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WHO ARE THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS?

AN ANALYSIS OF MATTHEW
25:31-46



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Matthew 25:31-46 (NIV)

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me’.

Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

They will also answer, ‘Lord when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or needing clothes, or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me’. Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

INTRODUCTION

The Story of the Sheep and the Goats is one of the best known in scripture, but unravelling its meaning is not as obvious as it might appear at first sight. This paper suggests three ways of understanding the text, and comments on the challenges and difficulties of each interpretation. It may be that each of the following readings has a degree of validity; nevertheless a rigorous examination of the context suggests a specific meaning which should take precedence, and which has special relevance for today.

1. MADE IN HIS IMAGE

At first sight the parable looks quite straightforward.¹ There will be a future Judgment when everyone will be judged according to how we have treated others. This seems fairly straightforward and logical. The whole ethos fits in with many other scriptures on how we treat each other; the command to love our neighbour as ourselves, the command to do to others as we would want them to treat us and the story of the Good Samaritan.²

The love and compassion of God for all humanity is to be expressed through how we deal not only with friends and loved ones, but also with strangers. We are all made in the image of God, and potentially Christ is to be found in each and every human being. A similar thought is expressed in Hebrews where an exhortation to visit those in prison is linked to the assertion that some have entertained angels unaware (Heb 13:2).

The concept can be simply expressed: *“Ultimately every person on earth will be called upon to account for his or her use of the opportunities of service experienced through life”*,³ or again *“Here the judge of all the world encounters all human-kind; independently of whether they are Jews, Christians, or Gentiles, all will be measured by whether they have helped the Son of Man in his least sisters and brothers”*.⁴

So the story of the Sheep and the Goats summarises a powerful strand of biblical thinking. It has been a great motivating passage for many and has helped inspire many works of compassion in Jesus’ name. The outworking of Christ’s compassion through the believing community has indeed changed history. Mother Theresa is often cited as an outstanding example in our own time, but it can be argued that the Church through the ages has had a massive influence on many of the features we

now take for granted in Western society. Healthcare, education, universities, hospitals and hospices were largely the result of church initiatives; in many cases the great monasteries of the Middle Ages were the founding resource much of which has now been taken over by the State and which we now take for granted. As late as say 200 years ago free education for all was unknown until the churches started founding schools for the poor. Indeed, it is difficult to see how even the Western concept of ‘charity’ as a social mechanism came into being except through the influence of the Church and its social care ethos based on the Judaeo-Christian ethical framework.

So the biblical and Christian social care dynamic, which might be summed up by this story of the Sheep and the Goats, has had a tremendous impact for good. Jeannine Brown helpfully comments that throughout his Gospel, by ‘righteousness’ or ‘justice’ Matthew has consistently meant something along the lines of *“covenant loyalty expressed through merciful action”*.⁵ Christ through his Church has touched and redefined our society in numerous ways, though scarcely acknowledged, if at all, by secular observers.

There are many who would justify themselves by saying they are doing their bit ‘for charity’, thereby implying they must be one of the ‘good guys’, so do not see any need for any kind of religion. They do not realise that they are in fact acknowledging that their lives have in some sense been touched by Christ, because the social ethos they are quoting has been derived from Christ and His followers. Does the story of the Sheep and the Goats justify their attitude? By doing ‘their bit’ for charity, have they made sure they qualify as ‘sheep’?

For example, because Brad Young understands from this text *“even if one helps another human being, no matter how insignificant in the eyes of the world, it is as if one had helped the Lord himself”*,⁶ it leads on to the conclusion that *“social involvement is elevated to the level of faith and piety ... practical religion becomes the ultimate concern during the end-times judgment. A person’s spirituality is measured in terms of humanitarian relief efforts and social reform. It is a clear echo of the classical prophetic message: help the poor and under-privileged. Good works prepare the nations to face the eschatological judgment of God at the climatic end of the ages.”*⁷

This is where we hit a problem. For some Christians the story of the Sheep and the Goats effectively becomes their gospel; it becomes the key passage defining their understanding of the Church’s function and mission. Now it may be right for some

parts of the Body to be focused on social care; we cannot all do everything, so it must be right that some local churches focus more on the social aspects of the Church's ministry than others; and of course many Christian charities are set up for just that purpose, to focus on one specific need. Historically too, medical missions and education have always played a key role as part of Christian mission work worldwide.

However if the Sheep and the Goats becomes the whole of the gospel, where does this leave the rest of the New Testament? If salvation is totally dependent on social work, why does the New Testament focus so much on the Cross and the Resurrection?

Donald Guthrie puts it this way: *"A difficulty arises over these verses. Is salvation simply dependent on acts of mercy? If so, the mission of Jesus would be unnecessary. Instead of going to the cross, Jesus should have organised a society for social relief"*.⁸ Dick France agrees, saying *"This passage has traditionally been an embarrassment especially to Protestant readers because it appears to say that one's final destiny ... depends on acts of philanthropy"*;⁹ while Martin Goldsmith is quite dismissive, *"This passage has sometimes been used carelessly to teach that God's judgment is based on human deeds of charity towards the poor and needy generally"*.¹⁰

This is the crux of the problem; simply taking the story at face value effectively renders most of the rest of the New Testament redundant.

2. THE LITTLE ONES AS DISCIPLES

One solution is to say that the story describes how those who have never heard the Gospel will be judged; again there is some support in scripture for this view, not least Romans 2:14-16 where Paul indicates that those Gentiles who do what the Law requires even though they have no knowledge of it, show by their lives that the Law is written in their hearts, and so will be declared righteous.

However, the primary objection still stands, so as Dick France puts it *"there is one feature of the scene which has led probably the majority of recent interpreters to a different conclusion. The recipients of the acts of kindness are Jesus' smallest brothers and sisters, and what is done to them is done to him; so is the final judgment concerned not with response to human need in general, but to the need of disciples in particular? ... That interpretation has a firm foundation in the earlier language of the gospel, which has spoken of true*

disciples as Jesus' brothers and sisters, and has used the phrase 'these little ones' to denote members of the disciple community".¹¹ The argument is that we should see how the phrase is used elsewhere in Matthew, then be consistent with this usage in Matthew 25.

In Matthew 12 the question arises directly. Faced with a tension between family loyalty and His ministry, Jesus poses the question "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" Pointing to his disciples he said "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matt 12:48). That seems quite a pointed definition to put alongside the Matthew 25 phrase, but on its own might not be enough.

Another passage to be considered is Matt 10:40-42. Here Jesus says "He who welcomes you welcomes me", so to receive a disciple is to receive Jesus. He goes on to say "Anyone who welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of water to one of these little ones who is my disciple ... will certainly not lose their reward."

In commenting on 25:40 "*the least of these brothers and sisters of mine*", Dick France concludes that "*the terms used in this verse strongly reflect language used earlier in this gospel to describe Jesus' disciples as 'these little ones' (10:42; 18:6-14), and as Jesus' 'brothers and sisters' (12:50; 28:10) ... Here His identification with His people goes further; their experiences are his experiences, and what is done to them is done to him, ... how people respond to Jesus' representatives is both a sign of their attitude to him and the basis for their reward.*"¹²

Similarly Martin Goldsmith comments that "*Jesus is so intimately involved with his people, and they are so united to him by faith, that they cannot be separated ... and what is done to his disciples is done to him.*"¹³ Goldsmith's comments remind us of Saul's experience in Acts. When Saul heard a voice, the words he heard were "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" and when he asked "Who are you Lord?", the reply was "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:3-5); when in fact it was the followers of Jesus who Saul had been persecuting. This exchange is very reminiscent of Jesus' words in Matthew 25, and again supports the contention that "*the least of these*" must relate to the followers of Jesus.¹⁴ Looking at Matthew 25 in the context of these other passages in Matthew, both Morris and France conclude that "*it is probably right to read 'these my smallest brothers and sisters' as a description of disciples.*"¹⁵

Goldsmith points out that this view does not in any way negate the imperative to do good to all, it is just not primarily what the passage is about - *“While it is a self-evident truth that Christians are called to love their neighbour and so to serve the down-trodden and have-nots, this passage relates specifically to needy Christians, the ‘little ones’ who follow Jesus and are in union with him”*.¹⁶ We might also recall Paul’s injunction that *“as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers”*. (Galatians 6:10)

So this interpretation suggests that the Sheep and the Goats will be judged according to their treatment of Christians and the Church; that what is done to a believer is done to Christ; and there is a growing sympathy in academic circles to this approach; the Church as ‘the Body of Christ’ represents Christ to the world, therefore what is done to the Church is done to Christ.¹⁷

This may resolve the issue of what would otherwise appear to be salvation through social work, but another question remains. Does it fit the context in which the parable is presented?

3. EXEGESIS IN CONTEXT

A sound hermeneutical principle is that scripture should be examined in its context. In this case the context is the Olivet Discourse as recorded throughout Matthew 24 & 25. We need to consider three aspects: firstly, the general setting and the initial audience; secondly, how the three parables which Jesus presents in this discourse fit together; and thirdly, how any references in the parable to the Hebrew Scriptures would have been understood by His hearers.

3.1 Setting – The Olivet Discourse

The initial audience is Jesus’ close disciples (see 24:1 & 26:1). From *“Jesus answered”* (24:3) through to *“When Jesus had finished saying all these things”* (26:1) should be understood as one block of teaching expounding eschatological issues. Jesus had commented on the Temple buildings that *“not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down”* (24:2); in response His disciples asked Him *“Tell us when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”* (24:3). From our perspective we would see that historically the disciples are asking about two different events, firstly the destruction of the Temple which

occurred in AD 70, and secondly the Second Coming.¹⁸ However, in His answer Jesus does not try to differentiate between these events, rather He provides teaching which in various ways covers both events.

In Matthew 24 Jesus describes various eschatological issues, then in Matthew 25 He tells three stories: the Ten Virgins, the Talents, and the Sheep and the Goats.¹⁹ Preachers invariably take these stories separately and out of context. However, whatever merit they may have as stand-alone teachings with a general spiritual application, to be properly understood in the context in which they were given, they should be considered as a unit and looked at together. Goldsmith agrees that *“the final parable brings the previous ones to their conclusion”*, thus identifying the three stories as a trilogy.²⁰ Most scholars agree that they form part of a block of eschatological teaching.²¹

3.2 Three Eschatological Parables

While it is generally agreed that the story of the ten virgins is about the Church being ready for Christ’s return, the parable of the talents is often taken out of context and not specifically seen as belonging in an eschatological setting. Tellingly the story of the ten virgins begins *“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like”* (25:1), then the story of the talents follows it with the introduction *“Again it will be like”* (25:14), meaning at that same time. It indicates that both the stories are to be taken as speaking about the same period of time, they are two different perspectives on the same events.

What does *“At that time”* mean since we are dealing with two different events? It is deliberately phrased so that these two stories can apply to both events, the destruction of the Temple, and the later event, the Second Coming of Christ.²²

The story of the Sheep and the Goats does not share a linking introduction. While it is clearly about a time of judgment, it is not linked formulaically to the other two. Before we consider why this is, we must look at the underlying Hebrew scriptures inherent in the Sheep and the Goats story.

3.3 Underlying Hebrew Scriptures

When Jesus uses Old Testament (OT) phraseology we should normally assume it is a deliberate reference to those Hebrew scriptures. Since the first hearers were Jesus' close disciples, any allusions to the Hebrew scriptures would be very obvious to them. They would automatically use those scriptures as keys to interpret the story. There are three specific Hebrew scriptures referred to in the story of the Sheep and the Goats: Daniel 7, Joel 3 and Ezekiel 34.

Firstly, scholars generally agree that *"the Son of Man"* imagery (25:31) with which the story opens is a direct and intentional reference to the well known vision of a final judgment given in Daniel.²³ *"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."* (Daniel 7:13-14) Other references to the same Hebrew scripture occur in Matthew 10:23, 16:27-28, and 24:30-31.

Secondly, Dick France points out the connection with Joel 3: *"The OT imagery continues with the gathering of all nations for judgment, as in Joel 3:2"*.²⁴ Johannes Facius agrees, saying that *"Matthew clearly echoes Joel's prophetic statement"*.²⁵ In Joel we read *"In those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, I will gather all nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. There I will put them on trial for what they did to my inheritance, my people Israel, because they scattered my people among the nations, and divided up my land."* (Joel 3:1-3) Here judgment is specifically related to the Gentiles' mistreatment of Israel and the Jewish people.

Finally, the deliberate reference to the Sheep and the Goats evokes Ezekiel 34, which is concerned with the return of the exiles to the Land and how the God of Israel will shepherd them like sheep. Ezekiel uses pastoral imagery in a graphic way to speak of God pastoring His people, but also speaks of judging them: *"I will judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats"* (Ezekiel 34:17). The link to Jesus' story in Matthew 25 would not be missed by His original hearers.²⁶

4. TWO ESCHATOLOGICAL EVENTS

We noted earlier that Jesus is answering two questions put to Him by the disciples. They think it is one and the same question, but we can see it as two. They assumed the fall of the Temple and the Return of Christ would occur at the same time. *“Tell us when this will happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”* (24:3). Jesus doesn’t try to correct them, but His teaching keeps in mind both of these scenarios. In each instance His teaching concerns the readiness of the ‘community of faith’ for His coming.

4.1 The Destruction of the Temple

Firstly then *“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like”* in 25:1 answers their question about the destruction of the Temple. When we look at Matthew 24 we can see that events covering the Jewish War of AD 66-70, and the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, even up to the eradication of Jerusalem in AD 135, are all probably part of this general scenario.

The stories of the ten virgins and the talents are linked together and relate to the community of faith which at that time meant the Jewish people. The parable of the virgins illustrates only too clearly the lack of readiness of many in Israel for the coming of their Messiah. I showed in a previous OPRP how the parable of the talents is a story about the outworking of covenant principles, so it speaks of how those in Israel lived up to their covenant responsibilities.²⁷

We noted that the story of the Sheep and the Goats lacks an introductory formula which links the other two. That is because it answers the second question, but not the first. Nevertheless, the unmistakable reference to Ezekiel 34:17 by deliberately citing ‘sheep and goats’ should not be ignored. In effect, Ezekiel 34 was already happening in Jesus’ time. Israel had returned from exile in Babylon, were back in the Land, were in the process of being pastored by Messiah himself and were about to face a time of judgment relating to their response to Him.²⁸

Jesus did not need the third parable to cover this first question, because Ezekiel 34 was in place and was already happening. Nevertheless His deliberate use of the phrase ‘sheep and goats’ should be enough to alert His Jewish hearers to His implication, that the Ezekiel 34:17 judgment is relevant to their question.

4.2 The End of the Age

Which brings us to the second question contained in 24:3 - “*What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?*” As before, the story of the ten virgins relates to readiness of the ‘Believing Community’ for the coming of Messiah, and the story of the talents to the fulfillment of covenant responsibilities.

If today it is generally recognised that the story of the ten virgins represents the Church, we should not under-estimate just how challenging are the implications. The girls had grown up in the same village as the bridegroom, they were friends with his sisters, constantly in and out of his house, and yet he says “I do not know you” (25:12). This is quite shocking; intentionally so. If the ten virgins represent the Christian Church, then it means a significant part of the Church will not be ready when Christ comes. We should note what happened to Israel in the first enactment of the story, and be prepared. As before, the second part of the trilogy, the story of the talents, provides a corollary, a serious warning about living up to covenant responsibilities.

However, if the believing community is now the Church, how does the third story in the trilogy, the sheep and the goats fit in, and what about our earlier question, who are the “least of these”?

In Joel, the criteria for judgment is clear: “*I will put them on trial for what they did to my inheritance, my people Israel, because they scattered my people among the nations, and divided up my land.*” (Joel 3:2). Remembering that we are considering the importance of context, then to understand the “*least of these*” as referring to the Jewish people would be a natural interpretation for the original audiences, both Jesus’ disciples and Matthew’s readers.

Johannes Facius believes that Joel 3 and Matthew 25:31-46 are speaking about exactly the same event.²⁹ He is clear that the judgment is about how those being judged have related to the Jewish people, and has “*no doubt that the expression ‘the least of My brethren’ refers to the Jewish relatives of the Lord*”.³⁰

The difficulty here is that if Joel 3 and Matthew 25:31-46 are speaking about exactly the same event, and it is the ‘nations’ who are being judged, then why has Jesus (and Matthew) included this story as part of a trilogy speaking about the readiness of the

believing community, and why did Jesus deliberately invoke the imagery of the sheep and goats, by implication another clear reference to the ‘flock’?

The whole of chapter 34 of Ezekiel is speaking of God pastoring the flock, but in the middle, in 34:17, is the note of warning that there will be a division within the flock, that even the flock which is being pastored is not aloof from judgment. The emphasis is on God’s care and protection, but even so, a separation will occur. We can see this is completely in line with the parables of the ten girls and the talents. It is making the same point. So the deliberate reference to sheep and goats keeps the message of the trilogy intact. It is the flock which is being judged.³¹

So if we follow this connotation Matthew 25:32 would therefore refer to, or at least include, the ‘believing community’. It makes the third story in the trilogy, the parable of the Sheep and the Goats, consistent with the other two. Following this reading it is not unbelievers who are being judged, either for their good works in a general social justice context, or for their reaction to the Christian Church as the expression of Christ, rather Jesus intends to warn us that it is the believing community (the *ekklesia*)³² which is being judged, (along with the nations).³³

Even if we think that Joel 3 and Matthew 25:31-46 are speaking about exactly the same event, the point Jesus is making very forcibly is that within the context of Joel 3, the nations being judged for their treatment of the Jewish people, the flock, the believing community, is not exempt.

In the story of the Sheep and the Goats Jesus has deliberately combined the imagery of Ezekiel 34:17 with the imagery of Joel 3. He is telling us that ‘the flock’, that is believers, will be judged for their attitude to Israel and to the Jewish people.³⁴

In answer to the disciples ‘second question’, “*What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?*”, Jesus warns that many in the Church will not be ready (the ten girls), many will not use the revelation they have been given (the talents), and this will be summed up by their attitude to Israel.

5. EKKLESIA THEN AND NOW

Nor is the logic of all this difficult to substantiate. There are really only two major themes in the Bible, Israel and Jesus. There are many other minor themes, but these

are the two 'Big Stories'. And Israel always points to Jesus. The function of Israel is to prepare for, provide and point to Messiah. If Israel is back in the Land, and if Israel always points to Jesus, then what should that be telling us?

There are two prophetic events which stand well clear of all others in terms of the number of scriptures which refer to them and their importance in the overall narrative. The first is the coming of Messiah. As we know, many of the prophetic scriptures relating to Messiah have already been fulfilled two thousand years ago, many have been partially fulfilled or await a further fulfillment, others have yet to happen. But the the Coming of Messiah as a 'two part drama' is, beyond question, the biggest prophetic focus in scripture.

The second major series of biblical prophecies concerns the Return of Israel to the Land. Now again, some of these, although relatively few, could be said to have had a partial fulfillment in the return of the Babylonian exiles. But by far the bulk of the prophetic scriptures concerning the return of Israel to the Land relate to our present time. They either have been fulfilled from 1947 onward, are currently in the process of being fulfilled, or some yet await fulfillment.

The point is this. If Israel, as the believing community in Jesus' day, was not ready for the coming of her Messiah, where does that put the Church today? The Coming of Messiah was the fulfillment of the biggest prophetic event in history, yet many in the believing community were unable to recognise it. We are now in the middle of the second biggest prophetic event in history, yet sadly too many in the Church seem unable or unwilling to recognise it. Others have a vague recognition that Israel is relevant to God, but are unwilling to do anything about it, in fact just like the man with one talent who did nothing with it.

As Johannes Facius puts it *"There are those ... within our churches who want to avoid taking any position when it comes to the question of Israel and the Jewish people ... they will be counted among those who turned against them"*. Commenting on the phrase *"whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me"* Facius is concerned that *"what bothers me, not to say shocks me, is the fact that Jesus does not speak about something that these people did wrong towards his brethren"*, rather it includes those who stood by and did nothing. He points out that the force of this parable is that neutrality is not an acceptable option in God's sight, and that those who *"do not come out in support of God's people will be counted among those who have*

turned against them”; so that the only acceptable position for the Church in the sight of God is that ***“we are called to stand up and actively show love towards the so long rejected and suffering Jewish people, and to dare to stand with them in their present struggle”***.³⁵

If Israel two thousand years ago missed out by being unable to recognise what God was doing in their generation, the Church is in exactly the same danger today. Speaking of the reason for the fall of Jerusalem, Jesus explicitly identifies the cause as being *“because you did not recognise the time of God’s coming to you”* (Luke 19:44). Those who fail to recognise what God is doing in our generation put themselves in the same position as those who failed to recognise what God was doing two thousand years ago.³⁶ We are meant to understand.

In Isaiah the Lord says *“I will beckon to the nations, I will lift up my banner to the peoples”* (Isaiah 49:22). Israel is a banner, that is a signal, to the Gentiles. The return of Israel to the Land is the biggest prophetic event since the Coming of Messiah; it loudly and clearly heralds His Return, but many in the Church are not listening.

6. HOW TO BE A GOAT

There are two issues we need to look at briefly, from a scriptural standpoint, which caused many to miss the Messiah when He came, and which similarly blind or confuse many concerning what God is doing in terms of prophetic fulfillment today.

6.1 Herod and Politics

When John the Baptist was in prison he sent messengers to Jesus to ask *“Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”* (Luke 7:19) Now this really is quite remarkable, because earlier John had absolutely no doubt who Jesus was, see Matthew 3:11-15 and John 3:26-36. What caused John to stumble and doubt? Like many he assumed that when the Messiah came, he would naturally sort out the social justice and political issues of the day.³⁷ It was a natural attitude – God turns up so things get sorted. Only it didn’t happen like that. John had challenged Herod over morality and social justice and as a result was in prison (Luke 3:19-20); and when Herod put people in prison the outlook was not good.

So John's question to Jesus carries several undertones. 'If you are the Messiah when are you going to get me out of prison?' 'If you are the Messiah when are you going to start sorting Herod out, I tried and didn't get very far, isn't it time you took a hand?' 'Isn't sorting out social justice and unfair politics what you are here for?' These are all implied questions in John's message to Jesus.

Jesus does not answer any of these. That is typical of God, He answers according to His agenda not ours. Rather than answer directly, Jesus points John to what He is doing. God never tells us why He is not doing what we think He ought to be doing, rather He expects us to be awake to what He is doing and to respond to that. Jesus tells the messengers to report what **is** happening "*the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor*" (Luke 7:22).

Now Luke had already taken care to define his understanding of the Messianic mission. Scholars are agreed that when Luke carefully records Jesus reading from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:18-19), Luke is taking care to set out a scriptural basis for the Messianic task.³⁸ Now Jesus is fulfilling it in those very terms.³⁹

Jesus effectively answers John 'Don't ask what I'm *not* doing, focus on what *is* happening'. Luke is saying 'Don't ask why the Messiah did not fulfill some people's political and social justice criteria, instead look at what He did do and how accurately it fulfilled the prophetic scriptures'.

Exactly the same applies today. Many people stumble over seeing Israel from God's perspective, because they want their own ideals of politics and social justice met first. Basically their argument says 'If God was in it everything would be perfect'. This is not the place for a discussion on the politics or social justice issues going on in Israel today. Nor is it to say they are unimportant. Rather it is to say that it is not the place to start. If you want to start there, you will stay in prison with John the Baptist and not get out.

The place to start, as Luke would insist, is to focus on what God **is** doing, not on what He is not doing. God is fulfilling prophecy in our lifetime, the second most important tranche of prophecies in scripture is being fulfilled in our generation and that should be our focus. God expects us to sit up, take notice and get involved.

6.2 The Sanhedrin and Theology

In Acts 4 Peter and John were up before the Sanhedrin. Now the Sanhedrin were not bad people. They were the leaders of the ‘community of faith’ of their day. One of their associates, Saul, was later to testify how he was full of zeal, and both fastidious and blameless regarding the Law (Philippians 3:6). Their problem was that their theology stopped them seeing what God was doing. Peter and John were standing before them with a man who had been healed. The evidence was there. Yet they still *“commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus”* (Acts 4:18). Their theology stopped them seeing what God was doing before their eyes.

Too many Christians today fall into the same trap. Sadly many theological colleges are teaching that God has no interest in the State of Israel because the New Covenant has replaced the Old. This is not the place to rehearse the arguments which I set out in a previous paper on how the various covenants affect Israel today, except to summarise briefly that although the Law (otherwise known as the Sinai Covenant or Mosaic Covenant) has been overtaken by the New Covenant, the earlier covenant made with Abraham which contains the promises relating to the Nation and the Land is unaffected.⁴⁰

The point is, this is not the place to start. The place to start is with what God **is** doing, not with what our theology says He cannot be doing. Let us say it again, God is fulfilling prophecy in our lifetime, the second most important tranche of prophecies in scripture is being fulfilled in our generation, and that should be our focus, not to let our theology get in the way. That is to join the Sanhedrin. God expects us to sit up, take notice and get involved.

7. SUMMARY (CAN THE SHEEP SMELL THE COFFEE?)

The Olivet Discourse (Matt 24:3–26:1) is Jesus’ response to the disciples’ questions about what we can see with hindsight were two historically different, but parallel, events. In each case the same spiritual principle applies. The three stories which Jesus tells in Matthew 25 cover both these events.

Firstly, the destruction of the Temple and (by association) the fall of Jerusalem. The story of the ten girls and the story of the talents both relate to the “Believing Community” of the day, the Jewish people, Israel. The story of the Sheep and the

Goats is not directly related to this first event. Even so, by invoking Ezekiel 34:17, it powerfully suggests that Ezekiel 34 is nonetheless relevant. Israel was being shepherded by her Messiah, but there was judgment involved in that shepherding process. Israel, the 'Community of Faith', was judged according to her reaction to what God was doing in her day.

The second historic event alluded to is the Return of Messiah. Once again the stories of the ten girls and of the talents are relevant. No-one doubts that these relate to the Church, that is the 'Believing Community' of our day. This time the story of the Sheep and the Goats is also directly relevant. It is the third part of a trilogy. It evokes both Ezekiel 34 and Joel 3. Ezekiel 34 reinforces that it is the flock which is being judged, in line with the two other stories. Only now the flock is the Church.

In addition, the allusion to Joel 3 clearly specifies the criteria for judgment as being the Gentiles' treatment of the Jewish people and the Land of Israel. Given the significance of Joel 3, *"the least of these brothers and sisters of mine"* must refer to the Jewish people. The 'Community of Faith', the *ekklesia*, will be judged according to our reaction to what God is doing in our day. Then, it was the Coming of Messiah according to the fulfillment of scripture. Today, it is the Return of Israel to the Land according to the fulfillment of scripture, in preparation for the Return of Messiah. Now, as then, the reason given will be ***"because you did not recognise the time of God's coming"*** (Luke 19:44).

RT Kendall said recently *"Jesus gave us the parable of the ten virgins to show that the church would be spiritually asleep in the very last days. Sadly, I cannot think of a more apt description of the church today"*.⁴¹

We know the phrase "It's time to wake up and smell the coffee". The question is "Can the sheep smell the coffee?" If not, they might very well find themselves among the goats.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Dick France argues that strictly speaking this passage is not a parable, rather a short “apocalyptic revelation”; however since most commentators refer to it as a parable I have retained that description. Dick France ‘The Gospel of Matthew’ p960
- 2 Among the Hebrew prophets see for example Isaiah 58; Ezekiel 18; Hosea 4:1-7; Amos 2:6-8; 5:10-3 and Amos 8 for relevant sentiments.
- 3 Leon Morris ‘The Gospel According to Matthew’ p 633
- 4 Gert Theissen ‘The New Testament – A Literary History’ p137
- 5 Jeannine Brown ‘Matthew:TTCS’ p288
- 6 Brad Young ‘The Parables’ p295
- 7 Brad Young ‘The Parables’ p296
- 8 Donald Guthrie ‘Jesus The Messiah’ p300
- 9 Dick France ‘The Gospel of Matthew’ p957
- 10 Martin Goldsmith ‘Matthew & Mission’ p177
- 11 Dick France ‘The Gospel of Matthew’ p957-8
- 12 Dick France ‘The Gospel of Matthew’ p964
- 13 Martin Goldsmith ‘Matthew & Mission’ p177
- 14 See also John 13:20 “whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me”.
- 15 Leon Morris ‘The Gospel According to Matthew’ p639; France ‘The Gospel of Matthew’ p958

- 16 Martin Goldsmith 'Matthew & Mission' p177
- 17 See Dick France 'The Gospel of Matthew' p957-959 for a discussion of academic views.
- 18 See France 'The Gospel of Matthew' p889-901 for a discussion of the 'two question' issue and further academic views on the subject.
- 19 There is not room in this study to consider the two shorter stories in 24:42-51 on the same theme.
- 20 Martin Goldsmith 'Matthew & Mission' p176
- 21 See Dick France 'The Gospel of Matthew' p889-894 & 936 for comments on the unity of this discourse.
- 22 Notice also that the phrase 'At that time' is a deliberate echo of Joel 3, see the following section on allusions to Hebrew scriptures.
- 23 Dick France 'The Gospel of Matthew' p957, 959-960
- 24 Dick France 'The Gospel of Matthew' p960
- 25 Facius also sees a striking link between Joel 3:14-15 and Matt 24:29-30, strengthening his argument that Jesus was directly alluding to Joel 3; Johannes Facius 'Hastening the Coming of the Messiah' p50-2
- 26 Ann Spangler and Lois Tverberg 'Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus' p46
- 27 Frank Booth OPRP No 18 p4
- 28 This concept of Israel being judged by the Coming of Messiah is expanded in Malachi 3:1-5, which further expounds Ezekiel 34:17.
- 29 Facius 'Hastening the Coming of the Messiah' p51
- 30 Facius 'Hastening the Coming of the Messiah' p56

- 31 In the very next chapter Matt 26:31 Jesus again quotes scripture (Zech 13:7) to invoke the Shepherd / flock imagery in relation to his followers.
- 32 For a brief discussion of how the word *ekklesia* was adopted from the Septuagint so that the 'believing community' of Israel continued to be identified with the 'believing community' of the Church, see OPRP No 28 p18-19
- 33 The Greek word translated "*nations*" in Matt 25:32 is *'ethne'*, which according to David Stern corresponds to the Hebrew "*goyim*". He points out that in some Jewish circles today "*goyim*" could mean either "Gentiles" or "Christians". David Stern 'Jewish NTC' p30, 5:47N; & p38, 10:5N.
- 34 Eliyahu Ben-Haim has described Israel as the 'litmus test' for the church and the nations; International Prayer Conference, Jerusalem, 2004.
- 35 Facius 'Hastening the Coming of the Messiah' p56-7
- 36 See also Matthew 11:20-24 and 16:3.
- 37 Dick France thinks that "*John may have been expecting Jesus to accomplish a physical deliverance from the Romans and so began to doubt that Jesus was the 'one to come'.*" 'Luke:TTCS' p132. See also Alex Jacob's comments in OPRP No 20 p6 & p12.
- 38 So for Joel Green "*It has become axiomatic in studies of Luke that Jesus' sermon at Nazareth is programmatic for our understanding of the mission of Jesus in the Gospel*" in 'The Theology of the Gospel of Luke' p76
- 39 James Edwards considers that "*These six claims, all direct quotations from Isaiah ... are also conspicuous fulfillments of the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 61:1-2 on which Jesus based his ministry*". 'The Gospel According to Luke' p221
- 40 Frank Booth OPRP No 18 p11-15
- 41 RT Kendall 'New Wine Magazine' April 2017 p27

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ABBREVIATIONS

Jewish NTC Jewish New Testament Commentary

OPRP Olive Press Research Paper

NICNT New International Commentary on the New Testament

Pillar NTC Pillar New Testament Commentary

TTCS Teach the Text Commentary Series

Scripture quotations are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION.

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