

“THESE LEAST BROTHERS OF MINE”

A Reappraisal of the Great Judgment Scene as Apocalyptic Retribution in Matthew 25:31–46

~: William A. Bales ~:

Mount St. Mary's Seminary

I. Introduction

“And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of these least brothers of mine, you did it to me.’” So reads the verse at the very heart of one of the most misunderstood passages in the Gospel of Matthew. The general contours of the dramatic scene in Matthew 25:31–46 are well known. Jesus comes with the angelic hosts in great power and glory to a vast multitude of people, identified as “all the nations.” From his glorious throne he sits as judge to separate this multitude into two groups, one signified “sheep,” the other, “goats.” The criteria for this separation are revealed as six specific charitable works performed on yet another group, identified as “these least brothers of mine.” The seriousness of the drama reaches shocking proportions as the group signified as “goats” are sent away to everlasting punishment, while the “sheep” inherit the heavenly kingdom, everlasting life.

The interpreter is confronted with a raft of puzzling questions¹: (1) identifying “these least brothers of mine”; (2) finding the significance, if any, of the six specific “works of mercy” Jesus lists; (3) classifying the genre of the passage; (4) finding the significance and contribution of the passage at this juncture in Matthew’s gospel narrative, and, more specifically, its significance at this point (the conclusion) in the so-called “Olivet” discourse (Matt. 24–25); (5) correlating themes and ideas from the passage with texts elsewhere in Matthew; (6) situating this scene in the overall eschatology of Matthew’s gospel; (7) identifying the “nations” in 25:32; (8) how people could have served Jesus without, apparently, having ever met him; (9) understanding how the time frame of the scene (AD 70? The end of the world?).

The almost ubiquitous understanding of the text today—especially at the popular level—is that an individual’s eternal destiny hinges upon whether or not, in the course of one’s life, one has performed the six works of mercy listed in verses 35–36 (and, perhaps, similar works) to persons in need (understood as “these least brothers” of Jesus).² Helping the poor, the “disenfranchised,” the “unfortunates” of

1 I list here the primary interpretive problems; there are others. Here I list them in order of priority or seriousness, at least as I see it. Not all of these will be addressed in this article.

2 The text of Matt. 25:35–36 (RSV) reads, “For I was (1) hungry and you gave me food, I was (2) thirsty and you gave me drink, I was (3) a stranger and you welcomed me, I was (4) ill-clad and you clothed me, I was (5) sick and you visited me, I was (6) in prison and you came

the world becomes therefore the primary focus of the Christian life, inasmuch as attaining unending life in the heavenly kingdom would (rationally) be a person's highest aspiration. "As you did it to these least ..."—interpreted as helping the "unfortunates" among us—has become the motto of many parishes and charitable organizations and is a common rhetorical prod in fundraising efforts. Indeed, Matthew 25:31–46 has been employed by countless groups, both religious and otherwise, in their efforts to raise money to help people with various needs.

Taken to its logical conclusion, one which I have encountered from various pulpits over the last 25 years many times, the "unfortunates" interpretation calls into question the necessity of God even sending his son into the world as savior. If our primary obligation in life is to take care of the unfortunates among us, then what's the point of believing in Christ? The world had access to this sort of ethic long before Christ came (for example, in the OT, as well as in many other religions and philosophies). What's the point of a church if attaining the heavenly kingdom is possible by simply taking care of "the least of these"? And why, on Sunday morning, are we not down the street serving at a soup kitchen or helping out at Habitat

to me" [works enumerated]. Scholars who hold to the more common interpretation—what I will call the "unfortunates" interpretation in this article—include, for example, Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 258–259; Douglas Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 290; John P. Meier, *Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1980), 304; Frederick D. Bruner, *Matthew, A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 563–577; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Mathew*, 3 vols., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 429–430.

A minority of scholars hold that "the least" should be restricted to needy Christians, for example, Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 33b (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 744–745; Graham Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), 207–231; Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991, 2007), 358–359 (Harrington thinks "the least" could include missionaries); R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 357–358; D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 518–521.

Another minority holds that by "the least," Jesus means missionary Christians, and perhaps the apostles (this is the view defended in this article). See, for example, Donald Senior, *Matthew*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 282–284; Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 604–606; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 514; Richard B. Gardner, *Matthew* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991), 358–360; David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 243–254; David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 604–611; George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 118–119; Lamar Cope, "Matthew XXV: 31–46, 'The Sheep and the Goats' Reinterpreted," *Novum Testamentum* 11 (1969): 32–44 at 39–40; J. Ramsey Michaels, "Apostolic Hardships and Righteous Gentiles," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84 (1965): 27–37 at 28–31; T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus As Recorded in the Gospels According to St. Matthew and St. Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 248–252.

for Humanity instead of going to church? Not surprisingly, certain commentators who embrace today's standard approach to the passage have said as much. Arland Hultgren, in his well-known commentary on the parables of Jesus, concludes his treatment of Matthew 25:31–46 as follows:

If Christ is seen clearly in the disfigured faces of the unfortunates, one may indeed be moved to serve him. But, in fact, according to this passage, Christ is actually hidden in those faces; his face is obscured by the faces of the unfortunates. People therefore do not know that it is Christ whom they serve—or fail to serve. Gone is the view here that the only way one can serve Christ (or God) is a prior commitment to him. The old argument that one must be religious in order to be moral—and so religious faith becomes only instrumental to ethics—goes by the board. The down-to-earth service of the person in need—without any sense of religious obligation or motivation—that is service to Christ! Christ's true servants, then, know nothing about him, but seek only to serve the neighbor.³ [his emphasis]

Francis Watson states the matter a little more baldly:

The parable of the sheep and the goats asserts both the secret solidarity of the Son of man with the oppressed and the possibility that his true servants are those who know nothing of him but only seek to serve their oppressed neighbor. *The heathen* may act not so much as "anonymous Christians" but as servants of the anonymous Christ. ... Naturally the church should perform works of mercy to the oppressed inside and outside its own communal boundaries, and in so far as it does so its members will be found among the sheep rather than the goats. But if the works of justice and mercy are regarded as the sole criterion, then *the communal and confessional context out of which they proceed is irrelevant*. Even *the worshippers of idols*, who constitute the overwhelming majority in the group designated as *panta ta ethnē* ["all the nations"] (25.32), may feed the hungry and visit the prisoners; and in so far as they do so *they are the true servants of the anonymous Christ*.⁴ [my emphasis]

3 Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 326–327.

4 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 Press, 1993), 71–72. Examples of this sort of interpretation could be multiplied. See, for example, Bruner, *Matthew*, 563–577.

The purpose of this study is to present a more satisfactory understanding of Matthew 25:31–46. First I will point out some of the serious problems with the “unfortunates” interpretation, then move to an analysis of the genre and text of the passage with the aim of ascertaining Matthew’s primary intention and meaning.

II. Problems with the “Unfortunates” Interpretation

*Soteriology*⁵

Inasmuch as Matthew 25:31–46 has an acute concern about how a person will or will not attain everlasting life, an important question to ask is whether or not the “unfortunates” interpretation of how a person attains this wonderful end is found elsewhere in Matthew. The answer is an unambiguous “no.”

In Matthew, the basis of individual salvation is exercising faith in the only one who can save, Jesus. That, after all, was the reason behind his naming, for “he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). In Matthew, humans are in a catastrophic situation as a result of sin. Utterly lost and without hope, salvation is, humanly speaking, “impossible” (Matt. 19:26). In Matthew, the program of salvation is illustrated by the many maladies Jesus miraculously heals. He alone is portrayed as the source of healing, restoration, and wholeness. What Matthew conveys via the narration of Jesus’ marvelous physical restorations is the notion of a metaphysical restoration involving the forgiveness of sins, a transformed human nature, and restored fellowship with God (hence one of Jesus’ other titles in Matthew, “Emmanuel”—God with us).

Thus, in Matthew, Jesus’ primary concerns are to forgive sin (Matt. 9:2, 6), restore a disfigured and fatally flawed humanity, and reconcile people to God. Jesus’ statement about coming to “serve” by giving his life as a “ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28) is pointedly connected with his passion and death by which a remedy to these problems would become available:

[Jesus] will consummate this service [20:28] by the death of the suffering servant, an atoning sacrifice for the sake of and in the place of “many”. . . His death above all is a sacrifice “for the remission of sins” (cf. 26:28), a “ransom” (*lytron*) which buys back, redeems, frees captive mankind from the grip of evil. . . Thus does the messianic king “save his people (the church) from their sins” (1:21).⁶

In Matthew, Jesus comes to save a humanity sunk in the mire of sin and guilt, incapable of extrication or transformation. He comes to offer a renewed spiritual

5 Or, “the study of salvation.”

6 Meier, *Matthew*, 229.

life and hope for a life beyond this life. For Matthew, there is no other possible solution to humanity's dire and bleak situation than faith in Jesus.

Matthew's soteriology is rooted in his christology. It is because of Jesus' unique (divine) person, power, and authority that he, and he alone, can solve and rectify humanity's condition. Various titles and rhetoric are used by Matthew to convey this christology. Jesus is the Son of David and Son of Abraham (1:1)⁷. He is Emmanuel (1:23), the Savior (1:21), the King of the Jews (2:2; 27:11, 29, 37), the Christ (1:1; 2:4; 16:16 and others), and Son of God (3:17; 8:29; 16:16 and others). More Matthean christological titles could be added, but these suffice to show Matthew's portrayal of Jesus as the fulfillment of all the great promises of the Old Testament—promises having to do with a coming ruler, savior, judge, restorer, and deliverer who would set all things right.

Besides titles, many events in Matthew's narrative advance a christology which shows that faith in Jesus is indispensable for personal salvation. Jesus receives the adoring worship of the Magi, something Matthew's Jewish audience would have known was reserved only for divinity ("... and falling down, they [the Magi] worshipped him." [Matt. 2:11]). The great prophet, John the Baptist, by his own self-testimony is just a house-slave—if even that—compared to Jesus and compared to what Jesus was about to bring to the world (the Holy Spirit—Matt. 3:11). Jesus' miracles show him as the bringer-of-new-life, both physical and spiritual (see chapters 8–9, 12, 14–15, 20:29–33, 21:14). Especially important in this regard are the miracles that symbolically reconcile a person with God by removing uncleanness—for example, the leper, stopping a blood flow, and performing exorcisms.⁸ Jesus is the rest-giver (11:28). He is the "ransom" for humanity (20:26–28; 26:28). Unique among the gospels, Matthew depicts certain events at Jesus' death as *life-giving*,⁹ indicating, among other things, that only Jesus' death on the cross can bring *the dead to life* (27:51–54).¹⁰

More than the other gospels, Matthew portrays Jesus as a new and greater Moses, bringing a new and greater salvation (and law) that is patterned after the life of Moses and events connected with the Exodus, Passover, escape from Egypt, giving of the Law, and journey to the promised land.¹¹ Matthew's careful and

7 "Son" titles indicate that Jesus, as the "son" of these men will fulfill the covenant promises that God gave them. For a detailed study of these covenants and their promises, see Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship By Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises*, Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 101–135, 176–237. The covenantal promises are staggering in scope, emphasizing Matthew's high christology.

8 On this, see John Paul Heil, "Significant Aspects of the Healing Miracles in Matthew," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41 (1979): 274–287.

9 Rocks were split, "the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised ... coming out of the tombs after his resurrection ..." (Matt. 27:51–53).

10 See Meier, *Matthew*, 352–353.

11 On this, see especially Dale C. Allison, *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993). Just one obvious and early example: Herod's attack on the

deliberate construction of Jesus as the new and perfect Moses builds a christology that sees Jesus' career as analogous to what Moses was and did. At the time of the Exodus, faith in and obedience to Moses were essential if one was to be "saved" from slavery in Egypt. One had to *follow him* (literally). So in Matthew: faith in and obedience to the New Moses, Jesus, is clearly necessary. Jesus alone can rescue a person from the "slavery" of sin and death (and from the tyrannical dominion of Pharaoh / Satan), bring his people through the sea (baptism), through the wilderness, provide sustaining manna and an abiding presence (in the Eucharist), give the law (the Sermon on the Mount), and (as Jesus / Joshua) bring them into the promised land.

The notion that Matthew would introduce a kind of "short cut" in 25:31–46—that having worked in one's life to meet the needs of the "unfortunates" will result in being ushered into the heavenly kingdom—irrespective of one's faith or even knowledge of Christ—would be, soteriologically speaking, astonishing. It would render as completely irrelevant the rich soteriological tapestry that Matthew has so carefully woven throughout his gospel narrative.

Further, in Matthew, being connected to the church is, soteriologically, a very important thing. Keeping in mind the new exodus theme, the church is the new Israel that goes out with the new Moses to get the new law, and, provided with the sustaining powers of the new sacraments, finally enters the new promised land. Matthew is clear about presenting the church as the channel or vehicle through which saving "graces" would be made available to the nations.

In Matthew 16:18 Jesus speaks of building his church, through which he will engage and conquer the "powers of death."¹² In Matthew 10 the pattern appears to be set (repeated in Matt. 24–25 and 28) that Jesus will authorize certain chosen ones to evangelize the nations. The feeding miracles in both 14:13–21 (the feeding of the 5000) and 15:32–39 (the feeding of the 4000)—both anticipating the eucharistic banquet (26:26–29)—portray life-giving food as being mediated by the disciples (probably meaning the twelve). These feeding actions anticipate a church with leadership that mediates God's saving gifts. In 18:15–20, it is *the church* that functions organizationally and juridically. In 28:16–20 the nations will be baptized into the church via the missionary efforts of Jesus' chosen and appointed emissaries. The "unfortunates" view of Matthew 25:31–46, if correct, would constitute a glaring aberration from a Matthean soteriology so closely connected with ecclesiology.

(angelically extricated) Christ-child (Matt. 2:13–18) is certainly intended by Matthew to recall Pharaoh's attack on Israelite male-children and Moses' providential extrication from that attack (Exod. 1:15–2:10). Jesus is a new Moses / Savior preserved from the murderous aspirations of a new Pharaoh / King via God's providential protection.

12 A useful (RSV) translation of the Greek *pulai hadou*, literally, "gates of Hades."

"Brethren" in Matthew

Another problem for the "unfortunates" interpretation of Matthew 25:31–46 is that when the word for "brother" (Greek = *adelphos*) is used in Matthew (often on the lips of Jesus), it is not used to refer to "any and all human beings." Matthew uses the term to indicate a more focused and specific group—usually those who have become his disciples—those who appear to have repented (to one degree or another), put their faith in him, and are following him.

It is true that the Greek word (*adelphos*) behind translations such as "brethren" or "brother(s)" is used in Matthew to indicate relations other than disciples. For example, the use of *adelphos* meaning "brother" as we understand it in our modern western culture (that is, as offspring of the same mother and/or father) is the clear meaning in Matthew 1:2, 11; 4:18, 21; 10:2, 21; 14:3; 17:1; 19:29; 20:24; and 22:24, 25. The meaning of *adelphos* is disputed at 12:46–48 and 13:55. Some hold it to mean "blood brother," that is, offspring of the same mother or father, as just previous. The other uses of the word *adelphos* in Matthew indicate a quasi-familial relation based on adherence to a common religious tradition. In some cases it refers to those who share the common tradition of Judaism with Jesus (5:22, 23, 24, 47; 7:3, 4, 5),¹³ in others it refers to persons who are showing, at some level at least, faith in him (12:49, 50; 18:15, 21, 35; 23:8; 28:10).¹⁴

When Jesus speaks of "these least brothers" in Matthew 25:40, the meaning, especially in the context of Matthew 24–25 (where he is clearly addressing his disciples) is likely restricted to those who have put their faith in him. It is likely to be further restricted as meaning simply the twelve. As chapter 24 and 25 flow into chapter 26, the same group designated "disciples" in 24 and 25—and in the beginning of 26—becomes seamlessly "the twelve" at the Passover supper (see 26:19–20).

Taking Care of the Poor Not a Matthean Emphasis

Another problem for the standard "unfortunates" interpretation of Matthew 25:31–46 is the modest observation that *care for the poor is simply not an emphasis in the Gospel of Matthew*.¹⁵ The word for "poor" (Greek = *ptochos*) is used only

13 The view of Benedict T. Viviano ("The Gospel According to Matthew," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990], 669) and others who understand the "brethren" references in the Sermon on the Mount as being somewhat universal, that is, as meaning "all of humanity" is unlikely. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is addressing his disciples and others from a decidedly Jewish society, a "closed" religious group, the analog of those who would later constitute his church.

14 Some occurrences are, admittedly, ambiguous. See, for example, Matt. 23:8 where Jesus proclaims a group identified as "the crowds and his disciples" as brethren.

15 In this respect Matthew is very different from the Gospel of Luke, whose narrative is strewn with various material and references that show a keen concern for the poor and economically less fortunate. Luke also gives strong warnings about the danger of seeking riches. Some scholars point to Matt. 5:7; 9:13; 12:7; and 23:23 as "evidence" that Matthew does have a

five times in the entire gospel. In Matthew 11:5 and 19:21 it is used in contexts where helping the poor is not the issue.¹⁶ In Matthew 5:3 “poor” is mentioned, but it is used in the phrase “poor in spirit,” a phrase that certainly means something more than simply economic want. The word “poor” is also used in 26:9 and 26:11 in connection with Jesus having his head anointed with expensive ointment. In Matthew 6:2–4 the giving of alms appears, yet the issue at hand is not helping those in need so much as warning against hypocrisy. Besides this lexical data, the *theme* of helping the poor and needy is simply not in Matthew.

How astounding then, when the reader arrives at Matthew 25:31–46 and learns that his eternal destiny hinges *solely* on whether or not he has helped the poor! As we will see below, being astounded should serve as a hint that the reader has missed Matthew’s (and Jesus’) point.

One should also note that the Old Testament *sine qua non* of works done for the less fortunate—that of *taking care of widows and orphans*—is missing from Jesus’ catalogue of works in Matthew 25:35–36 (repeated in 25:42–43). Numerous Old Testament texts implore the care of widows and orphans.¹⁷ The “sojourner” is often grouped with the widow and orphan as persons singled out for special concern and attention, especially in Deuteronomy.¹⁸ It is possible that this grouping, “sojourners, widows, and orphans” functioned in the OT as a metonym for any needy person or persons. It is surprising, therefore, for Jesus to make no mention of widows and orphans in the list of works in Matthew 25, if his purpose was to enjoin care for the unfortunates of the world.

A related problem for the “unfortunates” interpretation of Matthew 25:31–46 is that the idea of Jesus so closely identifying himself with the poor—again, *any* poor—would be unique in the gospel of Matthew. The two other places in Matthew where Jesus uses similar “identity” language are in 10:40 and 18:5. In 10:40 Jesus states: “He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me.” Here Jesus identifies himself not with the poor but with the twelve disciples being sent out on mission. Jesus tells the twelve that whenever people “receive” them (which would entail accepting their message [see 10:14])

thematic concern for the poor (see, for example, Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 258). In response: Matt. 5:7 (“Blessed are the merciful” & etc.) certainly has more in view than just the materially needy. Matt. 9:13 and 12:7 reference Hos. 6:6, where the underlying Hebrew is *hesed* (“covenant fidelity”). Translated by the LXX and carried over into the NT as *eleos*, the meaning at 9:13 and 12:7 is better understood as it is in Hosea, “covenant fidelity.” Matt. 23:23 (also *eleos*) may also have *hesed* underlying it. That one must scrape the barrel in this manner in order to find such scanty evidence of “helping the unfortunates” in Matthew only succeeds in proving my point.

16 The issue in 11:5 is that of compiling a list of deeds being done by Jesus as a message for the imprisoned John the Baptist. In 19:21 the context is that of challenging a wealthy man to overcome his love for riches.

17 To list but a few of the several dozen possible examples, see Deut. 24:17, 19–21; 26:12; Job 22:9; Pss. 94:6; 146:9; Jer. 22:3.

18 See throughout Deut. (11x); Pss. 94:6; 146:9; Ezek. 22:7; Zech. 7:10.

their "receptors" are actually receiving Him. "Identity" language is also found in Matthew 18:5: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me." Here, however, Jesus is teaching on humility and on turning from the natural tendency to want to be considered important, not on caring for the less fortunate.

The "unfortunates" interpretation has a further problem: none of the six works *necessarily* suggest that the recipients of the works are poor. They could just as easily suggest someone who is simply in need of one or more of the works at a specific time and place.

Another problem is that some commentators push the rhetorical severity of the six works so that the "least" are viewed as, for example, the downtrodden, the marginalized, the disenfranchised, the disfigured, and / or the oppressed.¹⁹ None of the six works mentioned in Matthew 25:31–46 necessarily suggest any of these severe conditions. This sort of hyperbolic "shove" may be at home in the rhetoric of incautious homilies, but it is not the fruit of careful exegesis.

The "Unfortunates" View a Novelty in the History of Interpretation

Strangely, what seems like such an obvious interpretation of Matthew 25:31–46 to modern interpreters has not seemed so obvious to prominent interpreters and commentators down through the centuries. In his extensive treatment of the history of the interpretation of Matthew 25:31–46, Sherman Gray has shown that it wasn't until the *twentieth century* that the "unfortunates" view became the majority interpretation (65% of commentators investigated).²⁰ The nineteenth century was somewhat mixed (60% of commentators investigated interpreted the "least" as Christians or missionaries).²¹ Prior to 1800, however, in every quarter and age, the more restricted view of the "least"—interpreted as either Christians or missionaries—was dominant.²² The "unfortunates" interpretation was held by only a small minority of Church Fathers, for the most part as a secondary or tertiary interpretation.²³

Gray's study does not prove the view that will be set forth in this article. It does, however, demonstrate that the dominant view at present is a relative newcomer, and is not firmly rooted in the interpretive tradition of the Church.

19 See, for example, Hultgren, *Parables*, 326; Watson, "Liberating the Reader," 69.

20 Sherman W. Gray, *The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25:31–46; A History of Interpretation*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 114 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 347. All who wrestle with Matt. 25:31–46 are deeply indebted to Gray for this magisterial work.

21 Gray, *The Least of My Brothers*, 346.

22 Gray, *The Least of My Brothers*, 331–346.

23 Gray, *The Least of My Brothers*, 11–126, 331–342.

III. Toward a More Satisfying Interpretation of Matthew 25:31–46

The Genre of Matthew 24–25

In moving from an analysis of the many problems stemming from the common interpretation of Matthew 25:31–46, an important question to ask of the passage is that of genre. While virtually all commentators acknowledge that Matthew 24 is apocalyptic in genre, most do not see—or at least leave unstated—that the genre extends into chapter 25. By the time 25:31–46 is finally analyzed, a sustained awareness of the apocalyptic genre as *the* crucial interpretive backdrop has disappeared. The discussion of genre moves myopically to that of parable, pronouncement story, or whatever.²⁴ This is one of the most serious errors in the interpretive process for Matthew 25:31–46.

The genre categorized as “apocalyptic” is distinctive and is found in ancient sources like Daniel, Isaiah, 1 Enoch, and quintessentially, in the Book of Revelation.²⁵ The following elements are characteristic of the genre:

1. The life-setting is that the people of God are in, or, more commonly, *will be in*, some sort of serious distress, brought about by evil powers (human and/or angelic).
2. A messenger from heaven conveys a message, often to some important prophetic figure, to reveal (*apokaluptō*) what is about to take place—usually in a dream or trance-like setting. If the suffering is future, both the suffering and the subsequent vindication of God’s people will be disclosed by the heavenly messenger. If the suffering is taking place at the time of the revelation, then what will primarily be in view is future vindication.
3. The people of God are either explicitly or implicitly exhorted and warned to remain faithful and loyal to God, his ways, and his mission during this upcoming time of suffering and distress (see Rev. 2–3; Dan. 7:25; 11:31–35; 12:10).

24 Notable exceptions to this critique are the studies by Graham N. Stanton, “The Gospel of Matthew and Judaism,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 66 (1984): 264–284 at 280–281; and David C. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 227–235.

25 On this genre, see espec. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 31–69; also John J. Collins and Adela Y. Collins, “Apocalypses and Apocalypticism,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1.279–292; Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Book of Daniel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible vol. 23 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977), 62–77; Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 5–12.

4. A very important part of this genre concerns the announcement that a savior figure will eventually arrive in a glorious and spectacular fashion, usually with an angelic host, who will set things right by destroying the forces of evil and rewarding and thereby vindicating God's people who have remained faithful through the time of distress. The ultimate fate of both the righteous and the wicked is disclosed, and this fate is intimately connected to the coming or arrival of the savior figure.
5. In general, the arrival of the savior figure will be soon (relative to the "revelation").
6. In general, his arrival will be connected with what is understood as the "end" of time or at least the end of an epoch, ushering in some sort of new and revived world situation.
7. Before his arrival at the "end," various catastrophic "woes" will be unleashed or allowed by God on the world (for example, earthquakes, famines, lawlessness, the proliferation of evil in general, an unleashing of the forces of evil on God's people—both of a deceptive nature and perhaps physical persecution). These "woes" serve as signs of the impending end and function to alert God's people and perhaps others that the end is near.
8. These "woes" may affect all peoples, both the righteous and the wicked, but sometimes only the wicked are targeted.
9. Two qualities permeate apocalyptic: (1) dualism (both in the angelic and in the human sphere)—the radical disjunction and enmity between the forces of good and evil—and (2) an emphasis on a kind of "determinism" or divine sovereignty. In the midst of all the chaos and suffering, God is still in total control. Though it may not appear to be so, everything is going according to the divine plan and thus God will work everything out in his own time for the good of his people and for his own glory.

Apocalypses—be they brief (Matt. 10:16-42) or extensive (The Book of Revelation)—serve several purposes: (1) They encourage the people of God in and through their present trials and in anticipation of the coming woes via a heavenly disclosure that all will ultimately be set right. The labor, mission, and endurance of God's people will not be in vain. The righteous will be vindicated and receive salva-

tion and various rewards; the wicked, especially those who persecute God's people and oppose his purposes, will be condemned and punished severely. (2) While the current (or soon-to-be) unhappy circumstances are not exactly explained in the apocalypse proper, the people of God are informed that God's good purposes are being realized even in the midst of their distress. All is taking place according to his plan—thus mitigating their anxiety and helping them to maintain their confidence in God. (3) The people of God are able to deduce that they are, in fact, God's chosen ones. They and they alone are "legitimized" in their own minds, bringing strength, encouragement, and comfort in the face of impending trial. (4) Importantly, and beyond *encouragement*, the people of God are *warned* in various ways to maintain their fidelity and trust in him during the present and upcoming distress.²⁶

All of these elements are present in Matthew 24–25, marking the entire discourse, and not just Matthew 24, as a unified apocalypse:

1. The people of God (in this case, the twelve) are about to suffer distress in various ways. The general environment will be dangerous and fearful; deceivers will be about (24:4–5) and the twelve will be surrounded by unstable political conditions that will lead to wars and rumors of wars (24:6–7). Because of their missionary activity (24:14) they will suffer tribulation (undefined), hatred, betrayal, and death (24:9–12). Because of the delay of Jesus' parousia, the disciples will be tempted to stray from the path of righteousness (this is the basic hazard presented in the parables of the wicked household servant [24:45–51], the ten virgins [25:1–13], and the talent-entrusted servants [25:14–30]).
2. Here in Matthew 24–25, as in the "mini-apocalypse" of Matthew 10:16–42, the heavenly messenger (Jesus) is already present on the scene, so there is no need for a messenger to be sent from heaven, appearing in some dream or trance.
3. The apostles are exhorted / warned to fidelity (and to specific precautionary measures) during the upcoming time of distress, the interim period between Jesus' death / resurrection and his parousia. These exhortations / warnings occur throughout chapter 24. At the end of chapter 24, and continuing through 25:30, the warnings become longer, more descriptive, and parabolic. These warnings are primarily focused on being productive, diligent, and faithful during the time of mission, the interim time before the return of the

26 For more on the function of the genre, see Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 220–241.

king. The warnings (exhortations) are logically connected to the (previously mentioned—24:14) upcoming mission of proclaiming the Kingdom. The Noahic simile (24:37–41), indicating that the exact day of Christ's parousia is unknown, leads to the warning (24:42) of constant readiness—meaning productive, faithful kingdom service, and, pointedly for the twelve, the mission to the nations mentioned in 24:14. The keynote theme of 24:42 (readiness for Christ's parousia) serves as an introduction that is developed first in the short analogy of the thief and householder (24:43–44), and then in three longer parables: the wicked household servant (24:45–51), the ten virgins (25:1–13), and the talent-entrusted servants (25:14–30).

4. Various eschatological "woes" and other signs (some spectacular) occur before Jesus' parousia. See (1) 24:6–8; (2) 24:11–12; (3) 24:15; (4) 24:24; (5) 24:29; (6) 24:37–39.
5. The savior figure, with his angels, arrives in a glorious and spectacular fashion, setting all things right by condemning the forces of evil and rewarding and vindicating God's faithful people: (1) 24:27; (2) 24:30–31; (3) 24:39–41; and, most importantly, (4) 25:31–46. Final judgment, salvation, and vindication are portrayed in 25:31–46 with a striking twist vis-a-vis comparable apocalypses. It's not just that the apostles will be saved and those who reject them and / or persecute them be condemned (as would be expected in normal apocalypses). Rather, the success and vindication of their *mission* is also in view.²⁷ Their *mission* of proclaiming the kingdom to the world (Matt. 24:14; see 10:5–7; 28:16–20) is vindicated—a group has responded to them and to their message (really two inseparable matters) and so are saved; those who reject them and their message are condemned.

Of note is that Jesus' discussion of his actual parousia as savior / judge before he arrives at 25:31–46 is rather sparse. Only in 25:31–46 do we find the kind of resolution one expects in apocalypses. Matthew 25:31–46 resumes and completes the parousia scene that was stated tersely in 24:27 and then again quite briefly and incompletely in two short verses just follow-

²⁷ This assertion will be argued at length below; I make it here to give the reader a complete picture of the apocalypse that is present in Matt. 24–25.

ing, 24:30–31. Matthew 25:31–46 presents the same scene, the same players, only now expanded and, fittingly, concluded.

Matthew 10:16–42: Relevance and Genre

RELEVANCE

The missionary discourse in Matthew 10:16–42, while given to the twelve by Jesus before their proto-mission (explained in 10:1–15), clearly has more relevance to the post-resurrection mission given to them in chapter 28 than to the limited mission narrated in chapter 10. Matthew narrates nothing about the actual results or activities of this (evidently small and short) mission. When the twelve rejoin Jesus in 12:1 (plucking grain on the Sabbath), it's as if nothing had even taken place. There is no narration of any of the remarkable and severe events that Jesus foretells and warns of in 10:16–42. Though one could suppose that during this “proto-mission” the twelve experienced some opposition and some need for the kind of exhortative encouragement found in the discourse, they were manifestly not delivered up to councils, flogged in synagogues, dragged before governors and kings, or delivered up to death. Jesus didn't “come” before they had gone through all the towns of Israel (10:23).

All of this would happen post-resurrection, after the “great commission” in 28:16–20. Jesus uses the occasion of this first, limited mission—using elements of the apocalyptic genre—to convey the kind of information to the twelve that apocalypses generally convey and for reasons that apocalypses are generally used. When Jesus later speaks of the twelve's mission to the nations in 24:9, 14 and in 28:16–20, this information will not be repeated.²⁸ It is here instead.

GENRE

Matthew 10:16–42 contains many elements of the apocalyptic genre, and therefore can fairly be categorized as a “mini-apocalypse.” Of the nine elements listed above²⁹—all of which are found in Matthew 24–25—the following are present in 10:16–42:

1. A heavenly messenger (Jesus) reveals what is about to take place (suffering, persecution, etc.).
2. The life-setting of the message is the proto-mission, but also (see just above) the mission post-resurrection, where the twelve will experience serious distress brought about by evil human beings, precipitated by the mission (10:16–25).

28 Matt. 24:9 very briefly mentions that the mission will end in death for some, but gives none of the extensive details that we find in chapter 10.

29 See above in the section just prior, *The Genre of Matthew 24–25*.

3. The twelve are explicitly exhorted and warned to remain faithful and loyal to God, His ways, and His mission during this upcoming time of difficult labor, hardship, and distress (10:24–39).
4. Jesus reveals that he (the savior figure) will arrive, it will be soon (10:23), and he will set things right by destroying the forces of evil and rewarding and vindicating the twelve, as well as vindicating the divine origins of their mission and message

which brings encouragement and hope to the twelve.³⁰ Both end, though using different rhetoric, with the notice that those who have (or, have not) *received the twelve* (and their message), have (or have not) actually *received Jesus*, and will be repaid accordingly.³¹

Analysis of Matthew 25:31–46

THE CONTEXT OF MATTHEW 25:31–46 WITHIN MATTHEW 24–25

Jesus' lengthy response in 24:4–25:31 is to the disciples' question in 24:3, where they ask him concerning the timetable of the temple's destruction, the end of the age, and Jesus' parousia (his "coming").³² "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming (*parousia*) and of the close of the age?" Much of the ensuing discourse, however, is taken up with matters pertaining to the upcoming apostolic mission to the nations,³³ directed as exhortations and warnings to the disciples.

Indeed, exhortations / warnings regarding the disciples upcoming *mission* begin in 24:37 and continue uninterrupted until 25:31. Matthew 25:31 once

30 I interpret the four groups mentioned in 10:40–42 as different ways of designating the *same* group—the group Jesus is talking to, the twelve. They are the ones being sent, they are the prophets, they are the righteous ones, they are the "little ones"—an appellation that anticipates "these least" in chapter 25. The reason I take these four to be the same group is that Jesus is speaking to *one group* (the disciples) who, given their new status as "sent ones," could have readily identified with the designations "prophet," "righteous man," and "little one." As such (meaning, "as all three"), they were about to be sent to whoever would receive them.

31 I realize that with respect to Matt. 25:31–46 this appears to beg the question; that "the least brethren" are the *twelve* who were (or were not) received on their gospel-proclaiming mission will be developed below.

32 I understand these three things as happening concurrently, at one and the same event. The temple's destruction will bring about the end of the age, and this only at Jesus' parousia. A detailed defense of this view is beyond the scope of this study. See, however, how earlier in Matt. 16:27–28 Jesus predicts that his parousia will take place before the death of some of the twelve present there at Caesarea Philippi—to me, at least, an obvious reference to AD 70, the time when the temple was destroyed (compare 24:34: "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place.") For a concurring opinion, see Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Ignatius Catholic Study Bible (Ignatius: San Francisco, 2000), 60.

33 The word translated "nations" is *ethnos* (plural = *ethnē*). The first eight occurrences of *ethnos* in Matthew clearly mean "Gentiles," that is, *non-Jewish people*. The ninth occurrence (21:43) is ambiguous. The last five occurrences (24:7 [2x], 9, 14; 25:32; 28:19) most likely mean "nations," that is, all people groups, Jew and Gentile (on this, see, for example, John Meier, "Nations or Gentiles in Matthew 28:19?," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39 [1977]: 94–102).

The more interesting question, however, given the high eschatological drama taking place in Matt. 24–25, is the question of which "people groups" are intended in Matt. 25:32. One's answer to this question is intertwined with the question of the timing of the events in 25:31–46. Is this the end of the world, where all the nations of the world stand before Christ, or is this AD 70, where the many *ethnē* which constitute Palestinian Jewry are judged? I think the latter, though a full defense must wait for a later study.

again picks up the matter of the parousia and effectively resumes the drama where 24:29–31 left off.³⁴ The series of intervening warnings, exhortations to readiness, again, typical of apocalyptic, are over. Now, in 31–46, we are told of final vindication—the sort of thing expected of an apocalypse—for the twelve and their mission. The receptive “nations” receive salvation; the unreceptive ones, damnation. The events in 31–46 are a recapitulation and augmentation of 24:29–31, and, for that matter, of 7:21–23,³⁵ 10:14–15,³⁶ 10:40–42; 11:22–24; 12:41–42, 13:40–43, 13:49–50, 16:27, 19:28–30, and 26:64.³⁷

Matthew 24–25 is Jesus’ revelatory discourse to his disciples about events that will (and did) take place within a generation of his death and resurrection: the destruction of the Jerusalem temple (AD 70) and with it the end of the old covenant age and the judgment upon *that generation*, meaning all the towns and cities of what was then “Israel” (see 10:23;³⁸ 23:34³⁹), and finally Jerusalem itself (see 23:37–39⁴⁰). Jesus’ discourse foreshadows events that will bear a similar contour at the end of the world.

IDENTIFYING “THESE LEAST BRETHERN OF MINE”

In Matthew, the word for brethren (*adelphos*) can indicate several possible meanings.⁴¹ Here, however, the likely meaning is *disciple*, and, more specifically, the *twelve*

34 Matthew 24:29–31: “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken; ³⁰ then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; ³¹ and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”

35 Matthew 7:21–23: ²¹ “Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ ²³ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.’”

36 Matthew 10:14–15: “And if any one will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.”

37 Matthew 26:64: “Jesus said to him, ‘You have said so. But I tell you, *hereafter you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.*’”

38 Matthew 10:23: “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of man comes.”

39 Matthew 23:34: “Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from town to town ...”

40 Matthew 23:37–39: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! ³⁸ Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate. ³⁹ For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

41 See above, p. 57.

disciples that Jesus has been talking to throughout chapters 24–25. Before 25:31 there has been no final resolution and vindication for the disciple / missionaries. In v. 31 Jesus shifts from warning the disciples to bringing before their minds a majestic—not to say somewhat frightening—parable-like judgment scene. Before the great throne are the sheep, the goats, and Jesus’ “least brothers.”

Jesus’ use of the proximate demonstrative adjective “these” (*toutōn*) in the phrase “one of these least brothers of mine” (*heni toutōn tōn adelphōn mou tōn elachistōn*) suggests that at 25:31 he shifts from speaking to the twelve and is now speaking *about* them. “These least” are singled out, a group separate from the *sheep*—and hardly a subset of the *goats*. They are “the least” (*tōn elachistōn*) of the larger set of “brothers” (*tōn adelphōn*). They are nearby, visible, and present to both sheep and goats, and hence the use of the proximate demonstrative “these” instead of just the definite article “the” (*tōn*). Further, the “fronting” of *toutōn* in the phrase *toutōn tōn adelphōn mou tōn elachistōn* (that is, putting it before the rest of the clause), puts special emphasis on this group, suggesting that they are to be understood as a third group in the scene. The apostles are hearing about themselves in the final part of the apocalypse in this parable-like scene, even as in chapter 10 they heard about themselves at the end of the “mini-apocalypse” (10:40–42).⁴²

The reference to the word “least” associates 25:40 (and 25:45) with texts from earlier in Matthew that concern Jesus’ disciples. One of those places, significantly, is 10:42: “And whoever gives to one of these *little ones* even a cup of cold water—because he is a *disciple*—truly, I say to you, he shall not lose his reward.” The phrase “one of these little ones ...” in 10:42 uncannily anticipates “one of these least ...” in 25:40, 45. The Greek word for “least” in chapter 25 (*elachistōn*) is used in the NT as the superlative of the word for “little ones” in 10:42 (*mikros*). Further, in Matthew 11:25 Jesus effectively refers to any and all of his disciples as “babes”; not to the wise and understanding, but to *babes* has the Father revealed the saving secrets of the kingdom. Finally, the narrative in Matthew 19:27–20:28 has an acute concern that a disciple of Jesus not seek worldly greatness, or seek to be “first” in the sense valued by the Gentiles. Rather, the disciple must seek to be a servant—and, in that sense, seek “littleness” and “lastness.” With the sort of background these earlier Matthean texts provide, associating “*these least*” in 25:40, 45 with *the disciples* is not as far-fetched as might appear at first.

There is more. The nations are gathered for judgment before the exalted Christ on his “glorious throne” (*thronou doxēs*). The only other place in Matthew where the term “glorious throne” is used is when Jesus is speaking to the twelve disciples in chapter 19: “Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of man shall sit on his *glorious throne* (*thronou doxēs*), you who have

42 Scholars are divided on this important point—taking “these least” as a group separate from the sheep and goats. For a concurring view, see, among many others, Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus*, 248–252.

followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt. 19:28). Assuming coherence in Matthew's eschatology, this reference in chapter 19 refers to the same event we are now witnessing in 25:31–46. Christ comes in glory, sitting on his glorious throne, judging the nations, of which the twelve tribes are a part. So where are the twelve disciples on their thrones? They are the "these" of 25:40, 45. Though least and of no-account in the world's eyes, they are now exalted to positions of honor before those they had been sent to evangelize. The last have become first, the first last; the least have become great, the servants now rule (Matt. 19:30; 20:16, 26–27).

Both on the level of Matthew's overall narrative and on the level of the apocalypse that is Matthew 24–25, identifying the "least" in 25:40, 45 as the disciples-now-apostles-now-judges makes good sense. Matthew's eschatology, though complicated, coheres. The apocalypse of 24–25 finds a denouement as, fittingly, all nations are judged in the presence of the "least" and on the basis of their response to the obedient proclamation of these same "least."

"THESE LEAST" AND THE SIX WORKS OF MERCY

Evidence from chapter 10 strengthens the understanding that the "least" in 25:40, 45 are the twelve disciples. The specific works mentioned in 25:31–46, performed for the "least," correspond remarkably to the needs that the twelve were to experience on their proto-mission in chapter 10.

The "proto-mission" in chapter 10 functions as a kind of blueprint for the post-resurrection mission to the world (seen especially in the revelatory discourse in 10:16–42). In that proto-mission, the twelve were to take no money with which to buy food or drink (10:9–10), and so they would be dependent on those who might receive them for these provisions, something we find in 25:35 ("I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink"). They had no money for shelter, and they were directed by Jesus to go forth with what was, effectively, insufficient clothing (10:10, "nor two tunics"). Again, they would be dependent on those who might receive them for these necessities. Correspondence is found in 25:35–36: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was ill-clad⁴³ and you clothed me."

Before the proto-mission, Jesus tells his apostles that they would suffer bodily tortures and be dragged before governors and kings (10:17–18). The last two so-called "works of mercy" in 25:36 nicely attend to these adversities: "... ill

43 The Greek word used here, *gumnos*, can literally mean "naked" (so RSV and NABRE), but often means simply "uncovered" in the sense of being inadequately clothed or not having an outer garment. See W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, 3d ed., rev. by F. W. Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon of the NT* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), [hereafter, BDAG] s.v. γυμνός (*gumnos*). A NT example of an ill-clad missionary is the apostle Paul, who lists as one of the hardships he regularly experienced on his missions as being "in cold and exposure" (2 Cor. 11:27). See also 2 Tim. 4:13, where Paul writes to Timothy from prison, "When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas. ..."

and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.” Being dragged before rulers would certainly involve some imprisonment, necessitating sustaining help from someone—in 25:36 from the “sheep.”⁴⁴ The Greek word translated here as “ill,” *astheneō*, denotes not only the debilitating weakness that comes as a result of disease but also the sort of weakness that comes from things like, for example, beatings, which would fit well here in Matthew 25:36, where it is coupled, as the rhetoric of the passage suggests, with imprisonment.⁴⁵

The exalted Christ mentions these six “works of mercy” in chapter 25 because what is at issue is whether or not a particular people group received the apostles, exemplified and signified by the sorts of works he lists, works done to meet the needs of the missionary apostles. One must not miss Jesus’ deeper point: the works are emblematic of having received not just the messenger but *the message* of the missionaries,⁴⁶ that is, they became disciples of Jesus through the vehicle of his emissaries. *Receiving the message* is the basis on which eternal life is granted (or not).⁴⁷ That receiving the message was the real point of the mission in chapter 10 (and thus in the post-resurrection mission that is in view in the Matthew 25 judgment scene) can be seen not only in 10:14, 40–42, but also plainly in 11:20–24, where Jesus forecasts doom on the cities who had received his benefits (healings, etc.) but not his message of repentance and faith (see also 12:41–42).

Further, on the level of Matthew’s story, one could posit that Jesus’ words in chapter 25 to the nations about having done (or not) the six works to him would have been readily understandable and recognizable to the twelve who sat there on the Mount of Olives listening to this discourse, for during the “proto-mission” they had already lived through and experienced, at least to some limited degree, these very sorts of kindnesses or deprivations (the six works), necessitated by the terms of Jesus’ commission (Matt. 10:8–11).

Works similar to those performed for the twelve in Matthew 10 and 25, signifying being on mission or signifying the reception of the Gospel message, are found in Paul: (1) “To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are ill-clad and buffeted and homeless ...” (1 Cor. 4:11); (2) “... on frequent journeys ... in toil and

44 For a detailed and illuminating treatment of prisons and imprisonment in the ancient Roman world, see Craig S. Wansink, *Chained in Christ: The Experience and Rhetoric of Paul’s Imprisonments*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 130 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 27–95.

45 See BDAG s.v. ἀσθενέω (*asthenō*). The word can also simply indicate being in need of any basic material necessity (see Acts 20:34–35), though I think it more likely that the meaning of *asthenō* in 25:36 is a weakened state brought about by abusive persecution.

46 See 10:14: “And if any one will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.”

47 And so my approach is consistent with Matthean soteriology. This explains why the list in chapter 25 omits, for example, the care of widows and orphans (something brought up earlier in this study—see p. 58). Christ’s verdict here in Matthew 25 is not based on the treatment of people in general, but on how one received the missionaries and their message.

hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure ..." (2 Cor. 11:26–27); and (3) "you know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first; and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as *Christ Jesus*" (Gal. 4:13–14). These Pauline parallels concur with what I have been arguing above with respect to the "least".

"AS YOU DID IT ... YOU DID IT TO ME."

Reception of the apostles is the reception of Jesus. This concept is consistent with the notion of the *shaliach* ("sent one"), someone sent with a message in the name of and on behalf of the sender, with the full authority of the sender, so that to receive or not to receive the "one sent" would be the equivalent of receiving (or not) the sender and his message. This practice can be observed in the OT (prophets, who speak with divine authority), NT (for example, Matt. 10:40; John 13:20; Acts 9:4–5, Gal. 4:13–14), and in extra-biblical sources. It is in the background both in chapter 10 (especially 10:40–42), and in the judgment scene in chapter 25.⁴⁸

TWO OBJECTIONS

For some commentators, the "surprise" of the sheep and goats (25:37–39, 44) at the Great Judgment scene poses a problem for interpreting "the least" as missionaries. They argue that if the least are understood as missionaries, the sheep and goats certainly would have *known* of Jesus through the missionaries' proclamation.⁴⁹ This objection, however, misses an important rhetorical point: *only at the parousia*, when the discourse reaches its resolution and climax, do both sheep and goats *fully comprehend* just how great was the one who had been working in and through the "no-account" missionaries. Neither sheep nor goats had actually *seen* Jesus himself (and *a fortiori* had never seen the glorified Jesus as they do now at the Great Day), but they did receive or reject him when they received or rejected the lowly missionaries. The surprise manifested by both groups springs from the great contrast between the glorious, enthroned Christ and the "little ones," the apostles.

The sheep, who had become disciples, knew of course that Jesus was the one who had sent the apostles on mission to them, and that Jesus was present in and

48 For more on the *shaliach* concept and practice, see Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*, 313–315; Craig S. Keener, "The Jewish Agent as New Testament Background?," in *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1. 311–313; P. Borgen, "God's Agent in the Fourth Gospel," in *Religions in Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 137–148; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (XIII–XXI)*, Anchor Bible vol. 29A (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), 632; C. K. Barrett, "Shaliah and Apostle," in *Donum Gentilicium* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 88–102.

49 See, for example, Jan Lambrecht, *Out of the Treasure: The Parables in the Gospel of Matthew*, Louvain Theological & Pastoral Monographs (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1991), 278; Hare, *Matthew*, 290; Dan O. Via, "Ethical Responsibility and Human Wholeness in Matthew 25:31–46," *Harvard Theological Review* 80/1 (1987): 92.

through them—and in the church—in some way. But the breathtaking, majestic scene they now behold of Christ enthroned in glory with all the angels makes it seem almost unbelievable that their reception of these otherwise ordinary-looking men and their message was actually the reception of this colossal figure.⁵⁰ This, then, explains the surprise of the *sheep*. With respect to the goats, there is no real problem. They rejected the missionaries as the *no-accounts* they appeared to be; now they learn the truth of things and are stunned.⁵¹

The “surprise” notices to the sheep and goats add a rhetorical element to this part of the apocalypse (the *encouraging* part). They add a kind of “ironic vindication” for the twelve. The twelve are let in on the “joke” that the parousia will bring marvelous surprise one day to the sheep, and terrible shock to the goats. They will be sent out, but the Lord of Glory, the Judge of all the Earth stands by them—or better—is, unawares, “through them, with them, and in them” as they go about their mission.⁵²

Besides the “surprise” problem, *the feature* in 25:31–46 that is seemingly most probative *against* the view outlined in this study is that the reader or hearer simply senses that the passage is exhorting *him* to care for the “least,” and is *not* focused on the comfort, encouragement, or vindication of the “least.” The major concern seems to be with the destiny of the sheep and goats, not with the “least” (whoever *they* are). The “least” seem somewhat ancillary to the parable as a whole; they are the *means* to the more important *end* of soberly considering one’s eternal destiny and acting so as to attain a good end (inheriting the kingdom). In other words, the reader senses in 31–46 that he is being exhorted by Jesus to associate himself with the sheep (not the “least,” and certainly not the goats).

Here again, however, this is an objection that arises from interpreting 25:31–46 out of context (especially the context of chapters 24–25), and from missing the connections with the proto-mission in chapter 10. In chapter 10:40–42, the apostles are not being exhorted to be receptors of righteous (& etc.) men. They *are* the righteous men who will (or, will not) be received. So it is in 25:31–46: the apostles, listening to Jesus on the Mount of Olives as he comes to the end of his apocalyptic discourse are not exhorted to be like the sheep. They are the *least* who will be received by the sheep (but not by the goats). Both passages (10:40–42 and 25:31–46) serve the same rhetorical function within the context of their respective

50 In agreement with this position is, for example, John P. Meier, “Nations or Gentiles in Matthew 28:19?,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39 (1977): 94–102 at 101; Blaine Charette, *The Theme of Recompense in Matthew’s Gospel*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 79 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 157–158.

51 See the disdain, typical of “goats,” shown by the Jewish leaders to Peter and John in Acts 4:13 “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were *uneducated, common men*, they wondered; and they recognized that they had been with Jesus.”

52 Before the apostles are sent out on the world-wide mission, Jesus said that he would be “with them” (Matt. 28:20), and that is exactly what has happened.

apocalypses. They encourage the disciples (in manifold ways) before they are sent off on what will be, for some, a "suicidal" mission (10:21, 28—compare 24:9).

THE APOSTLE'S MESSAGE

Earlier in the discourse (24:14) Jesus says that the "gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations." The *nature* of the message—the good news of the kingdom—preached by the apostles and received by the sheep, is worth considering briefly.

From Matthew, we have no examples of "evangelistic proclamations" like we have in Acts 2, 3, 10, 13 (to Jews), 14, 17 (to Gentiles), and 26 (to a mixed audience). From Matthew 28:16–20, we learn that the apostles will proclaim (something) so as to make disciples for Jesus, and then teach these disciples to obey all that Jesus had taught them—evidently meaning material found throughout the gospel of Matthew. While the evangelistic proclamation would likely have been in continuity with what both John the Baptist and Jesus had earlier preached (about, for example, the advent of the Kingdom of Heaven and repentance), surely Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection would also have been part of the message. Though Matthew narrates no ascension, Jesus is presented in 28:16–20 as exalted above the nations as ruler, Lord, and effectively King—this also, we expect, would have been part of the missionaries' opening proclamation.

Some, then, would accept and receive the Kingdom proclamation and begin to learn of Jesus' teaching from the apostles, others would not. What is important to note is that, for Matthew, neither the proclamation of the good news of the Kingdom nor the teaching of the gospel to newly minted disciples would have had, as a special concern, care for the unfortunates of this world.⁵³ The message had as its primary concerns the same concerns that John the Baptist and Jesus had in their preaching: forgiveness of sin and hope of eternal life on condition of repentance towards God (which would mean turning to follow Jesus' teaching) and faith in (the now exalted) Jesus. This was the message of the apostles in the interim; this was what was received or not received.

IV. *The Meaning(s) of Matthew 25:31–46*

The Primary Meaning of 31–46

After the *exhortative* material stemming from the stories and parables about Noah, two men in the field, two women at the mill, the householder, the wise servant, the 10 virgins, and the talent-entrusted servants (24:37–25:30), in 25:31–46 *the twelve are encouraged* (as in 10:40–42) that their missionary efforts, attended as they will be with trials, sufferings, and death (10:17–23, 28, 39; 24:9), will have

53 Certainly care for the needy would have been part of Christian catechesis, given under, I would guess, the larger rubric of loving one's neighbor as oneself. As pointed out earlier in the study, however, care for the needy *per se* is not a Matthean emphasis, and barely a concern.

eternal significance, success, and final vindication. Not only will their labor not be in vain, their “living out” of the previous warnings brings supremely important results: eternal consequence for the hearers (receptors) and vindication for themselves. Jesus uses this same sort of “rhetoric of encouragement” in chapter 10 (vv. 14–15, 26, 40–42), only now, in chapters 24–25, it is expanded and filled with powerful imagery. Those who receive their message, who repent and become disciples, can expect the eternal kingdom; those who reject it will suffer eternal fire and punishment (25:41, 46). The messengers themselves will be vindicated on that Great Day—the main point of 31–46, as this would be the primary concern of the apocalyptic genre—many having paid the supreme price for their missionary efforts, even as Christ himself had. On the level of the gospel story, this encouragement was for the twelve. For Matthew’s first century readers, it should have encouraged any missionary endeavors at the time. For Matthew’s readers down through the centuries, it should likewise encourage all missionary activity.

Christological and Soteriological Coherence with the Rest of Matthew

According to Matthew, the world’s most pressing need, both in the first century and today, is not to take care of the poor. The extreme christocentricity presented in the gospel, coupled with its presentation of humanity’s desperate condition, show that for Matthew the world’s most pressing need is to believe in Jesus Christ and receive the forgiveness, life, and salvation that He alone offers and confers, and to become members of his church. As far as Matthew is concerned, Jesus is the only source of this forgiveness and new life, as mediated through the Church.

Further, Derivative Meanings

The alternative interpretation that understands “the least of these” as Christians (but not restricted to missionaries, as I have argued above), is somewhat legitimate, though derivative and secondary. According to Matthew, Jesus is present in his Church as well as in his missionaries and apostles (see Matt. 18:20). It would therefore be wise to treat them with the sort of kindness exemplified in the six works of mercy. This is not, however, Jesus’ primary point in Matthew 25:31–46.

Further, since all human beings are made in the image of God, even though marred by the Fall, and since, according to Matthew and other Scripture texts, we are commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves (and to love even our enemies), it is certainly legitimate, in some sense, to speak accurately about doing good to Jesus when we do good to any fellow human being. This, again, is not Jesus’ point in Matthew 25:31–46.

V. Conclusion

The “unfortunates” interpretation of Matthew 25:31–46 is unfortunate. It is the result of methodology that too hastily grabs at the “obvious” when, with a little

more investigation, a more coherent and satisfying solution can emerge. "What's the harm?" one might ask; "The text is being employed to help people, and that's a good thing." The harm is that, theologically and pastorally speaking, this important text is being employed *horizontally* instead of how Jesus intended, that it be understood *vertically*. For Matthew, and for the rest of the New Testament, the primacy lies with embracing the missionary message that Christ is King, Savior, and Judge and responding accordingly. This is the scene we are presented with in Matthew 25:31–46; this is the message the apostles and others have taken to the nations; this is the message that, when received, results in eternal happiness—to the glory of God *and* to the glory and vindication of his holy apostles.