

## THE "PARABLE" OF THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS: A CHALLENGE TO CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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AS HE began his panorama of the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman empire, Adolf Harnack quoted Mt 25:35-36: "I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was in prison and you came to me. . . . As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me," and wrote: "These words of Jesus have shone so brilliantly for many generations in his Church and exerted so powerful an influence that one may further describe the Christian preaching as *the preaching of love and charity*."<sup>1</sup> The portrayal of the last judgment in Mt 25:31-46, where this saying appears, is one of those "classic" texts which has inspired and challenged generations of Christians.<sup>2</sup> It has recently been called a "summary of the gospel"<sup>3</sup> and is one of the most widely cited biblical passages across confessional and even religious boundaries.<sup>4</sup>

The classic interpretation emerges directly from the text. When the Son of Man comes in his glory, he will judge all peoples. The criterion of judgment will be works of charity and mercy shown toward the marginal, the poor and the suffering of the world, the least of Jesus' brothers and sisters, who generally throughout Christian history have been equated with suffering Christians or members of one's ecclesial community.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A. Harnack, *Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* 1 (New York: Putnam; London: Williams, 1908) 146.

<sup>2</sup> David Tracy has defined a classic as "any text, event or person which unites particularity of origin and expression with a disclosure of meaning and truth available, in principle, to all human beings" ("Theological Classics in Contemporary Theology," *TD* 25 [1977] 349). A full discussion of his position can be found in *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) esp. 99-153. Here he states: "what we mean in naming certain texts, events, images, rituals, symbols and persons, 'classics' is that we recognize nothing less than the disclosure of a reality we cannot but name truth" (108). A. Sand has called this passage a *locus classicus* for Christian service to the needy (review of E. Brandenburger, *Das Recht des Welternrichters: Untersuchung zu Matthäus 25, 31-46* [Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1980], in *TR* 79 [1983] 22).

<sup>3</sup> "Le sommaire de l'évangile, c'est Matthieu 25/31 a 46" (R. Mehl, "La catholicité de l'église: Commentaire des déclarations de l'Assemblée oecuménique d'Upsal," *RHPR* 48 [1968] 369).

<sup>4</sup> P. Christian, *Jesus und seine geringsten Brüder* (Leipzig: St. Benno, 1975) 1.

<sup>5</sup> Despite the importance of this passage to theology and ethics, there is no significant history of interpretation. A study of Chrysostom, who among the Church Fathers made the most use of the passage, is offered by R. Brändle, *Matth. 25:31-46 im Werk des Johannes Chrysostomos* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1979); Protestant interpretation since the Ref-

Since the close of the 19th century, the passage has increasingly received a "universalistic" application that care must be shown to all the needy of the world and that this mandate binds all people. Such an interpretation is especially strong within contemporary Catholicism, where it has been used to summon Catholics to a concern for every needy and hungry person, or any victim of injustice or persecution. The documents of the Second Vatican Council refer to it often, most notably in the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*:

In our times a special obligation binds us to make ourselves the neighbor of absolutely every person, and of actively helping him when he comes across our path, whether he be an old person abandoned by all, a foreign laborer unjustly looked down upon, a refugee, a child born of an unlawful union and wrongly suffering for a sin he did not commit, or a hungry person who disturbs our conscience by recalling the voice of the Lord: "As long as you did it for one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it for me (Mt 25:40)."<sup>6</sup>

This passage of Matthew was quoted by Pope Paul VI at the conclusion of Vatican II and has been cited frequently by Pope John Paul II, from his first encyclical, *Redemptor hominis*, to his homily at Edmonton, Canada, when he quoted this passage to stress the solidarity of all peoples and the obligation to view *every individual* in need or the victim of injustice as the least of Jesus' brothers and sisters.<sup>7</sup>

Liberation theologians, especially in Latin America, have often turned to this passage as they attempt to engage the Church with massive poverty and social injustice. In his seminal work *The Theology of Liberation*, G. Gutiérrez often evokes this passage. He argues that the least of Jesus' brethren are *all the needy* and then underscores three main points of the passage: (a) the stress on communion and brotherhood as the ultimate meaning of life; (b) the insistence on a love which is manifest in concrete actions, with "doing" favored over simple knowing; and (c) the revelation that contact with the Lord takes place through human mediation.<sup>8</sup> Other liberation theologians cite it to counter a view of

ormation has been surveyed in W. Brandt, "Die geringsten Brüder: Aus dem Gespräch der Kirche mit Matthäus 25, 31-46," *Jahrbuch der theologischen Schule Bethel* 8 (1937) 1-28.

<sup>6</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, no. 27, cf. nos. 22, 93; *Lumen gentium* 8: ". . . the Church encompasses with love all those who are afflicted with human weakness. Indeed, she recognizes in the poor and the suffering the likeness of her poor and suffering Founder." Translation from W. M. Abbott, S.J., ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: America, 1966) 24; also *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 4 and 8.

<sup>7</sup> Paul VI, homily on Dec. 7, 1965: "We recall that the face of Christ must be acknowledged as clearly visible in the face of every person, especially if he or she is afflicted by pain or sorrow," in *Sacrosanctum oecumenicum concilium Vaticanum II: Constitutiones, decreta, declarationes* (Vatican City: Polyglot, 1974) 1075; John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis*, no. 16; homily at Edmonton, *Origins* 14 (1984-85) 246-47.

<sup>8</sup> Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973, 198.

religion which would divorce faith and praxis, to redefine "justice" in terms of acts of mercy, and to give a Christological grounding to social action.<sup>9</sup>

While the universalistic interpretation has prevailed in the teaching and preaching of the churches and mirrors a broad-based exegetical consensus, within the last two decades a flood of articles has so challenged this consensus that a recent study states that "its interpretation defies consensus" and that the best solution would be one which leaves the smallest residue of problems.<sup>10</sup> The debate centers on *who* is being judged: all peoples (Jews, Christians, pagans), all nations (excluding Jews, but including Christians), simply all gentiles (excluding both Jews and Christians), or leaders within the Christian community; and the flash point in the debate is the claim that the least of the brethren of the Son of Man are Christians—missionaries or suffering members of the community—and not simply any person in need.<sup>11</sup>

As argued forcefully by Lamar Cope, the passage does not deal with deeds of charity done to any needy person, but rather with the rewards and punishments meted out to those gentiles who accept or reject Christian missionaries.<sup>12</sup> Cope attacks the use of this passage in ethics

<sup>9</sup> See C. Bussmann, *Who Do You Say? Jesus Christ in Latin American Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985) 82–85.

<sup>10</sup> G. Gay, "The Judgement of the Gentiles in Matthew's Theology," in *Scripture, Tradition and Interpretation*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and W. Lasor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 146.

<sup>11</sup> The major studies, along with those of Brandenburger (n. 2 above) and Cope and Friedrich (nn. 12 and 16 below), are I. Broer, "Das Gericht des Menschensohnes über die Völker: Auslegung von Mt. 25:31–46," *BibLeb* 11 (1970) 273–95; D. R. Catchpole, "The Poor on Earth and the Son of Man in Heaven: A Reappraisal of Matthew xxv.31–46," *BJRL* 61 (1979) 355–97; A. Feuillet, "Le caractère universel du jugement et la charité sans frontières en Mt 25, 31–46," *NRT* 102 (1980) 179–96; D. Gewalt, "Matthäus 25,31–46 im Erwartungshorizont heutiger Exegese," *Linguistica biblica* 25–26 (1973) 9–21; G. Gross, "Die 'geringsten Brüder' Jesu in Mt 25,40 in Auseinandersetzung mit der neueren Exegese," *BibLeb* 5 (1964) 172–80; J.-C. Ingelaere, "La 'parabole' de jugement dernier (Matthieu 25,31–46)," *RHPR* 50 (1970) 23–60; J. Lambrecht, *Once More Astonished: The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 211–35; R. Maddox, "Who Are the 'Sheep' and the 'Goats'? A Study of the Purpose and Meaning of Mt. 25:31–46," *AusBR* 13 (1965) 19–28; J. Mánek, "Mit wem identifiziert sich Jesus? Eine exegetische Rekonstruktion ad Matt. 25:31–46," in *Christ and the Spirit in the New Testament: In Honor of C. F. D. Moule*, ed. B. Lindars and B. S. Smalley (Cambridge: University, 1973) 15–25; J. R. Michaels, "Apostolic Hardships and Righteous Gentiles: A Study of Matthew 25,31–46," *JBL* 84 (1965) 25–37; J. A. T. Robinson, "The 'Parable' of the Sheep and the Goats," *NTS* 2 (1955–56) 225–37; also in his *Twelve New Testament Studies* (London: SCM, 1962) 76–93; U. Wilckens, "Gottes geringste Brüder—Zu Mt. 25,31–46," in *Jesus und Paulus: Festschrift für W. G. Kümmel*, ed. E. E. Ellis and E. Grässer (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1975) 363–83; J. Winandy, "La scène du jugement dernier (Mt 25,31–46)," *Sciences ecclésiastiques* 18 (1966) 169–86.

<sup>12</sup> L. Cope, "Matthew XXV:31–46, 'The Sheep and the Goats' Reinterpreted," *NovT* 11 (1969) 32–44.

and homiletics. It cannot, he stresses, provide a legitimate basis for concern for the poor and the needy of the world. The ethic is rather a churchy, sectarian one, and for wider concerns one must turn to other parts of the New Testament.<sup>13</sup> By the mid-seventies, then, for many authors, especially in Germany and France, the classic interpretation was no longer valid.<sup>14</sup> Though the debate was less heated in the United States, William Thompson in his study of Matthew's community stated that the missionary interpretation was gaining favor and it has been adopted (with modifications) by Robert Gundry in his commentary.<sup>15</sup>

Like most debates within NT, it became the subject of a massive German doctoral dissertation by Johannes Friedrich at Tübingen in 1976, published the following year.<sup>16</sup> From a detailed analysis of tradition and redaction, as well as from a thorough study of the OT background, Friedrich argued that Matthew edited an original parable about the final judgment in which God as king would judge people on the basis of their treatment of the poor. In this universalistic form the parable goes back to the historical Jesus. Matthew's redaction comprises principally the introduction of the Son of Man on his glorious throne (25:31-32a) and hence the identification of the king with the Son of Man, the introduction of *panta ta ethnē* (v. 32) which links the parable with the command to evangelize all the nations in 28:19, and the identification of those in need as the "brethren" of Jesus (v. 40).<sup>17</sup> This position, adopted also by Jan Lambrecht, enables both the classic and the missionary interpretation to be true; Jesus articulates the classic position which Matthew adapts to the missionary needs of the community.<sup>18</sup>

Independent of the hermeneutical problems which such a position raises by confronting interpreters with a choice between the meaning offered by the text or a reconstructed meaning behind the text (i.e., the meaning intended by Jesus) it did not carry the day. Commentators who wrote after the debate continued to maintain that the text as we have it

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 43-44.

<sup>14</sup> N. 11 above, esp. the studies by Broer, Haufe, Ingelaere, Michaels, and Winandy.

<sup>15</sup> W. G. Thompson, "A Historical Perspective in the Gospel of Matthew," *JBL* 93 (1974) 243-62; see also W. G. Thompson and E. A. LaVerdiere, "New Testament Communities in Transition: A Study of Matthew and Luke," in *Why the Church?*, ed. W. J. Burghardt and W. G. Thompson (New York: Paulist, 1977) 36-38 (reprinted from *TS* 37 [1976] 567-97); R. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 511-16. Gundry argues that those judged are all humanity and that the norm of judgment will be the treatment of Christian missionaries.

<sup>16</sup> *Gott im Bruder? Eine methodenkritische Untersuchung von Redaktion, Überlieferung und Traditionen in MT 25,31-46* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1977).

<sup>17</sup> Esp. 298-307 for a summary of his detailed analysis.

<sup>18</sup> *Once More Astonished*, esp. 219-26; also in his "The Parousia Discourse: Composition and Content in Mt. XXIV-XXV," in *L'Évangile selon Matthieu: Rédaction et théologie*, ed. M. Didier (Gembloux: Duculot, 1972) 309-42.

in Matthew is a warning that all peoples will be judged on acts of charity shown to those most in need.<sup>19</sup> A fresh approach to the problem was proposed by Egon Brandenburger, who reversed the distinction between tradition and redaction proposed by Friedrich and Lambrecht and argued that Matthew takes over an original passage about the judgment which the returning Son of Man will exercise and adds to it the short comparison of the king dividing humanity as a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats (25:32-33).<sup>20</sup> In its pre-Matthean form the passage grew out of the mission theology of early Jewish Christianity, and Matthew makes it into an apocalyptic scene of the judgment of the whole world by Jesus the royal Messiah.<sup>21</sup>

This passage offers a parade example of the problems in relating social ethics to exegesis. If the classic interpretation is not really what Matthew intended, then, at least within Roman Catholic theology, an interesting tension arises in the application of magisterial teaching. The same council which affirmed that the interpreter through literary and historical criticism must seek "what the author really intended" may be using a text in a sense not intended by the author.<sup>22</sup> The use of the text by recent popes may be in tension with the hermeneutical rules outlined by Pius XII in *Divino afflante Spiritu*.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (8th ed; New York: Scribners, 1972) 206-14. Jeremias treats it under the theme of "realized discipleship" and relates it to the ethics of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-7). Also J. Meier, *Matthew* (Wilmington, Del.: Glazier, 1980) 301-6: "The stunning universalism of this revelation [that Jesus has identified with the poor and the outcast] must not be blunted by restricting the 'least of my brethren' to Christians, to poor or insignificant Christians or to Christian missionaries" (304); *The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church and Morality in the First Gospel* (New York: Paulist, 1978) 177-78; P. Perkins, *Hearing the Parables of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1981) 158-65; E. Schweizer, *The Good News according to Matthew* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975) 480-84.

<sup>20</sup> *Das Recht des Weltenrichters* (n. 2 above).

<sup>21</sup> While I will not follow Brandenburger in every respect, his study offers a fresh approach, especially in his attention to the "royal" dimension of the passage and his discussion of the relation of justice and mercy in Matthew.

<sup>22</sup> See *Dei verbum*, no. 12, for the hermeneutical guidelines proposed by the Council. Commentators on the Council documents have often noted a tension between the actual use of Scripture in the documents and the principles for use enunciated in the Decree on Revelation; see R. E. Brown, *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* (New York: Paulist, 1981) 68-69 (Brown cites comments by G. Lindbeck and O. Cullmann).

<sup>23</sup> In this landmark encyclical, issued Sept. 30, 1943, which encouraged the use of the historical-critical method and provided the basis of *Dei verbum*, Pius XII stated that interpreters should "bear in mind that their foremost and greatest endeavor should be to discern and define clearly that sense of the biblical words which is called literal" and should use all methods of scholarship "so that the mind of the author may be made abundantly clear" (par. 23; tr. from *Official Catholic Teachings: Bible Interpretation*, ed. J. J. McGivern [Wilmington, N.C.: McGrath, 1978] 327). While both Pius XII and Vatican II stress that the "literal" (or, better, literary) sense should be normative for interpretation, both stress that in Scripture God speaks to men and women and that the meaning of Scripture is

For all interpreters of this passage there is the danger of "modernizing" Matthew.<sup>24</sup> While the "classic" interpretation of this passage has always stressed that Jesus is present in needy or suffering people, for the majority of Church history these needy or suffering have been identified as Christians. Into the new wineskins of much contemporary interpretation has been poured the old wine of the 19th-century liberal creed of the Fatherhood of God and of universal brotherhood. If for the majority of Church history the text was *not* used as a mandate for university charity (i.e., all people, Christian or otherwise) what are the criteria for evaluating an interpretation which may not have a solid basis either in the historical meaning of a passage or in its interpretation by the tradition of the Church? If the passage is a "summary of the gospel," is there not also a danger of reducing the Good News to ethics, and an ethics which has minimal contacts with other dimensions of NT soteriology and Christology? (What ever happened to justification by grace through faith or the word of the cross?) On the other hand, if biblical scholarship has become so detailed and divided that people concerned either with ethics or with homiletics are always presented with a welter of conflicting interpretations, then it may not be Matthew's community which has become a sectarian conventicle but biblical scholarship itself.

While it would be exciting at this point to claim that new methods or new insights tilt the balance in favor of one of the two major interpretations, my aim will be more modest. My claim is that preoccupation with the questions of who comprise the "nations" (i.e., who are judged) as well as who are the "least of the brethren" (i.e., to whom mercy and charity must be shown) has not only reached an impasse but overshadows richer dimensions of the passage. I will examine aspects of the genre, the literary context and structure, and points of contact between the passage and other aspects of Matthew's theology. My hope is not only to throw some light on the disputed questions but to explore ways in which the passage may continue to challenge contemporary ethics and church life.<sup>25</sup>

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unfolded in the life and teaching of the Church under the guidance of the Spirit. Since Vatican II, the hermeneutical problem has become acute for Catholic theology, either in the form of dealing with the tension between the meaning of biblical texts in their historical and literary context and subsequent understandings, or in the challenge to work out principles of interpretation proper to the "pneumatic" meaning of Scripture. For an excellent survey of trends in interpretation since Vatican II, see S. Schneiders, "From Exegesis to Hermeneutics: The Problem of the Contemporary Meaning of Scripture," *Horizons* 8 (1981) 23-39.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. H. J. Cadbury, *The Peril of Modernizing Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1937).

<sup>25</sup> When I speak of "Matthew," I use it as a personification of the text, not in explicit reference to the author or final editor of the Gospel. My concern will be less with the relation of tradition and redaction than with the text in its final form. This text also confronts the interpreter with the issue of the androcentric language of the NT. The

## THE QUESTION OF GENRE

Since it contains allegorical elements and takes place in the heavenly sphere, commentators have been reluctant to call this scene a parable and have limited the term to the brief comparison of the king with the shepherd (v. 32).<sup>26</sup> There are, however, good grounds for calling it a parable. Though modern interpreters since A. Jülicher have operated out of a narrow understanding of parable as a realistic story with one single point of application, the Greek term *parabolē* translates the Hebrew *māšāl*, which is used for a wide variety of literary forms such as proverbs (1 Sam 10:12; Prov 1:1,6), riddles (Judg 14:10–14, allegories (Isa 5:1–7; Ezek 17:2–24), and revelatory discourses (1 Enoch 37–71).<sup>27</sup> In Matthew the distinction between parable and allegory is not rigid—he calls the Wedding Feast (Mt 22:1–14) a parable when it is clearly allegorical.<sup>28</sup> Also, those texts which are most like Mt 25:31–46 in both form and content are the *m<sup>a</sup>shālīm* or “parables” of 1 Enoch which give vivid

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masculine plural of the Greek *adelphos* can mean “brothers and sisters” and can be used for both male and female members of a religious group. On the various usage of *adelphos*, see W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, tr. W. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich (2nd rev. ed. by F. Danker; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979) 15–16, and E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 44–45. Schüssler Fiorenza makes a strong case that in using the masculine gender grammatically, e.g., “brethren” (*adelphoi*) or “saints” (*hagioi*), the NT writers were obviously referring to communities composed of men and women, and that these terms should be interpreted and translated in a sex-inclusive sense. The issue is further complicated since the genitive plural *adelphōn*, as in *hoi elachistoi tōn adelphōn* (Mt 25:40), is the same form in the masculine and feminine, so that the text could be translated “as often as you did it to the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.” Given Matthew’s close relation of “disciple” to those brothers and sisters of Jesus who do the will of God (12:49–50), this may well be the proper translation of Mt 25:40. However, since much of the debate centers on precisely who are meant by the *adelphoi*, prior to further analysis of the passage both translations, “least of my brethren” and “least of my brothers and sisters,” presuppose a certain interpretation. Since (unless otherwise noted) I am following the RSV, when referring to Matthew I will use its translation of *adelphoi* as “brethren” with the understanding that the interpretation ultimately proposed may challenge this translation.

<sup>26</sup> In his extensive survey and bibliography of parable research (*The Parables of Jesus: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography* [Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1979]), W. Kissinger contains no section on Mt 25:31–46.

<sup>27</sup> A. Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976; 2 vols. in 1, first published in 1888, 1899). For excellent exposition of Jülicher’s position along with surveys of subsequent research, see G. V. Jones, *The Art and Truth of the Parables* (London: SPCK, 1964) 1–40, and N. Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976). For understandings of *māšāl*, see T. Polk, “Parables, Paradigms and *Mesalim*: On Reading the *Masal* in Scripture,” *CBQ* 45 (1983) 564–83; R. A. Stewart, “The Parable Form in the Old Testament and Rabbinic Literature,” *EvQ* 36 (1974) 133–47.

<sup>28</sup> M. D. Goulder, “Characteristics of the Parables in the Several Gospels,” *JTS* 19 (1968) 51–69.

pictures of the judgment at the end of history.<sup>29</sup> Bultmann therefore called this passage an "apocalyptic prediction."<sup>30</sup> More accurately, it should be called an "apocalyptic parable" and, while it may function as a parable in its realism and engaging quality, it should be interpreted from the horizon of apocalyptic.

Characteristic of apocalyptic are scenes of eschatological judgment, the reversal of earthly status, and descriptions of the fates of evildoers and the just.<sup>31</sup> Within the NT, Matthew has a preponderance of predictions and vivid descriptions of judgment.<sup>32</sup> He also takes over all the Marcan and Q future Son of Man sayings, enhances them with apocalyptic motifs, and adds sayings with a distinct apocalyptic cast (13:41-42; 19:28a; 25:31).<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Esp. 1 *Enoch* 37-71, the "similitudes" of Enoch (chaps. 38-44, 45-57, 58-69). Though the dating of these similitudes is problematic, the references to the "throne of glory" (Mt 19:28; 25:31; cf. 1 *Enoch* 45:3; 47:3; 51:3; 55:4, 60:2; 61:8; 62:2-3; 62:5 [Son of Man sitting on throne of glory], and esp. 69:27-29), to the Son of Man presiding over or executing the judgment of sinners (Mt 13:41-43; 19:28; 25:31; cf. 1 *Enoch* 46:2-4; 62:5-16; 63:11-12), and to exclusion of sinners from the presence of the Son of Man (Mt 25:41, 46; cf. 1 *Enoch* 63:11) are evidence for some contact between Matthew and Enoch—if not between the final edition of each, at least in similar traditions available to the editors of both works. Since the similitudes of Enoch were not found at Qumran, some, notably J. Milik, who dates them around A.D. 270 (*The Books of Enoch: Aramaic Fragments of Qumran Cave 4* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1976] 89-107, 298-317), have argued for a post-Christian origin and late dating. Milik's position has not been generally accepted; see J. Fitzmyer, "Implications of the New Enoch Literature from Qumran," *TS* 38 (1977) 332-45; J. C. Greenfield and M. E. Stone, "The Enochic Pentateuch and the Date of the Similitudes," *HTR* 70 (1977) 51-65; M. Knibb, "The Date of the Parables of Enoch: A Critical Review," *NTS* 25 (1978-79) 345-59. G. Nicklesburg, (*Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981]), describes the problem of dating as "notoriously difficult" and says that at least the traditions collected in 1 *Enoch* 37-71 were known at the turn of the era (pp. 221-22). If so, they might have influenced Matthew. For possible contacts with Matthew, see D. Suter, *Tradition and Composition in the Parables of Enoch* (Missoula: Scholars, 1979) 23-31.

<sup>30</sup> *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963) 123.

<sup>31</sup> These are but a few of the characteristics of apocalyptic, which is somewhat of a plastic genre. On its characteristics see J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1984) 1-32. At 145 Collins says of the similitudes, "the macro genre is clearly apocalypse." Also L. Hartmann, "Survey of the Problem of Apocalyptic Genre," in D. Hellholm, ed., *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East: Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Apocalypticism, Uppsala, August 12-17, 1979* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1983) 329-43; K. Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic* (Naperville: Allenson, 1972) esp. 18-35.

<sup>32</sup> D. Marguerat, *Le jugement dans l'évangile de Matthieu* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1981). Marguerat notes that of 148 pericopes in Matthew, 60 touch on the motif of judgment, while the statistics for Mark and Luke are respectively 10 out of 92 and 28 out of 146 (p. 13).

<sup>33</sup> The status of 19:28 is disputed. The verse reads: "I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on the twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." While its second part, "you who . . .



Like other apocalyptic literature, Matthew offers no unified scenario for the final judgment, but rather multiple images. In 13:41, 49 the angels effect the separation of the good and the bad; in 16:27 and 25:31 they passively witness the judgment; in 24:31 they gather the elect from the four corners of the earth. The picture of who will judge is also diverse. In 19:28 the Twelve will sit on the twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel; in 25:31 the Son of Man alone will judge. Equally problematic is who will be judged. In the interpretation of the parable of the Wheat and the Tares the angels will gather out of the kingdom "all causes of sin and evildoers" (13:41), who by implication are members of the community; in the interpretation of the Net the angels will separate simply the "evil from the righteous" (13:49); in 16:27 every person will be judged; in 19:28 the tribes of Israel, and in 24:30 all the tribes of the earth. The language is powerfully evocative rather than literally descriptive, so that any attempt to define precisely who is meant by different groups in the parable of the Sheep and Goats, as well as in other places (such as the interpretation of the Weeds and the Wheat or the Net), may exact more than the genre permits.

#### THE LITERARY CONTEXT

The immediate literary context of the Sheep and the Goats is as a solemn conclusion to the final of Matthew's five great discourses, the "apocalyptic testament," which begins after Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple and the question of the disciples in 24:3: "What will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?"<sup>34</sup> Though Matthew follows Mark closely in the wording of the discourse, he alters its thrust away from the events surrounding the destruction of the temple to a fully developed instruction on the coming of Jesus and the end of the age. He does this in two principal ways.

First, Matthew makes significant alterations and additions within the discourse itself. In 24:3 he alters the question of the disciples, "Tell us, when will this be and what will be the sign when these things are all to be accomplished?" (Mk 13:4), which in Mark deals with the destruction of the temple (13:2-3), to "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be

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tribes of Israel," has a parallel in Luke (22:30) and thus may derive from Q, the first part is only in Matthew and shows distinct apocalyptic features. Matthew also adds 10:23, a future saying, but without distinct apocalyptic features; see H. E. Tödt, *The Son of Man in the Synoptic Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965) 67-94.

<sup>34</sup> On the importance of this discourse to both the structure and theology of Matthew, see S. Brown, "The Matthean Apocalypse," *JSNT* 4 (1979) 2-27; F. Burnett, *The Testament of Jesus-Sophia: A Redaction-Critical Study of the Eschatological Discourse in Matthew* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981); Lambrecht, "Parousia Discourse." I follow Burnett in calling the discourse a "testament" and am indebted to his careful study of the content and context of the discourse.

*the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?*" (Mt 24:3). Clearly in Matthew the discourse is more oriented to the final coming of Jesus and the end of history than to the destruction of the temple. Later in the discourse Jesus will say that after the time of tribulation "will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn" (24:30). At this point the first part of the question of the disciples in 24:3 has been answered: the end will come with the sign of the Son of Man after the period of suffering. However, 24:30 says nothing about the close of the age, and so the second part of the question is held in suspense. Matthew alone speaks of the "close of the age" (*synteleia tou aiōnos*, Mt 13:39, 40, 49; 24:3; 28:20), describes it as a time when the "angels will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers" (13:41), and says that it will come when the proclamation of the gospel is complete (28:20). Only in the final section of the apocalyptic discourse, the parable of the Sheep and the Goats, does Matthew describe the separation of the good from the evil and imply that the time for response to the gospel is past. The question of the disciples with which the discourse begins is therefore not answered until 25:31-46, and Matthew wants all the material in chapters 24-25 to be read as instruction on proper conduct prior to the final coming.

Second, Matthew expands dramatically Mark's short ending of the discourse (Mk 13:30-37) by the addition of material from Q or from his special source, and creates, in effect, a whole secondary discourse on the ethics of discipleship in light of the disclosures of the end time.<sup>35</sup> The three parables which precede the Sheep and the Goats (the Wise and Faithful Servant, 24:45-51; the Ten Maidens, 25:1-13; the Talents, 25:14-30) all deal with proper discipleship and all threaten exclusion from the presence of the returning Lord and other punishments to those who do not face the crisis which the return of the Lord will bring, fates similar to those suffered by those on the left (the goats) in 25:41, 46.<sup>36</sup>

Attention to the immediate context of the Sheep and the Goats is strong evidence against those who, like Cope or Jeremias, would exclude the disciples from those judged. In Cope's view, the disciples are not among the nations who are judged but are encouraged by the punishment of the gentiles who reject their mission.<sup>37</sup> Jeremias holds that the Sheep and the Goats presents Matthew's understanding of the salvation of those gentiles who have not heard the message of the gospel. While "the company of disciples" will be judged on the basis of open confession of Jesus (Mt 10:32), on obedience (7:21), on readiness to forgive (6:14-15),

<sup>35</sup> Meier, *Vision* 173-78.

<sup>36</sup> 24:51: "He will punish them and put them with the hypocrites"; 25:12: "Truly I say to you, I did not know you"; 25:30: "Cast the servant into the outer darkness."

<sup>37</sup> Cope, "Matthew XXV" 42-44.

on merciful love (5:7), and on faithful endurance (24:13–14), the gentiles will be justified by works of charity done toward the needy neighbor.<sup>38</sup> In opposition to the position articulated by Cope, Brandenburger has noted that the latter part of the apocalyptic discourse (after 24:37) comprises a *Gerichtsparänese* (instruction on judgment) and it is unlikely that Matthew would conclude with a parable where the disciples were being consoled over their fidelity (*Trostrede*) and by the punishment of those who reject them.<sup>39</sup> Jeremias' view is difficult to reconcile with Matthew's own perspective (which I will discuss in more detail) that the end will come only *after* the gospel has been proclaimed to all nations (28:20). Matthew does not really envision the need for two standards of judgment. The literary context is thus strong evidence that the disciples are to see themselves involved in the drama of the final judgment.

*Matthew 28:16–20: The Great Commission*

The parable of the Sheep and the Goats not only concludes the apocalyptic testament; it has literary contacts with other parts of Matthew. Of prime significance is the relation to the Great Commission of Mt 28:16–20. Here the historical career of Jesus concludes. In language reminiscent of the Son of Man of Dan 7:13–14, who receives "dominion, glory, and a kingdom," and whom the nations worship, Jesus, who was humiliated in his cross, now possesses all power and authority.<sup>40</sup> He then commissions his disciples to "make disciples of all nations," baptizing them and teaching them to observe "all that I have commanded you." Then, just as he was Emmanuel (God with us) during his historical life (Mt 1:23), Jesus promises to "be with" the disciples until the "close of the age" (*synteleia tou aiōnos*). Matthew has no ascension narrative; for him, the risen Jesus is present in the disciples as they go forth in mission to the nations.

Though this pericope itself is an exegetical battleground with consensus here also rare, it contributes to an understanding of the Sheep and the Goats. First, it provides an arch between the ending of the historical career of Jesus and the ending of history itself. If the Sheep and the Goats is a portrait of the close of the age, the Great Commission is a mandate for church life prior to that close. The Church is to be a community in mission which is to prepare for the coming of Jesus. The disciples are to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

<sup>38</sup> Jeremias, *Parables* 209–10.

<sup>39</sup> *Das Recht* 100.

<sup>40</sup> See J. Lange, *Das Erscheinen des Auferstandenen im Evangelium nach Matthäus: Eine traditions- und redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu Mt 28, 16–20* (Würzburg: Echter, 1973) 212–27; P. Perkins, *Resurrection: New Testament Witness and Contemporary Reflection* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984) 133.

and to teach the gospel of the kingdom as this was disclosed in the life and teaching of Jesus.

In the salvation-history perspective of this pericope, the end will come only *after* the gospel has been proclaimed to all the nations.<sup>41</sup> The assembly of all the nations at the beginning of the Sheep and the Goats as well as the presence of Jesus in the least looks to the end of history promised in 28:16–20. In Matthew's perspective all the nations will have heard the call to be disciples and will have been confronted with what Jesus did and taught as this is embodied in the life of the missionary disciples. The question of the salvation of those who have never heard the gospel, which arises later in church history and continues to concern contemporary theology, is not in the purview of Matthew's presentation of salvation history.

### *Mission to the Gentiles or the Nations?*

Study of the relation of the Sheep and the Goats to the Great Commission and to other eschatological passages sheds light on one of the major problems of the pericope, the translation of *panta ta ethnē*.<sup>42</sup> When translated simply as "all the gentiles," it provides the basis for Jeremias' position, that the passage deals with the "justification of the heathen," and that of Cope, that it represents a sectarian view that the gentiles will be punished for their rejection of Christian missionaries. Christians themselves are thus excluded from the judgment.

While it is true that in Matthew as in the NT generally, *ethnos* generally means "gentile" in contrast to Jews, in certain important places the phrase *panta ta ethnē* must embrace all peoples. In addition to Mt 28:16–20, both Luke (24:44–49) and the Marcan appendix (16:9–20) narrate a missionary charge of the risen Jesus.<sup>43</sup> In Lk 24:47 Jesus tells his disciples that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached

<sup>41</sup> Gundry, *Matthew* 513–14.

<sup>42</sup> The debate has taken place in respect to Mt 28:19, but it is also relevant to the use of the phrase in 25:31; see D. Hare and D. Harrington, "Make Disciples of All the Gentiles," *CBQ* 37 (1975) 359–69 (*ethnos* means "gentile" to the exclusion of the Jews), and J. Meier, "Gentiles or Nations in Matt. 28:19?" *CBQ* 39 (1977) 94–102 (term includes all peoples—gentiles, Christians, Jews).

<sup>43</sup> Since these verses (often called the "canonical ending of Mark," see DBS 1501) are not found in the best ancient manuscripts, and since Matthew and Luke did not have them in the version of Mark they used, there is a strong consensus that they do not represent the original ending of Mark, but rather an attempt to soften the abrupt ending of Mk 16:8, "for they were afraid." Nonetheless, they may contain motifs from early Christian resurrection traditions; see R. Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium* (Freiburg: Herder, 1976–77) 1.40–47; 2.544–59.

in his name "to all nations" (*eis panta ta ethnē*).<sup>44</sup> Since in the Acts of the Apostles the preaching of the apostolic Church is directed first to Jews and then spreads centrifugally to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:4–8; 13:47), Luke clearly does not limit *ethnos* to "gentile." The Marcan appendix, which may be based on a tradition shared by Matthew and Luke, commands the disciples to go into the whole world (*kosmon hapanta*) and to proclaim the gospel to the whole creation (*pasē tē ktisē*, 16:15). Paul, at the conclusion of a missionary career which embraced both Jew and gentile, describes his apostleship as bringing about the obedience of faith "among all the nations" (*en pasin tois ethnesin*, Rom 1:5). The use of the phrase in Mt 28:19 (where the universal mission is mandated) and in 25:32 (when it is concluded) reflects a broad-based early Christian tradition that the risen Jesus had commissioned his first followers to spread his message to all peoples.

In a number of other places Matthew clearly envisions the universality both of the mission and of the judgment.<sup>45</sup> In the interpretation of the parable of the Wheat and the Tares, Jesus says that the field where the Son of Man sows the good seed is the world (13:38), and just as the field was divided between weeds and wheat, so too at the harvest the world will be divided between the unjust (*all* causes of sin and *all* evildoers) and the righteous. He implies the universality of judgment in 16:27, when he says that the Son of Man will repay "everyone" according to his or her deeds (*kata tēn praxin*). In 24:9–14, where he edits the persecution logion of Mk 13:9–13, Matthew first adds to Mark's "hatred by all" the word *ethnesin* (nations; 24:9), and then adds a redactional sentence (v. 14) which presents his understanding of the role of persecution: "and this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world (*oikoumenē* in the sense of the inhabited world or humankind), as a testimony to all the nations" (*pasin tois ethnesin*). "All the nations" is clearly synonymous with the inhabited world. In 24:30 the appearance of the sign of the Son of Man will be the occasion for all the tribes of the earth (*pasai hai phylae tēs gēs*) to mourn.<sup>46</sup> Therefore in the mission

<sup>44</sup> J. Fitzmyer (*The Gospel according to Luke X-XXIV* [Garden City: Doubleday, 1985] 1578–81) translates the *panta ta ethnē* as "all the nations" and relates the charge to Luke's concept of the universal mission. He also states that Luke inherits a tradition about the final commission from L (Luke's special source) which was known to Matthew and the Marcan appendix.

<sup>45</sup> Marguerat, *Le jugement* 490.

<sup>46</sup> N. Dahl, "Nations in the New Testament," in *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World: Essays in Honour of Harry Sawyerr*, ed. M. E. Glasswell and E. W. Fasholé-Luke (London: SPCK, 1974) 54–68. Dahl (66) notes that Revelation uses a number of terms almost synonymously: *phylē*, *glossa*, *laos*, and *ethnos*. So, too, does Matthew, especially in apocalyptic contexts.

section of the apocalyptic discourse and in his final commission Matthew envisions the spread of the gospel to the whole inhabited world. "All the nations" in Matthew is not a term for religious or ethnic division (pagan vs. Jew, or pagan vs. Christian). It stems from the missionary vocabulary of the early Church to describe the universal scope of its mission. Since it is used in this sense in the Great Commission and in other mission commands, it necessarily has this sense in 25:32 to describe that stage when the mission is complete.

#### THE THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

##### *Christology in Matthew 25:31-46*

Examination of Mt 25:31-46 as a "parable" which is to be interpreted from the horizon of apocalyptic and of its contacts with other places in the Gospel reveals a scene when the mission to all the peoples of the world is complete and the parousia of the Son of Man is at hand. However, the dominant use of this pericope for Christian ethics as well as the disputed questions of who is judged and who are the least have overshadowed its Christological importance. If the passage is to continue to be a vital source for *Christian* ethics, examination of the Christology is essential.

##### *The Son of Man Enthroned in Glory*

The parable describes the arrival of the Son of Man enthroned in glory, who is also a king, the shepherd of his people who addresses the just as "blessed of *my Father*," and who is called *kyrios* by those he will judge. Matthew thus offers a tableau of major Christological themes which have resonated throughout the Gospel.<sup>47</sup> Jesus is the Son of David (1:1), the royal Messiah, who was proclaimed King at his birth and whom gentile wise men came to worship (2:1-12); yet he is the *basileus praus* (the humble King, 21:5; cf. Zech 9:9) who dies on a cross.<sup>48</sup> He is also the Son of God who has his origin in God (1:20), is proclaimed as such at his baptism (3:17), and who proves himself in confrontation with evil to be the faithful son (4:1-11). He speaks of God as his Father and is

<sup>47</sup> On Matthew's Christology see esp. J. Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 40-127, and *Jesus Christ in Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 61-93; J. Suggs, *Wisdom, Christology and Law in Matthew's Gospel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1970).

<sup>48</sup> Though the "wise men" (*magoi*) of Mt 2:1 are not explicitly called gentiles, their description as *apo anatolōn* suggests this. R. Brown says they represent the gentiles (*Birth of the Messiah* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977] 178). Their arrival also provides a structural parallel to the Great Commission, when the disciples will go forth to all nations. The importance of Jesus as the *basileus praus* has been stressed by G. Barth in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 125-37.

the Son to whom the Father has delivered all things and who reveals the Father to others, especially "to babes" (11:25-27).<sup>49</sup> Though Matthew offers a rich Christological tableau which stresses the majesty of Jesus, the exalted Son of Man is also the hidden and suffering Son of Man who gave his life for others and who was rejected by his people.<sup>50</sup>

The structure of the parable of the Sheep and the Goats underscores its Christology. The introduction (vv. 31-33) and the conclusion (v. 46) provide a short narrative frame for the central dialog (vv. 34-45) between the King and those judged. The arrival of the Son of Man, the assembly of the nations, and their separation occur rapidly (vv. 31-33). The dialog with those on the right and on the left is constructed in two parallel and similar columns. The King addresses a group as either blessed or cursed and announces their fates (enter into the kingdom or depart from me). In a series of rhythmic statements highlighted by the verb in the first person, "I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger, I was naked, I was sick, I was in prison," the King recounts the deeds of mercy which were done or neglected. The suspense arises from the three questions of the blessed, "When did we see you?" which unfold with an equal rhythm. This first column then concludes with the answer, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (v. 40).

The second column unfolds initially as an exact parallel to the first but with a negative before each act of mercy. However, the response of those on the left is condensed to a sentence, "When did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger, naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?"<sup>51</sup> Since both groups know what works of charity are demanded, the surprise comes in the answer of the King that he was identified with the least who were aided or neglected by those assembled. The primary thrust of the text is the disclosure of the King/Son of Man as hidden in the least, rather than an exhortation to the specific works of charity or even the identification of the least.

<sup>49</sup> Burnett (*Testament* 49-130) has studied this passage in relation to Mt 23:34, 37-39 and argued that in the Apocalyptic Testament Matthew portrays Jesus as wisdom rejected by her children.

<sup>50</sup> Matthew takes over completely the Marcan stress on Jesus as the suffering Son of Man. Matthew's method is very much one of "inclusive reinterpretation." Traditions are "remolded" or refashioned in view of new insights. Matthew's method has been well described by J. Meier, *Vision* 26-33, and *Antioch and Rome* (New York: Paulist, 1982) 59-62.

<sup>51</sup> The verb "minister" (*diakonēsamen*) is cited by those who feel that the parable is a warning against Christian leaders who, like the false shepherds of Ezekiel 34, neglect the suffering members of the community; see Maddox, "Who Are the 'Sheep'?" Lambrecht argues that the omission of the phrase "of my brethren" (v. 40) in the reply of the King to those on the left in v. 45 is evidence for the universalistic thrust of the earlier version of the parable and that Matthew has added "brethren" to direct the parable to his community (*Once More Astonished* 223-26).

The presence of the King/Son of Man who was hidden in the suffering community, yet is the exalted judge of evildoers, represents an integration of major motifs from Matthew's heritage. Matthew integrates a Christology of Jesus as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah (esp. 52:13—53:12) as well as the Suffering Just One of Wis 2:12–24 and 5:1–23.<sup>52</sup> In the baptism, the Passion predictions, and the account of the Passion, Matthew appropriates the Servant Christology but develops it in a manner which is unique to his theology.

In 12:17–21 Matthew has the longest "fulfilment quotation" in his Gospel, a citation of the first Servant Song of Isa 42:1–4.<sup>53</sup> This citation comes at a significant place in the structure of the Gospel. After the missionary discourse to the disciples (chap. 10), Matthew portrays Jesus as the "ideal missionary," preaching, teaching, and healing throughout Galilee (chaps. 11–12). The "fulfilment quotation" interprets this as an instance of the Servant who "will proclaim justice to the gentiles" (or nations) and who "will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick till he brings justice to victory, and in his name will the gentiles hope" (12:20–21). In one sense the application of this passage to Jesus is *inappropriate*, since in chapters 10–13 Jesus has not worked among the gentiles but in Galilee, and earlier had charged his disciples "Go nowhere among the gentiles" (10:5). Why, then, does Matthew cite here a text which stresses that the justice will be proclaimed to the gentiles and that the gentiles will hope in the name of the Servant? The answer seems to be that Jesus anticipates that mission which the Church will undertake. In the final commission (28:19–20), when the disciples are "sent forth" to all nations, Jesus promises to "be with" them. He is to be with them as the Servant who will proclaim justice to the nations in the form of the proclamation of the kingdom and its enactment through works of healing and mercy, as well as through the suffering and rejection they will meet in their mission (Mt 10:17–18). As I will attempt to show

<sup>52</sup> The influence of the Servant Songs, esp. Isa 42:1–4 and 52:13—53:12, is widespread in early Christianity, particularly as a "Passion apologetic" and in traditions adopted by the Synoptic Evangelists (e.g., the baptism of Jesus, Mk 1:9–11=Mt 3:13–17=Lk 3:21–22 [cf. Isa 42:1]; the Passion predictions [at least in their early forms; cf. Mk 8:31–32; 9:31–32; 10:33–34, and parallels]; the saying on the ransom for many (Mk 10:45=Mt 20:28; cf. Mk 14:24=Mt 26:28). See B. Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic* (London: SCM, 1961) 75–89; J. Jeremias and W. Zimmerli, *The Servant of God* (London: SCM, 1965). 88–99. For the influence of the "Suffering Just One," which itself is influenced by Servant Songs, see L. Ruppert, *Jesus als der leidende Gerechte? Der Weg Jesu im Lichte eines alt- und zwischentestamentlichen Motivs* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1972).

<sup>53</sup> The eleven "fulfilment quotations" which are distinctive in Matthew (1:22–23; 2:15, 17–18, 23; 4:14–16; 8:17; 12:17–21; 13:14–15, 35; 21:4–5; 27:9–10), not only illustrate their narrative context but highlight significant themes of the whole Gospel. For full discussion see Brown, *Birth of the Messiah* 96–104.



in more detail later, this is the precise picture of church life which stamps the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. The community is to be a community in mission which proclaims justice to the nations in the midst of suffering and persecution. The Son of Man hidden in the least of the brethren is also the Servant who will bring God's justice to victory and in whom the nations can hope.

While the Servant Christology with its attendant stress on the suffering of Jesus offered Matthew the basis for a theology in which Jesus is to be hidden in the suffering members of the community, the Son of Man Christology, especially in those sayings which Matthew took over from Q and others which are found in his Gospel alone, stamps his Gospel with a picture of Jesus as the exalted one who will punish sinners and vindicate the suffering.<sup>64</sup> In 13:41 (where the Son of Man sends out angels who will gather evildoers for punishment) and 25:31-46 (where the Son of Man will separate the just from those to be punished) Matthew presents a picture of the exalted Son of Man with a strong apocalyptic cast. In apocalyptic texts such as Daniel, *1 Enoch*, and Revelation such visions of the end time serve to encourage suffering people with the assurance that the fates of the just and evil are already determined and will be revealed at the appropriate time. Throughout the final discourse Jesus has pointed to the return of the Son of Man as one who will vindicate the faithful community. The final passage of the discourse simply presents a culmination of these motifs.

The stress on the disclosure of the hidden Son of Man has contacts with another important focus of Matthew's Christology and has implications for discipleship. Even more than in Mark, the Matthean Jesus is a figure of power, who is called Messiah (1:1, 16) and "God with us" (1:23) before his birth and whom people address as Lord (*kyrios*) and worship during his lifetime.<sup>65</sup> In Matthew Jesus can appeal to his Father, who will send more than twelve legions of angels (26:53), and at his death "the saints who had fallen asleep were raised" (27:52). The risen Jesus to whom "all authority in heaven and earth has been given" promises to "be with" his community to the close of the age (28:16-20).

Such a theology, which affirms an engagement with the power and presence of the risen Lord, caused problems in the early Church. At Corinth Paul was engaged in conflict with "superapostles" who prided

<sup>64</sup> The Matthean Q sayings which deal with the future are 24:27, 37, 39, 44, along with 10:23 and 19:28 (which are only in Matthew, but considered to be Q). The special Matthean future Son of Man sayings are 13:41; 16:28 (alteration of Mk 9:1); 24:30a; 25:31.

<sup>65</sup> For use of *kyrios*, see esp. 8:2-8, 21, 25; 9:28; 14:28, 30; 15:22, 25; 17:4, 15; 18:21; for worship (*proskyneō*, 2:2, 11; 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 20:20; 28:9, 17 (of risen Lord). Mark uses *proskyneō* positively of people's approach to Jesus only once (5:6; cf. 15:19), while Luke uses it of Jesus only in a postresurrectional setting (24:52).

themselves on their extraordinary visions and revelations along with the ability to perform miracles.<sup>56</sup> At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount (7:15–23) Matthew contains a strong warning against “false prophets.” They invoke the name “Lord, Lord,” prophesy in the name of Jesus, exorcise, and work miracles in Jesus’ name. Matthew characterizes them as those who effect “lawlessness” (*anomia*). Jesus warns against the same or similar groups in the first part of the eschatological discourse when he says that many will come in his name claiming “I am the Christ” (24:5, a phrase not found in Matthew’s source, Mk 13:6). In 24:11 Matthew adds to his Marcan source (13:12–13) that “many false prophets will arise and lead many astray,” and later he says that these “false Christs” and “false prophets” will arise and show signs and wonders (24:23–24). These false prophets will cause wickedness (*anomia*) to multiply and love to grow cold (24:12). Though there is some dispute about the precise identity of these “false prophets,” the description of Eduard Schweizer locates the problems in Matthew’s community with problems elsewhere in the early Church:

Matthew is struggling with the same problem as Paul and Luke and in some sense also John. It is the enthusiastic life of faith which is living by the experience of the risen and exalted Lord and the presence and activity of the Spirit, but, at the same time, threatens to become more and more remote from the teaching of the earthly Jesus and the standard of his conduct.<sup>57</sup>

Matthew counters their realized eschatology by stressing that true discipleship will be revealed only at the end of time (see 13:48–50; 25:31–46). Prior to that, the Church is a *corpus mixtum* where good and evil are often indistinguishable. In the Sheep and the Goats he counters their pretension to power by disclosing that the exalted Son of Man was hidden in the least of the brethren, who are both poor and powerless. Here Matthew not only crowns the picture throughout the Gospel of Jesus as the humble Servant, but also instructs the Church in what sense the risen Lord is “God with us.”

#### *The Son of Man As King*

In the parable of the Sheep and the Goats the Son of Man is also King. Commentators have noted the tension between 25:31–32, the Son of Man as judge, and vv. 33–34, where the King calls those on his right “blessed of my Father” and welcomes them into the kingdom prepared

<sup>56</sup> 2 Cor 10:7; 11:5, 12–15; 12:11; see V. Furnish, *II Corinthians* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984) 52.

<sup>57</sup> “Observance of the Law and Charismatic Activity in Matthew,” *NTS* 16 (1969–70) 218. See also Barth, in *Tradition* 79, 162–63; Burnett, *Testament* 262–73; Gundry, *Matthew* 132–33. Meier (*Matthew* 73–74) calls them “Christian enthusiasts” who imagine they have an “inside track” because of their special powers.

for them.<sup>58</sup> This tension has led to widely divergent positions, with Broer and Lambrecht arguing that the earlier version of the parable, which may go back to the historical Jesus, dealt with a judgment by a king which Matthew then interprets by a Son of Man Christology.<sup>59</sup> Brandenburger reverses the position by arguing that the original pericope, which dealt with the judgment to be exercised by the Son of Man, arose in the early Church and that Matthew added the royal motif.<sup>60</sup> Since this section is "special Matthean" material, reconstruction of the original form will be subject to constant debate and endless hypotheses. The value of Brandenburger's approach was to call attention to the neglected royal aspects of the parable. Whatever the relation of tradition and redaction, the text we have joins royal motifs to a Son of Man Christology. Attention to this juxtaposition yields further insights about the passage.

Though the description of Jesus as King is muted in the Synoptic tradition and generally limited to the Passion narrative (e.g., Mt 27:11, 29, 37, 42), Matthew makes most use of the motif. The child who is born is "King of the Jews" (2:2) and seen by Herod as a rival to the throne (2:13-14). A major part of the Infancy Narrative is concerned to show the Davidic descent of Jesus (1:1, 20) and, unlike Mark, who is most reserved about any public description of Jesus as Son of David, Matthew pictures Jesus often as the healing Son of David.<sup>61</sup> The expression "Son of David, have mercy on me" is almost a prayer in Matthew.<sup>62</sup>

In Israel's history there is a parallelism between the historical king and the attributes of God.<sup>63</sup> God is a God of justice who is concerned for the poor and the marginal in the land, and this mandate is given to the king.<sup>64</sup> When Israel no longer had historical kings, much of the royal

<sup>58</sup> Friedrich, *Gott* 174-76; W. Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1968) 525.

<sup>59</sup> Broer, "Gericht" 285-86; Lambrecht, *Once More Astonished* 219-22.

<sup>60</sup> *Das Recht* 43-51.

<sup>61</sup> On Davidic motifs in the Infancy Narrative, see Brown, *Birth of the Messiah* 66-69. B. Nolan (*The Christology of Matthew 1-2 in the Setting of the Gospel* [Fribourg: Editions Universitaires; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1979]) offers an extensive study of the royal motif but has no discussion of 25:31-46, which is surprising, since the Son of Man is explicitly called King in 25:34. On healing see D. Duling, "The Therapeutic Son of David: An Element in Matthew's Christological Apologetic," *NTS* 24 (1977-78) 392-410.

<sup>62</sup> Mt 9:27; 15:22; 20:30-31.

<sup>63</sup> See esp. Pss 45 and 89; on the "royal ideology," Brandenburger, *Das Recht* 67-76; S. Mowinckel, *He That Cometh* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1954) 5-9, 34-39, 56-89; H. Ringgren, *Israelite Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 220-38, and K. L. Schmidt, "basileus," *TDNT* 1.567-68.

<sup>64</sup> On God's love of justice, see Isa 30:18; 61:8; Pss 11:7; 33:5, 37:28; 99:4; on concern for the marginal, see Exod 22:21-27; Deut 15:1-11; cf. Job 29:11-17; Pss 69:33; 72:1, 4, 12-14; on duty of king to uphold justice and to be concerned for marginal groups, see Isa 9:6-7; 11:3-5; Jer 22:15-17; Pss 82:1-5 (these references are illustrative rather than comprehensive).

ideology was transferred to the Messianic King or to eschatological saving figures. The hoped-for Son of David in the Psalms of Solomon will restore justice to the land.<sup>65</sup> In *1 Enoch* the Son of Man and the Elect One, though they are not called kings, are associated with the "throne of glory" (61:8; 62:2, 5) and they exercise domination over earthly kings and participate in judgment, a royal function. Aspects of the ancient royal ideology influence the Matthean presentation of Jesus. Jesus announces the kingdom (4:17, cf. 10:7) and his ministry is the gospel of the kingdom.<sup>66</sup> He proclaims God's will for the people and takes the side of the poor and the marginal. In the Sheep and the Goats the juxtaposition of King and Son of Man represents a melding of descriptions which have been held apart in the historical ministry of Jesus. As Son of Man, Jesus is the one who suffered and was exalted; as King, he is the eschatological Messiah who will execute judgment and vindicate those who were defenseless.

### *Justice and Mercy*

Significant, then, is the description twice in the parable (vv. 37, 46) of the blessed as *dikaioi*. Their justice gives them a share in royal dominion, the *basileia* prepared for them (25:34). Such language has points of contact with the recognized stress in Matthew on both *dikaiosynē* (justice or righteousness) and *eleos* (mercy or loving-kindness).<sup>67</sup> In the Beatitudes they are side by side: those who hunger and thirst for justice will be filled; the merciful shall obtain mercy (5:6-7).

All the references to *dikaiosynē* in Matthew are without parallel in the other Synoptics and they give a distinct flavor to the Gospel.<sup>68</sup> *Dikaiosynē* is a multidimensional term which evokes a rich heritage of associations. Fundamentally it conveys a sense of "rightness" or what should happen.

<sup>65</sup> *Ps Sol* 17:26-42 from the first century B.C. On dating and theology of Psalms, see R. B. Wright, "Psalms of Solomon," in J. H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985) 2.639-49.

<sup>66</sup> The "gospel of the kingdom," which is found only in Matthew (4:23; 9:35; 24:14; cf. 26:13, "this gospel," and 13:19, "the message [*logos*] of the kingdom"), is proclaimed by Jesus and the postresurrection Church. It is a "capsule summary" of the whole document (Kingsbury, *Structure* 163).

<sup>67</sup> G. Bornkamm, "The Better Righteousness," in *Tradition and Interpretation* 24-32; R. Morhlang, *Matthew and Paul: A Comparison of Ethical Perspectives* (Cambridge: University, 1984) 48-57; B. Przybylski, *Righteousness in Matthew and His World of Thought* (Cambridge: University, 1980).

<sup>68</sup> Mt 3:15; 5:6, 10, 20; 6:1, 33; 21:32; see Przybylski, *Righteousness* 1-3, and authors cited there for discussion as to whether these references are Matthean compositions or due to his special source. The adjective "just" (*dikaioi*) appears in the following places unique to Matthew: 1:19; 5:45; 10:41; 13:17; 13:43; 13:49; 23:28-29; 23:35; 25:37; 25:46; 27:4, 19, 24 (here Jesus is referred as to a suffering just one); cf. 23:23, where *krisis* is used in the sense of justice.

It describes both God's demand and God's saving gift. It has overtones of fidelity to the will of God and concern that life in community possess wholeness or *šālôm*.<sup>69</sup> Matthew pictures Jesus as the Servant who proclaims justice to the nations and will bring justice to victory (12:18–21, citing Isa 42:1–4). Jesus praises those who hunger for justice and are persecuted for its sake (5:6, 10), and criticizes the Pharisees for neglecting the weightier things of the law—justice, mercy, and faith (23:23).<sup>70</sup> The disciples are to show a justice exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20). This is not a new form of legalism, but response to the command to love God and neighbor as exemplified by the life and teaching of Jesus. The gospel of the kingdom which Jesus proclaims and enacts is the way the world is made “right” or just before God.

Equally central to Matthew is *eleos*, translated somewhat inaccurately as mercy—which suggests forbearance from inflicting harm or forgiveness of wrong.<sup>71</sup> The biblical terms *hesed* and *eleos* primarily describe a

<sup>69</sup> These summary comments do not do justice to a complex discussion of the translation and meaning of the Hebrew and Greek terms associated with justice (*š'dāqāh*; *šedeq*; *mišpāt*; *dikaiosynē*; *krisis*). While most translations favor “righteousness” for *š'dāqāh/dikaiosynē* in place of “justice,” righteousness has two major defects: (1) it has become a “religious and churchy” term rarely used in secular discussion, a division which is unfaithful to its biblical heritage and context; (2) it has the nuance of “moral rectitude,” which is an unwarranted limitation of the biblical term. On biblical backgrounds of the terms, see J. Donahue, “Biblical Perspectives on Justice,” in *The Faith That Does Justice*, ed. J. C. Haughey (New York: Paulist, 1977) 68–112; K. H.-J. Fahlgren, *S'daka: Nahestehende und entgegengesetzte Begriffe im Alten Testament* (Uppsala: Almqvist und Wiksells, 1932) 81. Fahlgren describes justice as *Gemeinschaftstreue*, i.e., fidelity in communal life; see J. Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture* 1–2 (London: Oxford University, 1926) 337–40; Ringgren, *Israelite Religion* 132–34, 226–30. A strong case for the continuance of “righteousness” has been made by J. Reumann, “Righteousness” in the New Testament, “Justification” in the U.S. Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialog, with responses by J. A. Fitzmyer and J. D. Quinn (Philadelphia: Fortress; New York: Paulist, 1982). The RSV translates *š'dāqāh/dikaiosynē* as “righteousness”; the NAB normally translates *š'dāqāh* as “justice” in the OT, while choosing a variety of terms for *dikaiosynē* in the NT, e.g., “if we would fulfil all God's demands” (Mt 3:15); “holiness” (Mt 5:5, 10, 20); “religious acts” (Mt 6:1); “way of holiness” (Mt 6:33; 21:32; cf. Lk 1:75; 2 Cor 5:21); “righteousness” (2 Cor 6:7); “justice” (e.g., Jn 16:8, 10; Rom 3:21–22; 4:3, 5, 11; 5:21; 6:13, 16; 1 Cor 1:30).

<sup>70</sup> The Greek term for “justice” here is *krisis*, which in the LXX translates *mišpāt*, and which the RSV usually translates as “justice.” It is the nominal form of the verb *šāpāt* (to judge) and connotes “justice in action” either through a fair decision or a claim vindicated. See KB 579–80.

<sup>71</sup> Gundry (*Matthew* 70–71) calls mercy a “very prominent” theme in Matthew and lists a number of instances where, even though the term does not occur, there is an “ethic of mercy”: e.g., 18:23–35; 20:1–16. The background for the close connection of mercy and justice is the covenant betrothal between God and the people “in right and in justice, in love and mercy” (Hos 2:21–22 NAB, =RSV 2:19–20; cf. Mt. 23:23). Brandenburger (*Das Recht* 119–27) has an excellent summary of Matthew's theology of mercy, especially as it bears on Mt 25:31–46.

helpful act rather than an attitude or disposition.<sup>72</sup> Matthew invokes the saying of Hos 6:6, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice," to interpret both the call of Levi (9:13) and plucking grain on the Sabbath (12:7). Both association with marginal groups and violation of the Sabbath are examples of deeds of loving-kindness which transcend legalism. Those who seek healing from Jesus cry out, "Son of David, have mercy on me" (9:27; 15:22; 20:30, 31; cf. 17:15). Concrete actions of loving-kindness to those in need constitute the mercy which God desires.

### *Relevance to Parable of Sheep and Goats*

Now I will attempt to bring some of these threads together. In the story of the last judgment we have a juridical situation in which one group is called just (*dikaioi*, 25:37, 46) because they have performed acts of mercy and loving-kindness to those in need and therefore inherit the kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world; the other group is cursed because they neglected these deeds. As mentioned earlier, the horizon of this scene is apocalyptic. One critical aspect of apocalyptic thought is that the scenes of judgment disclose the transcendent values which should have been operative prior to the judgment. Apocalyptic is a view of history and human life from God's side. It also offers a solution to the problem of theodicy, that is, why evil people flourish and why the innocent suffer. Apocalyptic affirms that the sufferings and injustice which mar this world will be bearable because the order of justice will be restored. Sin and evil will be unmasked and goodness rewarded. Simply put, the world will be made "right" again.

Matthew adopts this perspective, since the parable of the Sheep and the Goats reveals the actions which should have been normative in the world. Matthew also modifies the apocalyptic perspective. First, by his double repetition of the deeds done or not done, he calls attention to the norms by which people will be judged rather than to detailed descriptions of the judgment. For Matthew, the world will be made right when acts of mercy and loving-kindness are shown to those most in need. He modifies apocalyptic also by his perspective on salvation history. For Matthew, the end time has been inaugurated by the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>73</sup> The benefits of the end time have already begun with Jesus, who expresses the higher form of justice in deeds of love. So, too, after the historical ministry of Jesus, when the Son of Man is hidden in the least of the brethren, the true order of justice is maintained when those acts of mercy and loving-kindness characterize the life of disciple-

<sup>72</sup> Bultmann, "eleos," *TDNT* 4.479.

<sup>73</sup> Meier, *Vision* 26-39, on Matthew's "remodeling" of salvation history.

ship. The parable of the Sheep and the Goats thus provides in the form of an apocalyptic revelation an integration of Christology, ethics, and salvation history.

*The Question of the "Least of the Brethren"*

Now we can address the question most debated: Are the least of the brethren of the Son of Man all the needy or Christian disciples? The evidence for the latter view is impressive. (1) In the NT *adelphos* (brother), when not describing a physical relationship, is used almost exclusively for a compatriot or coreligionist (a usage which early Christianity takes over from Judaism).<sup>74</sup> There is no clear instance where an unconverted gentile is spoken of as a brother. (2) In Matthew it is used extensively to describe the social relationships which should exist between those who respond to the gospel of the kingdom (5:22–24; 7:3–5; 18:15, 21, 35) or as a reference to disciples (12:49–50; 28:10). (3) Matthew uses the term "little one" for the vulnerable members of the Christian community (10:42; 11:11; 18:6, 10, 14), so that the least of the brethren of Jesus would be Christians most in need. (4) The identification of the Son of Man with the least is to be interpreted in light of sayings such as "he who receives you receives me" (Mt 10:40), which come at the end of the mission discourse in Matthew and are said to reproduce the rabbinic *šāliah* motif, where the sender is present in the messenger.<sup>75</sup> (5) The passage comes at the end of a discourse delivered to disciples and is preceded by three parables on proper discipleship.<sup>76</sup>

The position I propose is that "the least of my brothers" refers primarily to Christian disciples or missionaries (which for Matthew are virtually the same), but that this does not make the pericope into a sectarian ethic with little relevance for contemporary ethics or homiletics. Rather, engagement with Matthew's understanding of discipleship gives the pericope a richer dimension than its contemporary generalized use allows.

The Matthean Church is a community in mission until the end of the age. In addition to teaching what Jesus taught, this mission is to take place through witness. Matthew highlights the motif of witness early in his Gospel when, after the Beatitudes, he adds a series of sayings on the disciples as salt of the earth and light of the world (5:13–16), which circulated independently and are found in different forms in Mark and

<sup>74</sup> H. von Soden, "*adelphos*," *TDNT* 1.144–47.

<sup>75</sup> Cope, "Matthew XXV" 39–40.

<sup>76</sup> The Wise and Faithful Servant, 24:45–51; the Ten Maidens, 25:1–13; the Talents, 25:14–30.

Q.<sup>77</sup> The first saying, "You are the salt of the earth," has no direct correspondence but appears in Mk 9:50 as "salt is good, but if salt has lost its saltiness, how will you season it?" (followed by Lk 14:34). Here it serves as a warning to disciples against scandal and halfhearted discipleship (Mk 9:42-50). The second saying, "You are the light of the world," appears in both Mark (4:21 = Lk 8:16) and Q (Lk 11:33) in the form of a parable about not lighting a lamp and then hiding it, but rather placing it where it may be seen. Matthew radically reinterprets these sayings in the following manner. First, he adds the emphatic "you are" (5:13, 14) before each saying, which along with the frequent use of "your" (your lamp, your good deeds, your Father in heaven, v. 16), stresses the personal and positive quality of discipleship rather than its dangers (as in Mark and Q).<sup>78</sup> Secondly, he makes the witness motif explicit by adding the sentence, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (5:16). This latter phrase reflects the vocation of Israel, the covenant people, in Isa 42:6 to be "a light to the nations." Finally, Matthew locates these sayings after those Beatitudes which bless the disciples when they are persecuted (5:11-12), so that in their mission and witness "those persecuted by the world are the world's salvation."<sup>79</sup>

This perspective is undergirded by the two explicit uses of *martyrion* in Mt 10:18 and 24:14. Both appear in persecution sayings. The first is in the context of the mission discourse of chapter 10, where, after predicting rejection of their message, Jesus tells the disciples that they will be delivered up to councils, synagogues, governors, and kings "to bear witness before them and to the nations" (10:18, my translation).<sup>80</sup> The second instance comes in Matthew's own eschatological discourse (24:9-14), where he edits those sections of Mk 13:9-13 which he had not previously transferred to 10:17-21.<sup>81</sup> Matthew changes the sequence of the eschatological events as found in Mark. In Mark testimony before governors and kings is part of the sequence of persecutions that will

<sup>77</sup> The two sayings are also found in *Gos. Thom.* 33, and the second in the Oxyrhynchus papyri (654:29-31, 38-40). Their tradition history is complex; see J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I-IX* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981) 717-20, and Gundry, *Matthew* 75-78.

<sup>78</sup> Gundry, *Matthew* 77: "Matthew transforms this warning [Mk 4:24-25; Lk 8:18] into a command to do good works."

<sup>79</sup> Meier, *Matthew* 44.

<sup>80</sup> Matthew's editorial activity is complex here. The mission discourse is an amalgam of Mark, Q, and his special source. The persecution sayings follow closely Mark's wording of 13:9-13, but Matthew relocates them to chapter 10 and thereby is enabled "to give the future mission a cosmic scope with apocalyptic coloration" (Meier, *Matthew* 110). Matthew is also able to sound the theme of persecution for the sake of mission early in the Gospel.

<sup>81</sup> See Burnett, *Testament* 277-300, for details and significance of editing.



precede the end. In Mt 24:10–12 the persecution will be followed by apostasy and betrayal, and “love will grow cold” (v. 12). Following Mark, Matthew (24:13) says that the one who endures to the end will be saved and adds, “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world as a witness to all nations; and then the end will come” (v. 14). In this fashion Matthew brings the eschatological discourse of chapter 24 into close connection with the mission discourse of chapter 10. During both the earthly career of Jesus (the setting of chapter 10) and the period prior to the final coming (the setting of chapter 24), a life of discipleship is to be one of continued witness in the face of persecution. This is also the exact sequence found in the Great Commission; the consummation of the age will come at the end of the mission.

The Matthean Church is to be a community in mission which will bear witness to the gospel of the kingdom in the awareness that they will face rejection and persecution. The identity of the least of the brethren of Jesus in Mt 25:31–46 and their specific sufferings are to be interpreted from this perspective. Though a host of antecedents have been invoked to explain these, such as the true fast of Isa 58:5–9, the neglect of the flock by the unfaithful shepherds in Ezek 34:1–6, or parallels in the rabbinic literature, the closest parallels are the descriptions of apostolic sufferings found in Paul.<sup>82</sup>

Paul’s references to his apostolic sufferings come mainly in the “hardship lists” (*Peristasiskatalogen*) of 1 Cor 4:9–13; 2 Cor 4:8–9; 6:4–5; 11:23–29; 12:10.<sup>83</sup> All the sufferings of the “least of the brethren” in Mt 25:34–36 are mentioned by Paul: hunger (1 Cor 4:11), thirst (1 Cor 4:11; 2 Cor 11:27), living as a stranger or an itinerant (1 Cor 4:11, “we are homeless”), naked (1 Cor 4:11; 2 Cor 11:27), sick (*ēsthenēsa*; cf. 1 Cor 4:10, “We are weak,” *astheneis*), imprisonment (2 Cor 11:23; Phlm 1:9). Such lists are well known in “the philosophical and ethical treatises of many of Paul’s contemporaries (especially Epictetus) and in the literature of apocalyptic Judaism.”<sup>84</sup> Though Paul may be influenced by the form of these lists, they function very differently. In Hellenism they show either the courage that the wise philosopher exhibits in surmounting such difficulties or the inability of worldly cares to impinge on philosophic

<sup>82</sup> Friedrich (*Gott* 164–73) lists other possible antecedents in the OT and intertestamental literature. Gundry (*Matthew* 510–12) feels that Matthew offers here a paraphrase or “targum” on Isaiah. For extrabiblical Jewish parallels, see H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* 4/1 (Munich: Beck, 1928) 559–610, “Die altjüdische Liebeswerke.” My exposition here was occasioned by the study of Ramsey Michaels, “Apostolic Hardships and Righteous Gentiles” (n. 11 above).

<sup>83</sup> Until recently there was very little available in English on these lists and their function in Paul. An excellent discussion is offered in V. Furnish, *II Corinthians* 280–83, 354–55, 535–39.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* 281–82.

equilibrium.<sup>85</sup> In Paul, however, they indicate either that "the transcendent power belongs to God" (2 Cor 4:7) or that "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). These apostolic sufferings conceal the power of Christ which is at work in the one who proclaims the gospel. This is exactly the function of the list of sufferings in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. The exalted Son of Man is hidden in the presence of those who are undergoing the same sufferings that Paul undergoes in his mission to the nations.

Therefore I would affirm that the brethren of the Son of Man in Mt 25:31-46 are to be seen not simply as passive victims but rather as a Church in mission which through its teaching and way of life gives witness to Jesus. In such preaching the "disciple is not above the teacher" (Mt 10:24), nor the servant above the master. Just as Jesus was the lowly one meek and humble who suffered rejection and persecution, so will his community be. However, the community through its witness is not simply to indict an evil world. It is to be a light, so that humanity will give glory to God.

#### A CHALLENGE TO CONTEMPORARY ETHICS

This study began with a concern over a gap which seemed to be widening between the exegesis of the parable of the Sheep and the Goats and its use in contemporary ethics and church life. It has become a virtual "summary of the Gospel," a contemporary version of the "Gospel within the Gospel." Its challenge to contemporary ethics is seen as mainly one of application. To be a Christian is to be actively engaged in confronting and alleviating the sufferings of those most afflicted in our society, since Christ identifies with them. Major trends within exegesis have challenged this view as not faithful to the text, proposing rather that the passage deals either with the justification of the pagans (and not the demands of *Christian* discipleship [Jeremias]) or that it has in view the sufferings of Christian missionaries and the punishment of those who reject them (Cope). Neither view, it must be stressed, would absolve Christians from care for the poor and needy of the world. According to the rabbinic mode of argument from the "lesser to the greater," Matthew speaks of pagan virtues in such a way that Christians should surpass them (5:43-48).<sup>86</sup> If the pagans are to be concerned for the hungry etc., how much more Christian disciples? Even if the missionary interpretation in its most "sectarian" sense were correct, as Cope notes, there are other significant parts of the NT which summon Chris-

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 282, 354-55.

<sup>86</sup> See H. L. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965, orig. 1931) 94-98. *Kal Wa homer* (i.e., from the light [less important] to the heavy [more important]) is listed as one of the earliest hermeneutical principles.

tians to concern for the poor and needy.<sup>87</sup> The major concern of my discussion has not been simply potential *misuse* of the passage in contemporary ethics and proclamation, but that the generalized use has obscured some of its more significant challenges. Without pretending to be exhaustive, I would like to list the following.

1) The apocalyptic horizon within which the parable of the Sheep and the Goats is to be interpreted is a caution against abandoning apocalyptic as a resource for contemporary social ethics. New Testament apocalyptic has always been somewhat of an embarrassment for social ethics, since it seems to be opposed to concern for the world.<sup>88</sup> It is often "demythologized" or simply ignored as part of an outmoded world view.<sup>89</sup> Apocalyptic and eschatology have also spawned the idea of an "interim ethic": the teaching of Jesus and much of Paul were so influenced by the prospect of the imminent end of the world that they have little relevance for the long course of history.<sup>90</sup> Much contemporary use of the Bible for social ethics simply ignores this material and prefers to center on the historical career of Jesus, especially his "liberating praxis" and radical love.<sup>91</sup> At the risk of oversimplifying a complex hermeneutical issue, I would simply follow A. Collins in noting that apocalyptic reminds us that the love command must always be complemented by the call for justice.<sup>92</sup> Reflection on justice from its apocalyptic horizon led Ernst Käsemann to state that God's aim in the NT is not the salvation of the individual but the justification of the world.<sup>93</sup> Apocalyptic literature arises generally among people who are themselves suffering or oppressed, and its images of the

<sup>87</sup> Cope, "Matthew XXV" 44; see Lk 3:6; 10:25-37; Gal 6:10.

<sup>88</sup> Early but still very valuable discussions of this problem are A. Wilder, *Eschatology and Ethics in the Teaching of Jesus* (rev. ed.; New York: Harper, 1950), and *Otherworldliness and the New Testament* (New York: Harper, 1955); see also his short study *Kerygma, Eschatology and Social Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966).

<sup>89</sup> J. T. Sanders, *Ethics in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 130: "The ethical positions of the New Testament are the children of their own times and places, alien and foreign to this day and age. Amidst the ethical dilemmas which confront us, we are now at least relieved of the need or temptation to begin with Jesus or the early church, or the New Testament."

<sup>90</sup> The term "interim ethic" is associated with Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1961; German orig. 1906) 354, 366. See Sanders, *Ethics* 2-4.

<sup>91</sup> A positive appropriation of eschatological material is offered by T. Ogletree, *The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) chap. 4, "Synoptic Portrayals of Eschatological Existence."

<sup>92</sup> *The Apocalypse* (Wilmington, Del.: Glazier, 1979) x.

<sup>93</sup> Quoted by Koch (*Rediscovery* 77) from a lecture delivered by Käsemann, "Auslegung der Apokalypse Johannes," in Mainz, 1948-49. More than perhaps any NT scholar, Käsemann has grappled with the implications of apocalyptic; see P. Gisel, *Vérité et histoire: La théologie dans la modernité Ernst Käsemann* (Paris: Beauchesne; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1975) esp. 221-41, and Koch, *Rediscovery* 73-85.

destruction of evil and new creation remind us that evil is not to be lord of human life and that God's will is that justice be victorious.<sup>94</sup> Apocalyptic affirms that life must be shaped not simply by its present evil but by its future promises.<sup>95</sup>

2) The Sheep and the Goats in Matthew is an "apocalyptic" parable which, as the term suggests, *reveals* to Matthew's community the criteria by which all people are to be judged and the norms by which they, like those on the right, can be called just (*dikaioi*). The Son of Man will return as King and restore the order of justice. Treatment of the least, who I have argued are Christians in mission and witness to the world, becomes the occasion by which the true meaning of justice is revealed. The parable reveals that justice is constituted by acts of loving-kindness and mercy to those in need; the world will be made "right" or "just" when the way the least are treated becomes the norm of action.<sup>96</sup> What is done positively *for* them is not to be limited *to* them. What is proposed is not a "sectarian ethic" where Christians are to revel in the punishment of their oppressors. Rather, it is an ethic of faithful witness where the Christian, like Jesus in the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom, becomes the locus for the disclosure of God's will for all peoples.

3) The ethic proposed is a Christian ethic—in other terms, an ethic of discipleship.<sup>97</sup> It draws its strength not simply from a humanitarian compassion for those in need, but from a sense that, like the first disciples, Christians are to hear again the call "follow me" and are to be caught up in the mission of Jesus.<sup>98</sup> I have stressed the literary context of this passage at the conclusion of the eschatological discourse and its implications for discipleship. The parable of the Sheep and the Goats contains also the final words of Jesus before the Passion, when the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified (Mt 26:2). The one who will come in glory and grant a kingdom to the just will also suffer, die, and be raised

<sup>94</sup> J. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination* 214: "The legacy of the apocalypses includes a powerful rhetoric for denouncing the deficiencies of the world. It also includes the conviction that the world as now constituted is not the end."

<sup>95</sup> J. Kingsbury, *Matthew* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 93.

<sup>96</sup> The description of those who do works of loving-kindness as "just" is also a constant warning against the modern tendency to divorce justice (conceived as a matter of obligation or equity) from love (seen as supererogatory to the requirements of justice); see J. Alfaro, *Theology of Justice in the World* (Rome: Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace, 1973) 40–41; E. McDonagh, *The Making of Disciples* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1982) 119.

<sup>97</sup> For an excellent survey of the ways Scripture has been a resource for Christian ethics, see W. Spohn, *What Are They Saying about Scripture and Ethics?* (New York: Paulist, 1984) esp. 89–105 (on discipleship).

<sup>98</sup> In his first encyclical, *Redemptor hominis*, no. 21, Pope John Paul II urged the Church to be "a community of disciples," and Avery Dulles has proposed this as a comprehensive model of the Church: *A Church To Believe in: Discipleship and the Dynamics of Freedom* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) esp. 9–10.

up. An ethic of discipleship involves deep engagement with the mystery of the cross, which for Matthew, in common with other early Christian perspectives, is a life given in ransom for others.<sup>99</sup> As Brandenburger forcefully states, the service to others which the King/Son of Man demands in the parable is a service which he has not only proclaimed but embodied.<sup>100</sup> Jesus' gift of his life for others is also paradoxically the victory over death at the very moment death seems itself sovereign.

4) From the perspective of Christians who retell this parable today, the sufferings borne by the least of the brothers and sisters of the Son of Man summon the Church to be an authentic and faithful witness of the gospel and serve as a warning against what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace," grace without conversion and engagement in the scandal of the cross.<sup>101</sup> The Church cannot preach acts of loving-kindness to the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned, and the naked unless it too is a Church in mission which bears these same sufferings. No Gospel is harsher than Matthew on an ethic of words without deeds.<sup>102</sup> No Gospel is more eloquent on the dialectic of concealment and revelation, of weakness and power.<sup>103</sup> The ethic which the Church proposes to the nations must be an ethic to which the Church gives living witness in the midst of the nations.

<sup>99</sup> Mt 20:28=Mk 10:45; see also 1 Cor 1:30; Rom 3:24-25; 8:23; cf. 1 Pet 2:21-25.

<sup>100</sup> *Das Recht* 86.

<sup>101</sup> *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1966; German orig. 1937) 45-49.

<sup>102</sup> E.g., Mt 6:2, 5, 16; 7:5; 7:15-21; 23:13-15.

<sup>103</sup> E.g., Mt 5:11-12; 6:25-33; 10:16-20; 11:25-30; 26:52-53.