

The Judgment of the Sheep and Goats

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(Note: All underlining of Scripture quotations for emphasis has been added by the author.)

Matthew 25:31-46 (MEV):

³¹ *“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory.*

³² *Before Him will be gathered all nations, and He will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates his sheep from the goats.*

³³ *He will set the sheep at His right hand, but the goats at the left.*

³⁴ *“Then the King will say to those at His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world.*

³⁵ *For I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me drink, I was a stranger and you took Me in.*

³⁶ *I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you visited Me, I was in prison and you came to Me.’*

³⁷ *“Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink?’*

³⁸ *When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You?’*

³⁹ *And when did we see You sick or in prison and come to You?’*

⁴⁰ *“The King will answer, ‘Truly I say to you, as you have done it for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you have done it for Me.’*

⁴¹ *“Then He will say to those at the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.*

⁴² *For I was hungry and you gave Me no food, I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink,*

⁴³ *I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, I was naked and you did not clothe Me, I was sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’*

⁴⁴ “Then they also will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not serve You?’

⁴⁵ “He will answer, ‘Truly I say to you, as you did it not for one of the least of these, you did it not for Me.’

⁴⁶ “And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Introduction

Christians assume that this, the so-called Final Judgment, takes place at the end of the world.

And that it’s a judgment of both the living and the dead — those alive when Jesus returns, and those who have previously died.

Why do people think this is an event still to happen? Here are perhaps the main reasons:

- Because it takes place on the “last day”, when the dead are raised, etc.
- Because nothing resembling what Jesus describes has happened yet.
- Because the Church has always taught this, and it’s enshrined in her creeds and confessions.

This article will examine the traditional view to see if it stands up to Scriptural scrutiny.

We will examine other New Testament (NT) passages relating to the Judgment.

And we will examine the Old Testament (OT) to see what light it sheds on the timing and nature of this Judgment.

Context

1. Matthew 25 is part of Jesus’ Olivet Discourse, which begins in Matthew 24:3 and concludes in 25:46 (cf. Mt 26:1). So, the subject matter is the same as that of chapter 24.

Just prior to this Jesus had pronounced “woes” on the Jewish leaders. He had warned that continued persecution would result in their filling up the measure of their forefathers’ sin.

God’s wrath would fall on that generation, and upon their city and temple (Mt 23:29-38; cf. Mt 22:7).

2. The disciples are asking Jesus about the temple’s demise at “the end of the age” (Mt 24:1-3).

They are not at all interested in the end of the world.

Jewish thought divided history into two ages: the pre-messianic age, and the messianic or kingdom age.

Concerning this, Cornelis Vanderwaal comments:

The end of the age. What the disciples actually asked Jesus was: “What will be the sign of your coming (*parousia*) and the close of the age?” (24:3). They spoke not of the *world’s* ending but of the end of the *age*, by which they meant the age that would come before the time of the Messiah’s appearance. The Messiah would bring the “coming age,” the last days.¹

The disciples (correctly) connect the temple’s demise with Jesus’ coming as the Messiah to wrap up the (then) present age.

He would inaugurate the new (messianic) age, and he would bring judgment on the old order.

Accordingly, the term “last day” — when the dead are raised for judgment (Jn 6:39-40, 44, 54; 11:24; 12:48) — coincides with the wrapping up of the old world order and arrival of the new.

¹ Cornelis Vanderwaal, *Search the Scriptures* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1978), Volume 7: Matthew-Luke, p. 52.

Jesus' advent inaugurated the "last days" of Israel and of the old world order — see Acts 2:17; Hebrews 1:2; James 5:3; 1 Peter 4:7; 2 Peter 3:3; 1 John 2:18; Jude 1:18.²

3. Importantly, Jesus assures his disciples that everything described in the Discourse will transpire before that generation has passed on (24:34). This clear statement ought to guide our interpretation of the Judgment.³
4. Jesus clearly ties his coming to the 70 AD fall of Jerusalem (Mt 24:15-20; cf. Lk 21:20-24).
When his followers see certain signs, they must flee the city lest they be caught up in its judgment.

² "Latter days" in the OT prophets can refer to the messianic era as a whole. See Isaiah 2:2; Ezekiel 38:16; Hosea 3:5; Micah 4:1.

³ To escape the obvious meaning of Matthew 24:34, most scholars try to limit its application to what Jesus has described up to that point. Supposedly the focus then shifts to the distant future — to Jesus' final coming at the end of history. But there is no basis for such a claim. On the contrary, there is every reason to believe that 24:34 applies to the entire Discourse, and that everything described was fulfilled by AD 70.

Other NT passages relating to the Sheep – Goats Judgment

1. The book of Revelation.

Examining Revelation is pertinent because this book serves as John's version of the Olivet Discourse.

MAIN POINT: John's visions portray God's judgment of the living — of those alive when Jesus returns.

Only 20:11-15 deals with the judgment of the dead.

Revelation was given to help people interpret the dramatic events that were soon to transpire.

And to reveal what could not be seen literally.

John saw and wrote prior to Nero's persecution (which began in November 64 AD).

The visions reveal Jesus — his deity, sovereignty, wrath, etc. (1:1).

He was about to come on the clouds to put down his enemies (1:7).

Everyone would "see" him, including those who had "pierced him" — the first-century Jews.⁴

His heavenly rule would be revealed through the events soon to transpire.

Imminence statements bookend John's visions (1:1, 3; 22:6, 10).

Jesus was coming "soon" (3:11; 22:7, 12, 20). He was coming to judge the following:

- The seven churches in the province of Asia (chaps. 2 – 3; cf. 1Pet 4:17).
- The Harlot — Israel/Jerusalem (chap. 18).
She has been unfaithful to God and has persecuted his people (18:20, 24).
John's visions portray the Jewish War (66-70 AD), including the fall of Jerusalem itself.
- The Beast (Nero and his inquisition), and the nations generally (16:10-11, 19; 19:11-21).
- The dead (20:11-15). This would be concurrent with the judgment of the nations (11:18).
- Everyone (22:12). Judgment when John wrote was so near that (to all intents) it was already too late to change one's life and alter the verdict (22:11).

Revelation shows Jesus exerting his power to take possession of the Gentile nations, putting down all opposition (cf. Psalm 110; Mk 9:1). Death is the last enemy to be destroyed (20:14).⁵

Revelation affirms that God's eternal kingdom has come (11:15).

Jesus rules the nations as his inheritance (Rev 19:15; Ps 2:8-9).

He rules and judges from the heavenly Zion (Ps 2:6; 110:1-2; Rev 22:3).

2. Matthew 16:27-28:

²⁷ *"For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.*

²⁸ *Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."*

This describes a judgment of those alive when Jesus returns — to be witnessed by some to whom he spoke.

And this judgment clearly relates to the Sheep – Goats Judgment:

Both have Jesus' coming in glory, with his angels, dispensing rewards, on his throne/in his kingdom.

⁴ For another instance of "seeing" having the sense of "perceiving", note what Jesus says to the Sanhedrin in Matthew 26:64: *"I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven."*

How would the Jewish leaders "from now on" "see" Jesus seated in heaven and coming on the clouds?

Answer: In events soon to follow, they would begin to perceive that Jesus was indeed the One he had claimed to be — that he was now reigning alongside Yahweh and actually judging them!

⁵ For Christians, death has been "abolished" (2Tim 1:10). Eternal life is our present possession (Jn 5:24; 6:47; 1Jn 5:13), and death itself is but a portal to heaven (Jn 11:25-26). When we die, we are immediately clothed with our new, heavenly body (2Cor 5:1-10).

Here is Mark's parallel account (8:38 – 9:1):

^{8:38} *“For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”*

^{9:1} *And he said to them, “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.”*

Judgment will come upon the first-century Jews — those “in this adulterous and sinful generation” who are ashamed of Jesus (8:38).

The kingdom came “with power” in AD 70 when Jesus put down his enemies (Rev 11:15; Ps 110:5-6).

3. Matthew 13: Jesus' parables of the Weeds (13:24-30, 36-43) and of the Dragnet (13:47-50):
“At the end of the age” (13:40, 49) Jesus will send forth his angels to remove and incinerate the bad, leaving the righteous to inhabit God's kingdom (13:41-43, 49-50).
4. Matthew 3:10-12: John's message of judgment:
Messiah will baptize (cleanse) Israel; the wicked will be separated out like chaff and incinerated.
John message was a continuation of Malachi's (cf. Mal 3:2-5; 4:1).
John was the promised “Elijah” who would appear “before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD” (Mal 4:5, KJV).
5. Luke 19:12-27: The Parable of the Ten Minas:
Jesus returns to the same servants whom he commissioned when he left.
Likewise, the same enemies who sent a delegation opposing his rule are executed upon his return.
The latter clearly refers to the Jewish War of 66-70 AD.
6. Acts 2:19-20, 40 (my translation):
¹⁹ *“And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below: blood and fire and billows of smoke. ²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.”*
⁴⁰ *With many other words he warned them. He pleaded with them, saying, “Save yourselves from this perverse generation.”*

Peter is citing Joel's prophecy concerning the Spirit's outpouring and the judgment to follow.

“The great and glorious day of the Lord” (2:20) refers to the events of 66-70 AD.

The Jewish War culminated in the fiery end of Jerusalem and its temple.

Peter here exhorts his hearers to be saved from the wrath soon to befall that “perverse generation”.

Terms such as “perverse” or “crooked generation” derive from the Song of Moses (Dt 32:5, 20), where Moses anticipates Israel's future apostasy and the outpouring of God's covenant wrath upon the nation. Jesus described his contemporaries in similar terms — see Matthew 12:39; 16:4; 17:17; Mark 8:38.

7. Judgment in Hebrews.

Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians in danger of reverting to Judaism, probably in the early 60s AD. To prevent such the author explains how the New Covenant had supplanted the Old Covenant's provisional and typical entities.

Jerusalem, the temple, its priesthood, sacrifices and ceremonies were all about to end (8:13).

God had to decisively terminate the old religion so that his eternal and spiritual kingdom would be manifested.

The epistle's readers could "see the Day [of judgment] drawing near" (10:25).

The author cites two verses from the Song of Moses: "Vengeance is mine; I will repay", and "The Lord will judge his people" (10:30, citing Deuteronomy 32:35-36).

God was about to judge Israel — those in the nation who rejected Jesus and who clung to the temple ritual. Jesus was coming very soon (10:37).

The author hopes his readers are "not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the saving of the soul" (10:39, WEB).

8. James 5:7-9:

⁷ *Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. ...*

⁸ *You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.*

⁹ *Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door.*

James here addresses Christian workers who were being defrauded by wealthy Jewish landowners.

He urges them to be patient in view of the Lord's imminent return to judge their oppressors.

And not to grumble in their hardships, lest they be judged as well.

James had directly addressed these landowners in 5:1-6:

They had "laid up treasure in the last days" and "fattened [their] hearts in a day of slaughter" (Jas 5:3, 5).

He's referring to Israel's last days as a nation and to the looming war with Rome in which these landholders would lose everything — their lives as well as their property.⁶

9. 1 Peter 4:5, 7, 12, 17:

⁵ *but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.*

⁷ *The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded ...*

¹² *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, ...*

¹⁷ *For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?*

According to Peter, the "revelation" of Jesus was imminent (1Pet 1:7, 13; 4:13; 5:1, 4).

Here he notes that the end of all things is imminent and THE Judgment is about to begin.⁷

As part of that judgment, his readers were already undergoing a "fiery trial" to prove the genuineness of their faith (cf. 1Pet 1:7).

In Revelation, judgment also begins with the churches (chaps. 2 – 3) before extending to those outside (chaps. 6ff.).

⁶ That these were Jewish landowners is evident from the fact that they employed laborers to work their fields. Outside Jewish circles such work was performed by (unremunerated) slaves.

⁷ 1 Peter 4:17 (Greek text): τὸ κρίμα (*to krima*) = THE Judgment.

The following translations include the definite article: CJB, Darby, DLNT, GW, JUB, LEB, NABRE, NEB, NOG, YLT.

Compare this with Hebrews 9:27, where the article is absent in the Greek, yet many of our more familiar English versions choose to include it. Translation biases!

10. 2 Peter 3:

Peter here anticipates the coming “day of judgment”, “day of the Lord”, or “day of God”, when the world and its “elements” will be destroyed by fire (3:7, 10, 12, KJV).

Writing in the 60s AD, he’s warning about “last days” Jewish scoffers who will soon arise (3:3).

These scoffers will recall Jesus’ promise to return in judgment upon their nation, alleging its non-fulfillment since 30+ years had already elapsed (3:4).

To his readers Peter points to the Flood to show that judgment, though delayed, will certainly happen.

Peter has just linked the certainty of Jesus’ return with his glory seen in his Transfiguration (2Pet 1:16-18).

Peter’s first readers were themselves awaiting the Day and could even hasten its arrival (3:12).

There’s good reason to apply Peter’s description to the burning of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70.

In fact, many learned theologians have done so from the 17th century on.

For a defense of this position, see my article on this website: *2 Peter 3: A Preterist Interpretation*.

11. Jude 1:14-15, 17-19:

¹⁴ *It was also about these that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, “Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his holy ones, ¹⁵ to execute judgment on all and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness ...”*

¹⁷ *But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

¹⁸ *They said to you, “In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions.”*

¹⁹ *It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit.*

“Scoffers” had infiltrated the churches, fulfilling certain apostolic “last time” prophecies (Jude 1:4, 18).

But God was coming soon with myriads of his “holy ones” (angels) to judge these imposters (1:14-15).

Old Testament Background

From the Old Testament we discover two aspects to God's judgment:

First, God will judge his own people, Israel. Second, he will judge the world's Gentile nations.

1. The Song of Moses, Deuteronomy 32:1-43:
Moses recounts God's faithfulness and Israel's ingratitude; he predicts Israel's future idolatry (32:3-18). He foretells God's inevitable judgment for covenant apostasy (32:19-33, or perhaps to vs. 35). Following judgment, God will show compassion to his humbled people and avenge the wrongs done by their enemies (32:34-43, or 32:36-43).
2. The Psalmists call upon God to judge the world and avenge wickedness, and they rejoice in the fact that he will someday do so (e.g., Ps 9:7-8, 19; 82:8; 94:2; 96:13; 98:9).
3. Messiah will someday exert his power to take possession of the Gentile nations, crushing those who oppose his rule (Psalm 110). All nations will be his inheritance (Psalm 2).
He will rule from the heavenly Zion, at Yahweh's right hand (Ps 2:6; 110:1-2).
Messiah's beneficent kingdom will be characterized by justice (e.g., Psalm 72; Isa 9:7; 11:1-5; 16:5).
New Testament: All nations belong to Jesus (Mt 28:18-19). Judgment began in AD 70 (Mt 16:27-28; 25:31). He's the King of kings (Rev 17:14; 19:16); he rules rebellious nations with his "rod of iron" (Rev 12:5; 19:15).
4. Day of the LORD prophecies: Judgment on Israel and/or various nations.
New Testament: Various called the Day of God, of the Lord, of the Lord Jesus, or of Christ (1Cor 1:8; 5:5; 2Cor 1:14; Php 1:6; 1Thess 5:2, 2Pet 3:10, 12). Jesus is himself the Judge.
5. The OT prophets frequently employ cosmic or de-creation imagery to describe coming judgment.
See Isaiah 13:10; 34:4; Jeremiah 4:23; Ezekiel 32:7-8; Joel 2:31; 3:15.
The heavenly lights extinguished and the stars falling (and so forth) symbolize the demise of a nation and its leaders, usually through foreign invasion.
New Testament: Such imagery is employed in Matthew 24:29; Acts 2:19-20; Revelation 6:12-14; 8:12.
All of these passages relate to the Jewish War of 66-70 AD.
6. Yahweh's cloud comings. First-century Jews familiar with the Old Testament would have understood "coming on the clouds" as connoting divinity:
 - To ride on the clouds is uniquely God's prerogative (Dt 33:26; Ps 104:3).
 - God rides on the clouds as he personally descends in his mobile "throne-chariot" on his way to visiting men and nations in judgment (Ps 18:9-12; Isa 19:1; Nah 1:3).
 - Cherubim are the bearers of God's throne-chariot (Ezekiel 1, 10; cf. 1Chr 28:18; Ps 18:10; Dan 7:9).
They would also have recalled the Shekinah, the Cloud associated with the presence and glory of God:
 - No one can see God and live (Ex 33:20; 1Tim 6:16): the Cloud served to veil the glory of God within.
 - God was present in the Cloud in the desert, and his glory within was evident (Ex 16:10; 24:15-17).
 - God descended in the Cloud to speak with Moses (Ex 34:5; Num 11:25).
 - God also descended in the Cloud when the people misbehaved (Num 12:5; 14:10; 16:19, 42).
 - God's glory in the Cloud filled the tabernacle and temple (Ex 40:34-35; 1Kgs 8:10-12; cf. Eze 10:4).
 - Daniel saw a "son of man" ascending on the clouds into Yahweh's presence to be invested with universal authority (Dan 7:13-14).

In all these instances, no visible form was observed, for God cannot be seen.

And so in the NT, Jesus' return on/with the clouds (Mt 24:30; 26:64; Rev 1:7) is an affirmation of his deity. He would return with divine power and glory. Like Father, like Son!
He ascended in a cloud; he would return the same way (Ac 1:9-11; cf. Lk 21:27).
He was Daniel's "son of man" figure.

7. Day of Vengeance prophecies. These involve vengeance on the enemies and oppressors of God's people. Such vengeance is tied to Israel's deliverance.

Isaiah prophecies about divine vengeance on Assyria and Babylon and Edom (Isa 34:8; 35:4; 61:2; 63:4). (The last two references relate to the work of Yahweh's Servant.)

New Testament: The 70 AD judgment on Jerusalem fulfills all OT "day of vengeance" prophecies (Lk 21:22).

8. God's judgment upon the covenant people themselves.

The nation/city will be judged and purged of evildoers before being finally restored (e.g., Isa 1:24 – 2:3).

God's final OT word anticipates Messiah's role in purging the nation (Mal 3:1-5). Good and bad will then be clearly distinguished, with the wicked burned up as stubble (Mal 3:16 – 4:3).

An important prophetic concept is that of the Remnant — those of the nation who survive God's judgments.

Only the righteous remnant will remain, or return to repossess their land and city:

Isaiah 1:9; 4:2-3; 6:13; 10:20-23; 11:11, 16; 28:5; 37:31-32; 46:3; 49:6; Jeremiah 3:14; 23:3; 50:20;

Ezekiel 9:4-6; Joel 2:32; Amos 5:15; 9:8; Micah 2:12; 4:7; 7:18; Zephaniah 2:7, 9; 3:12-13; Malachi 4:1-3.

New Testament: The author of Hebrews foretells imminent judgment upon God's Old Covenant people (Heb 10:25, 30-31, 39).

Also, first-century believing Jews regarded themselves as the faithful remnant foretold by the prophets.

John's vision in Revelation 7:1-8 shows this first-century Jewish remnant being sealed on their foreheads to exempt them from coming judgment (cf. Eze 9:4-6).

9. An important point relating to the preceding:

The OT prophets speak of Messiah's coming and divine judgment almost in the same breath.

In other words, these events were not to be separated by multiple centuries or millennia.

See Isaiah 61:1-2; Daniel 9:25-26; Zechariah 9:9; 13:1, 7-9; Malachi 3:1, 5; 4:1, 5.

Days of Vengeance

It is well known that Jesus, teaching in the synagogue at Nazareth, pointedly excludes “the day of vengeance of our God” from his citation of Isaiah 61:1-2. See Luke 4:18-19.

Yet Israel’s salvation, throughout Isaiah, is inseparable from God’s “day of vengeance” — from his judgment of the nation’s oppressors (Isa 34:8; 35:4; 61:2; cf. Isa 63:4).

Further on in Luke we do in fact find Jesus referring to the day(s) of vengeance — in Luke’s version of the Olivet Discourse (Luke 21:22-23, MEV):

²² “For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled.

²³ ... For there will be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people.”

Isaiah and other prophets spoke of Israel’s deliverance through God’s judgment of their enemies, but Jesus declared that those prophecies would find their definitive fulfillment in the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.

As Matthew 23:34ff. makes clear, that very generation would be judged. Ongoing Jewish persecution of God’s people would fill up the measure of their sins. For Jerusalem is the city that persecutes (Mt 23:37; Lk 13:33-34).

In Revelation, Jesus comes on the clouds to judge his enemies, including those who had pierced him (Rev 1:7).

The “great city” — Babylon — is judged on account of her history of persecution (Rev 17:6; 18:20, 24).

For just like Sodom, Egypt, and Babylon before her, Jerusalem had become the sworn enemy of God and his people (Rev 11:8).

Extent of Judgment

1. As related above, the OT anticipates God’s judgment of Israel and of the nations.

Israel herself would be purged of evildoers, and the nations would be judged for their mistreatment of God’s people. Israel would thus be saved via judgment and transformation. That’s also what Revelation shows: judgment on Jerusalem the Harlot, followed by a new restored (spiritual) Jerusalem.

2. A major theme in the gospels and NT epistles is God’s coming judgment upon the Jews.

See Matthew 3:7-12; 21:33-41; 22:1-7; 23:29-39; Luke 13:1-9; 13:24-28; 19:27, 41-44; 21:20-24; 23:28-30; Acts 2:19-21; 1 Thessalonians 2:15-16; Hebrews 10:25-31; James 5:1-9.

Jesus regarded his generation as a particularly obnoxious one (Mt 12:39; 16:4; 17:17; Mk 8:38; cf. Ac 2:40).

As Timothy James notes:

[That generation’s] wickedness was the cumulative expression of the entire Jewish race under the Old Covenant, hence Jesus’ proclamation that they would “fill up” or fulfill the measure of their fathers, Matthew 23:32.⁸

The first-century Jews would be judged on account of their persecution of OT prophets and early Christians, as well as their rejection and crucifixion of Jesus.

Jerusalem’s judgment is depicted in Revelation 18 — judged because of her persecution (18:20, 24).

3. The New Testament also refers to judgment upon the wider world: Acts 17:31; 1 Peter 4:17-18.

Of a judgment of both Jews and Gentiles: Matthew 12:41-42; Romans 2:5-10; Revelation 1:7.⁹

(Further general references to judgment: 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 1 John 4:17.)

⁸ Timothy A. James, *The Messiah’s Return: Delayed? Fulfilled? Or Double-Fulfillment?* (Cortland, OH: Self-Published, 1982), p. 8.

⁹ Israel’s covenant privileges meant that she would be judged more harshly than the nations (Rom 2:12; cf. Am 3:2; Lk 12:47-48).

4. Both the living and the dead were to be judged when Jesus returned (Ac 10:42; 2Tim 4:1; 1Pet 4:5).
But it needs to be seriously questioned whether both groups were to appear together before Christ's judgment throne.
As aforementioned, Revelation itself depicts separate judgments for the living and the dead.
Though essentially concurrent (Rev 11:18), the respective judgments are separated spatially.
Thus, in Revelation 6; 8 – 9; 14:17-20; 16 and 18; 19:11-21 we see living people/nations/cities judged, whereas in Revelation 20:11-15 we see a separate judgment of the dead following their resurrection.
5. The "nations" gathered for judgment in Matthew 25:32 are the same as those mentioned in Matthew 24 — the nations that have encountered the gospel but have responded with hatred and persecution (24:9, 14).
The gospel would be proclaimed to "all nations" "in the whole world", by which is meant the Roman Empire and its surrounds.¹⁰ It was the Roman world that heard the gospel, and it was the Roman world that experienced a time of tribulation and judgment (Mt 24:7; Lk 21:35; Rev 3:10).¹¹
The predominant response by the nations — hatred and persecution — would no doubt be expressed both towards Christ's emissaries themselves and to those who responded to their message.
See also Matthew 10:17ff., further discussed below.

Separation of People

The separation of people in the Judgment (25:32-33) can be related to other such separations.

The "goats" include the following:

- those "taken" away (Mt 24:40-41).
- the wicked servant who wasn't expecting his master's return (Mt 24:45-51).
- the foolish virgins who didn't take sufficient oil (Mt 25:1-13).
- the lazy servant who buried his master's talent (Mt 25:14-30).

It is important to note that the master returns to the same servant(s) whom he left.

Where are the bad "taken" (24:40-41)?

The parallel in Luke 17:34-37 suggests that their destination is Jerusalem.¹²

The separation should also be related to the parables of Matthew 13 — the Weeds, and the Dragnet:

The bad are removed from God's kingdom and incinerated; the good remain.

With all this to transpire at the "end of the age" (Mt 13:40, 49; cf. 24:3).

¹⁰ The Greek term translated "world" in Matthew 24:14 (*oikoumenē*, Strong's G3625) refers to the inhabited world — the Roman Empire and its surrounds. We see this signification in Luke 2:1, where "all the world" clearly refers only to the Roman Empire. Likewise in Acts 2:5: The "Jews from every nation under heaven" present at Pentecost came from the nations of the Roman Empire and its immediate surrounds (Ac 2:9-11).

Note that the gospel, by AD 70, had been proclaimed from Britain and Spain in the west all the way to India in the east. Paul wrote of the gospel's remarkable progress in his time (Col 1:6, 23). Just as with creation's ubiquitous witness to God, so likewise the apostolic "voice" had "gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world" (Rom 10:18; cf. Ps 19:4).

And Luke notes: "[Paul's preaching] continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, ... 'in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people [from pagan gods] ...'" (Ac 19:10, 26).

¹¹ One therefore shouldn't limit Jesus' coming in judgment to Judea and the fall of Jerusalem.

¹² John Gill's comments on Luke 17:37: "... the words are an answer to a question, where such persons would be, who would be taken and destroyed, when others would be left, or preserved; and manifestly refer to the body, or carcass of the Jewish people at Jerusalem, ... the Roman armies gathering about them, and seizing them as their prey."

(From Gill's *Exposition of the Bible*, via the Bible Hub website: <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/gill/luke/17.htm>.)

Albert Barnes' comments on Luke 17:37: "Eagles flock where there is prey. ... [to] Jerusalem, the place of eminent wickedness, ..."

(From Barnes' *Notes on the Whole Bible*, via the Bible Hub website: <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/luke/17.htm>.)

Basis of Judgment

1. As aforementioned, the “nations” gathered for judgment (Mt 25:32) are the same as those mentioned in Matthew 24 — the nations that have encountered the gospel but have responded with hatred and persecution (Mt 24:9, 14). The gospel would be proclaimed to the nations of the Roman Empire and its surrounds. The predominant response by the nations — hatred and persecution — would no doubt be expressed both towards Christ’s emissaries themselves and to those who responded to their message.
2. So, we can now appreciate the basis of judgment:
Treatment of Christ’s distressed “brothers” — his followers — would determine the verdict (Mt 25:40, 45). The judgment presupposes that these are undergoing persecution — they are hungry, naked, in prison, etc. because of persecution and general injustice.
The Sheep – Goats Judgment is therefore a first-century judgment based on people’s treatment of Christ’s emissaries and disciples.
3. In support of Jesus’ “brothers” being his persecuted first-century disciples:
Jesus explicitly states that his “brothers” are those who obey God (Mt 12:49-50).
The “blessed” who are received into the kingdom (Mt 25:34) are the humble and persecuted (Mt 5:3-11).
In Matthew 10:40-42 Jesus promises rewards to all who will welcome and aid his emissaries, even for offering a cup of cold water. The principle here is the fact that Jesus closely identifies with his followers — what is done for the least of them is done to him (Mt 10:40; cf. Ac 9:4-5).

A closer look at Matthew 10

The situations described in Matthew 10 and in Matthew 24 are one and the same:

Both passages refer to universal hatred, widespread persecution, and the need to endure to the end in order to be saved. Compare Matthew 10:22 with 24:9, 13. Both passages deal with first-century events.

Matthew 10 looks beyond the apostles’ immediate mission to their post-Pentecost proclamation of the gospel. This (later) proclamation will engender fierce persecution from Jews and Gentiles alike (10:17-18).

There will be an urgency to that mission; when persecuted they should flee to another town, for Jesus will return before they have “gone through all the towns of Israel” (10:23).¹³

Jesus’ promise of a reward (in 10:41-42) relates to this time of persecution just prior to his return (10:21-23).

The principle here is this (10:40, MEV):

“He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.”

Christ’s emissaries would only be welcomed, and shown hospitality, and aided by those with like faith.

And so, the latter are promised precisely the same reward as the former — eternal life (10:41).

Indeed, the slightest help given to one of Christ’s distressed followers, especially to young disciples, will be rewarded (10:42; cf. Mk 9:41).

So too in the Sheep – Goats Judgment: Christ rewards those who have aided his persecuted followers:

Times of persecution reveal whose side a person is on, exposing one’s hidden motives.

Aiding his disciples — feeding, clothing, visiting them — would demonstrate loyalty to Christ.

But harassment or indifference would demonstrate the opposite.

¹³ By which is probably meant towns not just in Judea, Samaria and Galilee, but also foreign cities wherever Jews resided.

First-century Persecution

1. Early persecution came from the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem (Acts 4 – 9).
Then, from Acts 13 on we see incessant Jewish opposition to Paul and his companions in their missionary endeavors — constantly accusing them before the Roman authorities.
2. Some insight into how “normal” persecution operated can be garnered from James in his epistle addressed to Jewish Christians (Jas 1:1).
James refers to economic exploitation, hauling before the courts, and murder (Jas 2:6-7; 5:1-6).
3. The Hebrews author refers to the persecution of Jewish Christians (no doubt at the hands of fellow Jews) as involving imprisonment and confiscation of property (Hebrews 10:32-34; 13:3):
³² But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, ³³ sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. ³⁴ For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.
^{13:3} Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, ...
4. John in Revelation, writing to centers in the province of Asia with large Jewish populations, refers to persecution from the “synagogue of Satan” (Rev 2:9; 3:9). But things were about to get a whole lot worse under Nero. Once Nero had proscribed Christianity (in November 64 AD), we can assume that the Jews throughout the Empire would have hauled their Christian brothers before the Roman courts, leading to the conditions Jesus speaks of in Matthew 25. Gentiles throughout the Empire would have done the same.
5. Paul writes to the Thessalonians concerning persecution at the hands of their own people (1Thes 2:14).
6. The Parable of the Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1-8) presupposes a time of general injustice and persecution for Christians. Jesus there calls for Christians to persevere in the trials that would precede his coming. In response to their prayers, he will come “speedily” to grant them relief.
(Compare with James 5:4, 7-9.)

Some final observations

1. Judgment would bring relief to God's first-century people and wrath to their persecutors.

2 Thessalonians 1:4-10:

⁴ *Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.*

⁵ *This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering — ⁶ since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷ and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels ⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, ¹⁰ when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.*

Persecution probably subsided once the Jewish War had begun, and more so when Nero himself died by suicide in June 68 AD.

Relief from persecution may also be intended in Luke 21:28:

"Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

"Straighten up" here means to "be elated", especially after a time of sorrow. The opposite of dejection.

"Redemption" in this context simply means "deliverance" — no doubt from the trials and persecution that they as believers had suffered.

2. The rewards of eternal life or punishment meted out (in the Judgment) relate to eternal destinies.

So it is right to ask: How can the living be judged and rewarded with destinies that properly belong to the dead — admitted into heaven or cast into hell (as in Revelation 20:15)?

Response:

This is indeed a difficulty.

We may say that for those who survived this (first-century) Judgment, the verdicts given were provisional — a sentence that people felt in their hearts.

But we should also point out that vast numbers of people did in fact perish at that time:

Thousands of Christians perished under Nero's persecution.

Warfare, famine, plagues, and natural disasters claimed the lives of many others throughout the Empire.

The Jewish War itself resulted in massive casualties.¹⁴

All those who perished certainly entered into their eternal destinies.

Revelation 14 depicts this fact with its two-fold harvest of "the earth" — of the Land of Israel.¹⁵

In the first, Jesus is seated on a cloud as he harvests the Jewish martyrs into Paradise (Rev 14:14-16).

The second is a harvest of judgment, where the unbelievers and persecutors of Israel are harvested into "the great winepress of the wrath of God" (Rev 14:17-20). Their blood is squeezed out to become a 300 km deluge outside of Jerusalem — encompassing the full north-south length of the Holy Land.

¹⁴ According to Josephus, 1,100,000 Jews perished in Jerusalem. Another 237,000 Jews were massacred by their enemies in foreign cities (50,000 in Alexandria alone) and by the Roman army as it advanced through towns and villages *en route* to Jerusalem.

¹⁵ According to Kurt Simmons, "in the imagery of Revelation, the sea stands for the gentile peoples, the earth for Palestine and the Jews." Kurt M. Simmons, *The Consummation of the Ages* (Carlsbad, NM: Bimillennial Preterist Association, 2003), p. 280.

This last point emphasizes that the Roman campaigns and siege will result in a terrible blood-bath, so that the whole land becomes polluted with the blood of the slain.

All these — the good and the bad — perished and certainly entered into their eternal rewards.

Furthermore, these “harvests” should probably be related to the warnings given by John the Baptist and Jesus to the Jews, as related in Matthew 3:12 and 13:30.

3. Jesus in AD 70 returned as both king and judge (Mt 16:27-28; 25:31).

But his judgment of the nations at that time was merely the commencement of his ongoing rule as king and judge. (See Appendix 1, below.)

With his return the kingdom came “with power” (Mk 9:1; Rev 11:15-17).

He presently rules from the heavenly Zion over the nations (Ps 2:6; Ps 110:1-2).

His return inaugurated the new world order, which is depicted for us in Revelation 21 – 22.

From “Jerusalem” he rules the nations (Rev 22:3). We see (in this new order) the wicked residing outside Jerusalem’s walls, excluded from citizenship, under God’s curse, yet invited to repent (Rev 22:15, 17).

He rules and judges the nations via his word and law (Isa 2:3-4; 11:4; 42:4).

And he disciplines those who rebel with his “rod of iron” (Ps 2:9; Rev 12:5).

4. The proclamation of the gospel also results in judgment:

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.
(John 3:18)

Provisional verdicts and sentences are pronounced based on one’s response to the gospel:

Those who respond in faith are admitted into God’s kingdom. They are admitted into “Jerusalem” already this side of eternity (Rev 22:14), and even more fully when they die.

But a sentence of death hangs over all who reject Christ — these remain under God’s curse (Rev 22:15).

For such, final impenitence will lead to the lake of fire or “second death” — the death beyond death (Rev 21:8).

Thus, Jesus continually judges also via the gospel, with provisional verdicts becoming final at death.

5. The Judgment of the Dead (Rev 20:11-15) was a one-off past event.

For us today judgment takes place immediately when we die (Heb 9:27; 2Cor 5:8-10) — at which time each person enters directly into his final reward (heaven or hell).

There is no longer any intermediate abode to which we go to await some future end-time judgment.

Appendix 1: Jesus' ongoing judgment of the nations

The following excerpts are from a work published in 1900:

Christ Came Again: The Parousia of Christ a Past Event, the Kingdom of Christ a Present Fact, with a Consistent Eschatology.

Author: William Smith Urmey, D.D.

Publisher: Eaton and Mains, New York.

p. 307: [With the Parousia as a past event], it becomes obligatory on us to show that the judgment also was initiated at the time of the Parousia; our contention being that it is a continuous process running all through the kingly rule of Christ as the joint administrator of justice with the Father (Rev 22:1) in the new heavens and the new earth.

p. 319: *The Duration of the Judgment.*

"He hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world" (Acts 17:31). "In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men ... by Jesus Christ" (Rom 2:16). "The judgment of the great day" (Jude 1:6). These and similar texts have led many to suppose that the judgment was to be limited to one day, or a period of twenty-four hours.

There is obviously the teaching in the New Testament that there would come a certain point of time when the judgment would be ushered in, or *begin*, as Peter says in his first epistle [1Pet 4:17]. ... But this by no means obliges us to conclude that the process will be limited to a single day. ...

Van Oosterzee says, "It is self-evident that the imagery in which the last judgment is presented in Holy Scripture admits of no literal explanation, ... Even in the Middle Ages it was readily granted ... that [the] entire judgment, as respects both the investigation and the sentence, will be performed not in audible words, but in mental processes (Thomas Aquinas)." (Quotation from Dr. [Israel] Warren's *Parousia of Christ.*)

pp. 320-321: Dr. [Milton] Terry says: "... But nothing could be more unscriptural than the notion that the judgment of nations and of individuals is limited to one last day. It is a continual process running through the Messianic era, and a necessary part of the administration of the King of kings. Nations are continually undergoing signal judgment (Joel 3:2, 12), and the eternal destinies of individuals are being determined every day. And this is essentially the order of Christ's reign" (*Biblical Hermeneutics*, pages 450-451).

p. 323: The judgment scene in Matthew 25:31-46 is evidently intended as a description of the inauguration of Christ's judicial reign over the nations; commencing with those who at his coming could be judged by the criterion he then institutes — the treatment given his disciples as they went through these nations preaching the kingdom of heaven and declaring that Christ was soon to appear as judge of the living and the dead. But this same criterion may be extended to other nations as the Gospel is carried to them, and this law of love, as the great cardinal law of the kingdom, be the standard whereby all the other nations may in time be judged. Or we may look upon that judgment scene of Matthew as the beginning of judgment, under Christ, which is to be continued, with regard to humanity, so long as Christ shall continue to reign, which, according to the Scriptures, is forever and ever (Rev 11:15).

Appendix 2: What happened at the “end of the age”?

Kurt Simmons makes the following comment regarding the time limitation expressed by Jesus in his Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24:34; Mark 13:30; Luke 21:32):

The fact that the things described would be fulfilled in the disciples' generation shows that the Olivet Discourse is really just an expansion upon the Great Denunciation recorded in Matthew 23, which also expressly limited its dire predictions to that generation [in 23:36]. The only reasonable conclusion that follows is that the "end" described was not of the natural world or physical cosmos, but an "age," an "era," or an "epoch" of which Jerusalem's destruction was a part and sign: A world *order* was passing away and would be replaced by another, not the world itself. This is uniformly borne witness to by newer translations, which substitute "age" for "world" in Matthew 24:3: *“What shall be the sign of thy coming and the end of the age?”*

With this premise in mind, Preterists largely interpret the word rendered "world" or "age" as the Mosaic age. Not all Preterists agree that the age should be defined by the Mosaic law and covenant. This writer sees the term in reference to the larger world order and epoch that had endured from the time of man's fall, particularly as this was marked by Gentile dominion and the oppression of God's people. It was the peculiar office of the Messiah to deliver the saints from sin *and* [from] their enemies amongst the world's civil powers. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, thus said: *“... that [as the prophets foretold] we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us ... that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life.”* (Luke 1:68-75)

“Saved from the hand of our enemies.” Clearly, deliverance of God's little flock from their oppressors among the world's civil powers was the expectation of every Jew. Unfortunately, many misinterpreted this to mean that the Messiah would be a political figure, exercising dominion from an earthly throne. This was not to be: Jesus rules from the right hand of the Majesty in heaven; his kingdom is not of this world.

Christ's salvation from sin was fulfilled at the cross; putting his enemies beneath his feet occurred in the coming of his kingdom “in power” within the generation of those then living (Mt 16:27-28; 2Tim 4:1), and it was *this* that would mark the end of the age. Jerusalem and the Jewish nation, which had become enemies of Christ and his people, persecuting the church and opposing the gospel, were thus swept away in a larger time of *world-wrath* that put Christ's enemies — Jews and Romans — beneath his feet.¹⁶

¹⁶ From Kurt Simmons' online article: *The “Age to Come” and the Eternal State*. See: <http://www.preteristcentral.com>. Under this website's *Miscellaneous Studies* section.

Appendix 3: God's judgment of the nations in the OT Prophets

Two main points:

First: Such judgment is frequently tied to Israel's restoration.

Second: Such judgment is often based on the nations' mistreatment of Israel — they have gone too far by seeking to annihilate God's people.

Here is a brief look at some of these prophecies from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel, Micah, Zephaniah, and Zechariah.

- Throughout Isaiah, Israel's deliverance and restoration are tied to Yahweh's "day of vengeance" — his judgment upon the nation's oppressors (34:8; 35:4; 61:2; 63:4).
In Isaiah 63:1-6, Yahweh's Servant (whom we know to be Jesus) is the One who accomplishes the "day of vengeance" and the "year of [Israel's] redemption" (63:4). His wrath is directed towards Edom, which stands as the archetype of all of Israel's enemies.¹⁷
Likewise in Isaiah 34 – 35, the judgment of the nations (again, especially Edom — see 34:5-6) is tied to Israel's restoration. God acts in vengeance "for the cause of Zion" (34:8; cf. 35:4). Jesus likewise fulfills this prophecy — compare Isaiah 35:5-6 with Luke 7:22.
Therefore, Jesus came both to restore Israel and judge the nations — the two are closely connected.
Isaiah 61:1-2 is cited by Jesus as being fulfilled in his ministry, but he pointedly excludes the phrase "the day of vengeance of our God" (Lk 4:18-19; cf. Isa 61:2). Only later does he refer to the "days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written" — ironically in connection with the Jewish War and fall of Jerusalem (Lk 21:20-24).
- Isaiah 10:5-19: God's judgment of Assyria.
Assyria was the "rod" of God's anger; she wielded the "club" of his wrath against Israel (10:5, EHV).
But that nation went well beyond God's intent (10:6-7).
When God has finished using them to discipline his people, he will punish the Assyrians for their haughty defiance (10:12-19, 25).
All this to be tied to the saving of a chastened remnant within Israel (10:20-25).
- Isaiah 13:1 – 14:23: God's judgment of Babylon.
The "Day of the LORD" (Isa 13:6, 9) is his coming against Babylon with a foreign army (13:3-9).
Judgment is tied to Israel's restoration (14:1-2).
Babylon will be judged for its oppression (14:4), its anger and "unrelenting persecution" (14:6), and its pride (14:12-14).
- Isaiah 14:24 – 23:18: Prophecies of judgment against Assyria, Philistia, Moab, Damascus (Aram), Cush, Egypt, Babylon (again), Edom, Arabia, Jerusalem, and Tyre.
- Isaiah 24 – 27: General judgment. Tied to Israel/Judah's restoration (cf. 26:1-2; 27:6, 12-13).
- Jeremiah 50 – 51: God's judgment of Babylon.
Date: About 586 BC, following Jerusalem's destruction by the Babylonians.
Jeremiah foretells Babylon's demise at the hands of the Medes (50:3; 51:11, 28).
All this to be tied to Israel's repentance and national restoration (50:3-5, 18-19).

¹⁷ Commentators such as John Gill and Matthew Henry apply Isaiah 63:1-6 to the future — to Jesus' wrath directed against the Church's enemies at his Second Coming. See <https://www.christianity.com/bible/commentary.php?com>.
Isaiah's imagery of the winepress and stained garments is taken up in the judgments of Revelation (in 14:19-20; 19:13, 15).

Babylon was God's "hammer" and "weapon of war" to destroy nations (50:23; 51:20),¹⁸ but God would in turn "repay Babylon ... for all the evil that they have done in Zion" (51:24) and take "vengeance for his temple" (50:28; 51:11).¹⁹

Babylon went well beyond God's intent (cf. Isa 47:6; Zec 1:15).

- Joel 3: God's judgment of the nations is tied to the restoration of Judah/Jerusalem (3:1-2, 17-21).
The basis of judgment is their mistreatment of his people (3:2-3, 19).
Judgment proceeds from God himself enthroned in Zion/Jerusalem (3:16-17).
Peter links Joel's prophecies to his own time and urges his Jewish hearers to be saved from the coming Day of the Lord (Ac 2:16-21, 40; cf. Joel 2:28-32).
- Micah 7:8-20: God's wonders displayed in Israel's restoration (7:14-15) will make the nations ashamed (7:10, 16), so that they themselves will also turn in fear to God (7:17).
- Zephaniah 3:8-13: God will assemble the nations for judgment, after which they will call upon and serve him (3:8-9). He will gather his scattered people (3:10). With the proud removed, only the humble who trust God will inhabit Jerusalem — the righteous "remnant of Israel" (3:11-13, KJV).
- Zechariah 1: God's judgment of Israel's oppressors.
God was somewhat angry with his people, but he was "exceedingly angry" with the nations that he had employed to discipline them (1:15).
Those nations (among them Assyria and Babylon) went too far and "added to [Israel's] calamity" by seeking to destroy her as a people (1:15, WEB; cf. Isa 10:7; 47:6).
Though currently at rest and feeling secure (1:11, 15), those nations will in time be judged (1:18-21).
Such judgement will be tied to Jerusalem's restoration (Zec 2:1-5).

¹⁸ Nebuchadnezzar is called God's "servant" in Jeremiah 25:9 and 27:6.

¹⁹ Note the description in Psalm 74:3-8 of the Babylonians' high-handed destruction of the temple.