelist's intention an "interpretation."

The primary goal of this study was to produce an interpretation of Matt 25:31-46 which recognizes the locus of meaning in the author's intention. This is simply an historical exercise, and its results may only be measured in terms of probability. The theological or ethical relevance of this interpretation is a second, more important, and potentially more helpful or dangerous step.

Historical statements like the one offered by this study can only go so far. Historical statements say such and such a person said such and such a thing and meant such and such by what he said. This historical data can turn into theological or ethical lessons only under the illuminating force of some additional truth or influence. Not all theologians or ethicists recognize the same conduit for that illuminating truth. Commentators who believe that the source is God and that His conduit is the Bible tend to read the Bible in the light of itself as described above. Commentators who believe that the source is God and that the Bible is only one of several fallible sources tend to weigh the intentions of the biblical authors against each other and against other standards such as creeds, traditions, conscience, and current developments in science or social mores, etc.

Both sets of commentators must employ faith in God and exercise a sensitivity for recognizing the differences between descriptive and prescriptive data. Both methods of commentary have produced fruitful lessons for Christian faith and practice. The difference between the two methods comes down to this: The former method seeks to

accommodate the prescriptive intentions of the biblical authors as normative expressions of God's will for the context in which they were given, while the latter method is open to find fault with the prescriptive intentions of the biblical authors in the light of other conduits which they believe relay divine truth.

These two approaches may be evaluated in the light of E. D. Hirsch's early and latter concepts regarding authorial intention, interpretation, and criticism. The early Hirsch made a hard and fast distinction between the "meaning" which an author intends by his text and the "significance" of that meaning which people recognized for themselves.<sup>10</sup> Hirsch preferred to use the word "interpretation" for the explication of intended meanings, and the word "criticism" for the explication of the significance. The significance of an author's intended meaning could include any number of relations that meaning may have to the reader, to history, to the author's personality, to the author's other works, etc.<sup>11</sup> According to the early Hirsch, critics may say anything they wish about an author's meaning. They may agree or disagree, say the author went too far, or not far enough, say his presuppositions were wrong or that his reasoning was faulty. But for critics to serve the field of knowledge best, they should react to what the author intended. Accordingly, criticisms that fail to first identify the author's intention commit a sin of omission, "By seeking values irrelevant to the author's aims, it [inappropriate criticism] not only induces misinterpretations but fails to enhance the peculiar and unique values that a work potentially has for the critic's audience."<sup>12</sup> [brackets added]

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<sup>10</sup> E. D. Hirsch, Jr. *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale, 1967), 8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

In the early Hirsch's terms, the historical and contextual intention of the Evangelist is the meaning which interpretations explicate. All other applications of the text are more appropriately called "criticism." The early Hirsch would even label as "criticism" the kind of theological interpretation described above which cross-references Matt 25:31–46 to other biblical texts in order to explicate the Divine intention. Hirsch's early view, would further conclude that criticisms of Matt 25:31-46 are most valid when they respond to that which the Evangelist intended. Commentators who skirt the issue of authorial intention and seek rather to use the text as a tool for discourse disjointed from the Evangelist's intention are practicing in the early Hirsch's terms an inappropriate judicial criticism and in any case are not engaged in interpretation at any level. According to the early Hirsch, interpretations explicate the intention of the author and criticisms of that intention can be valid criticisms only if they really do respond to the intention of the author. Otherwise, the critic, though he may be speaking on the same subject, has not really engaged the intention of the author.

Nearly thirty years later, Hirsch adjusted his concepts to accommodate a recognition of the "transhistorical" and "transoccasional" quality of those intentions that are expressed in texts that are intended to apply across time—including the kinds of writing that are found in literature, law, and religion. Using Augustine as one of his models and Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall as another, Hirsch began to promote the idea that authoritative texts such as the Bible and the Constitution must be interpreted in the light of advancing knowledge. Augustine believed that that interpretation of Moses is correct which puts the truth in the best light. Marshall believed that the Constitution must be interpreted not according to the limited understanding of the

people who wrote it but according to the "nature of the objects themselves." Both Augustine and Marshall believed that the good intentions of the authors of the Bible and the Constitution would not have pointed these texts toward injustice or theological error when new circumstances would render their original applications of those texts obsolete. Accordingly, Hirsch shifted his view so that biblical commentaries which are not confined to the intended meaning of the authors may now be called interpretations and not mere criticisms.<sup>13</sup> The early Hirsch promoted a hermeneutic which is adopted by commentators who attempt to accommodate the biblical author's original intention. The latter Hirsch promoted a hermeneutic which allows commentators to interpret biblical texts in the same way that Thurgood Marshall interpreted the Constitution, not according to the "original intent," but according to "the nature of the objects themselves." Such a view of Scripture led Ulrich Luz to "interpret" Matt 25:31–46 against the original intention he believed the Evangelist held because he thought his own application of Matt 25:31–46 was more consistent with the Gospel and more helpful for Christians today.<sup>14</sup>

At the risk of breaking out of the historical context of this study, the author feels compelled to conclude with a theological opinion. Since there are plenty of texts in the Gospel of Matthew and elsewhere that command Christians to be loving to all people, and since Jesus both taught this duty and modeled it with his own life, there is no reason to recruit additional texts to make this point. If the Evangelist intended Matt 25:31–46 to make a different point, he should be heard for what he is saying. The best way to read the

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<sup>13</sup> E. D. Hirsch, Jr. "Transhistorical Intentions and the Persistence of Allegory," *New Literary History* 25 (1994): 549–568.

<sup>14</sup> Ulrich Luz, "Final Judgment (Matt 25:31–46): an Exercise in 'History of Influence' Exegesis." In *Treasures New and Old: Recent Contributions to Matthean Studies*, ed. David R. Bauer and Mark Allan Powell (Atlanta: Scholars, 1996), 271–310, here 293–95.

Bible with theological and historical integrity is to let each text say what the biblical author intended it to say. In the case of Matt 25:31-46, it appears that the Evangelist wanted his readers to know that their association with Jesus (though it may bring neglect and persecution) would put them in good standing when the Son of Man came to judge the world. A secondary and complementary application would be an exhortation to nominal Christians concerning the harsh judgment they could receive for the way they have treated their fellow servants (24:48-51). Theologians, however, who wish to teach that people will enter eternal life on the basis of a general philanthropy should base this belief in a different text, or at least be as candid as Luz is about disagreeing with Matthew's intention for this text. Furthermore, the idea that a person's faithful confession of Christ is not essential to salvation seems to contradict Matt 10:32-33 which promises Jesus' advocacy only to those who confess him before men and denies his recognition of those who deny him before men.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> John Nolland bases his similar conclusion on Matthew's conviction that "God's fresh initiative is located in Jesus (e.g., 1:23), Matthew's readiness to assign functions of deity to Jesus, and the necessity expressed in Matthew for people to align themselves with what God is doing through Jesus (8:10). John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1036-37.

APPENDIX Table 7: Summary of Shermann Gray's Survey, *The Least of My Brothers*

- 2<sup>nd</sup> C – First mention, the "least" were *probably* apostles or elders (*Acts of Thomas*, and *2 Clement*).
- 3<sup>rd</sup> C – Clement of Alexandria taught the **"the least" are Christians in general**.
- In the West, Tertullian and Cyprian agree with Clement of Alexandria, but
  - In the West, Hippolytus and Commodianus believe **"the least" are all mankind**.
- 4<sup>th</sup> C – **"Anti-Jewish" opinions** led some to emphasize that the **Jews are among the goats**.
- 5<sup>th</sup> C – Valerian of Cemele (d. ca. 460 CE) is the first to express a **"true universalism"** for "the sheep" and "the nations."
- 6<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> C – Jews and the **heathen are absent among "the goats"** – due to a belief that rejection of Christ condemns them already (Caesarius of Arles, d 542; cf Gregory the Great, d 609).
- 1600's – Daniel van Breen (d. 1664) says the **judgment is of only those living at the Parousia**.
- 1749 – John Heylyn is first to say **"the nations" are all heathen**.
- 1800's – Dispensationalism teaches that **"the least" are Jewish witnesses in the Tribulation**.
- 1800's – A preterist view teaches the **passage applies to Jerusalem's destruction in 70CE**

"The Least"		"The Nations"	
Patristic Age (until 750 CE) Summary			
Specifically Christians	33%	Only Christians	5%
All peoples	5%	All peoples	12%
Not Clear	62%	Not Clear	82%
Medieval Period			
Christians (17 of 21)	81%	All peoples (stated or implied)	52%
Apostles, monks, etc (included in 81% above)	29%	(7 of 17 say unbelievers who are already condemned will witness the judgment of Christian sheep + goats. 3 others do not restrict the sheep and goats to Christians.)	
Unclear, possibly all people	19%		
Renaissance and Reformation Period			
Specifically Christians	81%	All peoples (24 of 34)	71%
All peoples	14%	(9 of this 24 say unbelievers will only witness the judgment of Christians.)	
Not Clear	6%		
1700's			
Specifically Christians	70%	All peoples (19 of 23)	83%
All peoples	none	(4 of this 23 say unbelievers will only witness the judgment of Christians.)	
Not Clear	9%		
1800's			
Christians (or Jewish witnesses)	60%	All peoples	73%
Explicitly all peoples	17%	All the heathen (dispensationalists)	8%
Not Clear	19%	All non-Christians including Jews	10%
1900–1987 (see pp 255–257 for a complete graph)			
Specifically Christian	31%	All peoples	65%
Jewish witnesses	4.6%	Only Christians (50 of 391)	8%
All peoples	34%	(31 of this 50 say unbelievers will only witness the judgment of Christians.)	
Not clear, but unrestricted	19%		

Conclusion – The 20<sup>th</sup> century is the first time a majority of exegetes concluded that "the least" included all people of the world (if we combine the 34% who explicitly held this view with the 19% who were not clear.) In every other age, "the least" were most often thought to be Christians only. In every age, where there is a discussion of Matt 25:32, the majority held that "the nations" are all the people of the world, Christian and non. Sometimes exegetes made a distinction between the unbelieving "nations" and the "sheep and goats" – the former witnessing a judgment upon the latter. Often it was understood that unbelievers are condemned already.

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