

ON the SHEEP and the GOATS

A response to the article by A.E.Knoch concerning Matt. 25:31-46.

First of all, it seems to me that the passage in view is the conclusion of a body of the sayings of Jesus, begun in ch. 24:3 when "the disciples came to Him privately." The CLNT, and rightly so, I think, puts this entire passage in quotes. Then ch. 26:1 indicates a break, or a change of context, with the words, "when Jesus finishes all these sayings."

Immediately prior to this Jesus had spoken words against the scribes and Pharisees in ch. 23, ending that discourse speaking of their undergoing the judging of Gehenna (vs. 33), and then speaking of Jerusalem as a whole (vs. 37-39) saying, "left is your house to you desolate." Note that here He spoke of many times wanting to assemble them "in the manner a hen is assembling her brood under her wings." That would have been an assembling for care and protection. But this was not to be.

Instead we see the prediction of the demolishing of the buildings of the sanctuary, which we all know happened in A.D. 70. Instead of an assembling as a brood, we see the prediction of their fleeing and taking flight (ch. 24:16-21). Did this not also occur? I am wondering if "the consummation" spoken of in 24:14 was speaking of "the end" of their system of worship, with the destruction of the sanctuary and of Jerusalem. By this time the evangel of the kingdom had been heralded in that whole inhabited area. But to press this point is not the intent of this letter.

From 24:23 to the end of the chapter Jesus gives various descriptions and characteristics regarding "the presence of the Son of Mankind." Vs. 31 speaks again of an assembling through the use of messengers with a trumpet (a figure of a "message"). This assembling is of His people.

In vs. 37-42 we see examples of the suddenness of His judgment. The chapter ends with an example of His coming "in an hour which you are not supposing" (vs. 44), and "on a day for which he is not hoping and in an hour which he knows not" (vs.50). I suggest that in all of these, He is referring to coming to His people. In the days of Noah there was not yet the distinction of "Jews and non-Jews." A few were righteous, most were unrighteous.

The point of this example is the suddenness, the unexpectedness, of His visitation in judgment. The two in the field would not likely be the one a Jew, the other a Gentile. I suggest that these are both His people, but one suffers His judgment and is "taken" as were those who were taken by the deluge. The example of the "faithful and prudent slave," as compared to "that evil slave," is set within the same lord's house. Note that the slave who is cut asunder is appointed his part "with the hypocrites" -- the same term Jesus had just been applying to the scribes and Pharisees, who were still His people!

Now we come to ch. 25, and we see the same line of thinking continued. Some were ready for the coming of the bridegroom, some were stupid and unprepared. But all were "virgins," all were part of the same society: His people.

Next He gives the example of "a man traveling," who "calls his own slaves" and gives money for them to work with, then he is returning "and settling accounts with them." The faithful slaves are rewarded, the "wicked and slothful slave" suffers loss and is cast into outer darkness where he laments and gnashes his teeth -- along with the hypocrites of ch. 24:51. What happened to him? He simply lost his job and was removed from his position in the household, or business. He was now homeless and jobless. But he is still a part of the same society, one of God's people.

Now we come to the wonderful (for I suggest that this is part of the "good news") passage in vs. 31-46. Why should we suppose that all of a sudden Jesus has changed the format or the setting or the subject matter of this long discourse? I suggest that the problem lies in the translation of ta eqnh as "the nations." May I quote from Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. II, p. 369: "'ethnos'" in the NT. 1.

This word, which is common in Gk. from the very first, probably comes from 'ethos,' and means 'mass' or 'host' or 'multitude' bound by the same manners, customs or other distinctive features. Applied to men, it gives us the sense of people; but it can also be used of animals in the sense of 'herd' or of insects in the sense of 'swarm' In most cases 'ethnos' is used of men in the sense of 'a people'."

It seems to me that since Jesus is speaking in terms of sheep and kids, that the words "herds" or "multitudes" may be more appropriate for this passage. All along, up to this point in these sayings, He has been referring to His people, His household. A kid was a clean animal and could be used in a sacrifice. He was not severing the sheep from the dogs or the swine. I submit that this gathering is the same assembling spoken of in ch. 24:31. If you insist on the word being translated "nations," then I suggest a word of clarity be added and it read, "gathered [from] all the nations." This sense seems consistent to the entire passage.

Further, it would seem from the picture being drawn that since the "Shepherd" is severing one species from another, that it is evident that both up to this point have been a part of His herd. Jesus is here using this figure to once again show that when He is coming He makes a distinction, such as between the wise and the stupid, or between the faithful and the useless. This is a time of reward, or the suffering of loss. Knoch has well pointed out the absence of believing as being an ingredient in this figure. All that is discussed is good works, or the absence thereof.

But let us look further, at the terms "sheep" and "brethren." In John 10:24-27 we see Jesus saying to the Jews (vs. 26), "But you are not believing, seeing that you are not My sheep, according as I said to you." These were Israelites, Jews, but they were not His sheep. Vs. 27 gives a designation of sheep, "My sheep are hearing My voice, and I know them, and they are following Me." Recall Matt. 25:12 where the bridegroom said to the stupid virgins, "I am not acquainted with you."

In a broad sense, Israel was figured as sheep (e.g. Ps. 100:3; Isa. 53:6; Jer. 50:6; etc.). However, we see Jesus making a distinction here in John 10:26, as He did between virgins and servants in Matt. 24 & 25. Perhaps this is what Paul was referring to in Rom. 11:7 where he said, "yet the chosen encountered it. Now the rest [of Israel] were calloused ..." This would fall in line with Lu. 12:32, "Do not fear, little flocklet, for it delights your Father to give you the kingdom." Matt. 13:11 gives further light, where Jesus says to the disciples, "To you has it been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of the heavens, yet to those [the ones who were not disciples] it has not been given."

In Lu. 8:21 Jesus makes this statement: "My mother and My brethren are these who are hearing the word of God and doing it." Paul refers to this same group when he speaks of those "who are called according to purpose, because whom He foreknew, He designates beforehand, also, to be conformed to the image of His Son, for Him to be Firstborn among many brethren." (Rom.8:28,29) Paul uses the term "brethren" throughout his letters to refer to those of the body of Christ. Thus, how you treat His "body" is how you treat Him. To differentiate between the body of Christ and the Israelites in general, Paul inserts the qualifying phrase "my relatives according to the flesh" when he calls Israelites "brethren" in Rom. 9:3. In Rom. 10:1 Paul distinguishes between Israel, who he had just been talking about in the previous verses, and his brothers in Christ when he says, "Indeed, brethren, the delight of my heart and my petition to God for THEIR sake [or, "on behalf of them;" some later MSS read "on behalf of Israel"] is for salvation." Thus, to assume that the phrase "the least of My brethren" refers to the nation of Israel, in Matt. 25:40, is, I think, erroneous.

What is the difference between the sheep and the kids? The sheep produced the fruit of the Spirit -- Love -- without ever taking note of it. They were not aware of this fruit. It was the automatic produce of the mature life of Christ that was within them. It was evident that they were disciples ("By this all shall be knowing that you are My disciples, if you should be having love for one another." John 13:35). Their good works were just a mature outflow of His life. Their reward was to "enjoy the allotment of the kingdom."

What of the kids? They were just still "kids." -- pardon the pun. There was no fruit of the Spirit in their

lives. To change the metaphor, they just needed to be pruned to produce fruit. As you know, the word translated "chastening" in the CLNT is the noun "kolasis," from the verb "koladzo," which Thayer lists as, "1. prop. to lop, prune, as trees, wings. 2. to check, curb, restrain." Among the meanings Kittel lists are "to cut short," "to lop," "to trim." Consider the metaphor in John 15:1-2, "I am the true Grapevine, and My Father is the Farmer. Every branch in Me bringing forth no fruit, He is taking it away, and every one bringing forth fruit, He is cleansing it [with eonian fire?], that it may be bringing forth more fruit." Changing the metaphor again, let us look at Heb. 12:5-7, "My son, do not be neglecting (giving little care to) the Lord's discipline (education, child-training), neither be exhausted (dissolved) being continually convicted (exposed, reprov'd, put to the test) under Him, for whom the Lord is loving (continuously loves), He is continuously disciplining (child-training), and He is repeatedly scourging every son whom He is taking alongside with His hands (accepting, receiving). If you are remaining under discipline (child-training), God is continuously being brought (offered) toward you as sons. For what son exists whom a father is not disciplining?" (Mitchell version) So these kids are not ready to enjoy the allotment of the kingdom -- YET! But Christ is treating them as sons!

Returning to the metaphor of a branch being lopped off, we see in John 15:2 & 6 that "Every branch in Me bringing forth no fruit, He is taking away ... If anyone should not be remaining in Me, he is (or, was -- aor.) cast out as a branch, and is withered (or, it withered). And they are gathering them, and into the fire are they casting them, and they are being burned." This seems quite similar to the figure of the kids being sent from Him "into the fire eonian" in Matt. 25:41.

But let's look to Romans, where Paul uses the "branch" metaphor in ch. 11:17, "Now if some of the boughs are broken out ..." What happens to a bough when it is broken out of a tree? It withers, doesn't it? Is it true, then, that these too are being gathered into the fire and are being burned? Has this not happened, both literally and figuratively, to the Jews throughout history ever since? But the hope is found in vs. 23, "Now they also, if they should not be persisting in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again!" I suggest that this same principle applies to the kids that are pruned in Matt. 25:46.

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