

**Posttribulationism and the Sheep/Goat-Judgment of Matthew 25 —
A Summary-Critique of Robert Gundry's View**
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Robert Gundry places the judgment of the nations at the end of the millennium, and concludes it is the “last judgment” that deals with the “separation of the righteous from the wicked in the whole human race.”¹ In what follows, I will briefly summarize and critique his view on the judgment of the nations, using as my primary source his book *The Church and the Tribulation*.

Within premillennial eschatology, Matthew 25:31-46 is properly interpreted as referring to the judgment of the nations. The nations are comprised of the sheep and the goats, representing the saved and the lost among the Gentiles. According to Matthew 25:32, they are intermingled and require separation by a special judgment. This judgment follows the second coming of Christ, since it occurs “when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him” (Matthew 25:31). However, this judgment seems somewhat infeasible (as well as unnecessary) if, as posttribulationists hold, the rapture takes place at the Second Advent. At a posttribulational rapture, a separation of the saved from the unsaved would take place at that point.² Accordingly, most posttribulationists either ignore this passage entirely, or relate it to the final judgment after the millennium.

Crucial Terms in Gundry's Argument

Gundry is among those who place the judgment in Matthew 25:31-46 at the end of the millennium. His argument hinges, to a large degree, on the validity of his interpretation of three crucial terms: the “nations” in Matthew 25:32; the “kingdom” in Matthew 25:34; and the “brothers” in Matthew 25:40.

Briefly stated, Gundry argues that the nations are the men of all ages — both Jew *and* Gentile, living *and* dead. Thus, the men of all ages are gathered before Christ at the end of the millennium for judgment. The basis of the judgment is how these people have treated Christ's brothers. The brothers are defined as whoever does the will of the Father (i.e., fellow believers, see Matthew 12:50). Those who have treated these brothers well inherit the eternal phase of the kingdom (i.e., entrance into eternal life).³ Those who have failed to treat these brothers well will depart into eternal punishment. Gundry writes:

Nothing in Matthew 25:31-46 indicates that the judgment of all the nations has to do with admission or nonadmission into Jesus' millennial kingdom. On the contrary, some will go “into eternal punishment” and “the righteous into eternal life” (verse 46), so that “inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation

¹ Robert Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 512.

² John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), p. 192.

³ See Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art*, p. 513.

of the world” (verse 34) refers more easily to the eternal state than to a millennial state.⁴

The “Nations” in Matthew 25:32

Regarding the judgment scene in Matthew 25:31-46, Gundry raises the question, “May it not be the description of a general judgment of ‘all the nations’ of men from all ages at the close of the millennium (and thus be parallel to Revelation 20:11ff)?”

A comparison of the judgment in Matthew with the one in Revelation would seem to make this view unlikely.

- *Different Time:* The judgment of the nations occurs at the second coming of Christ (Matthew 25:31); the Great White Throne occurs following the millennial kingdom (Revelation 20:11-12).
- *Different Scene:* The judgment of the nations occurs on earth (Matthew 25:31); the Great White Throne judgment occurs at the Great White Throne (Revelation 20:11).
- *Different Subjects:* At the judgment of the nations, three groups of people are mentioned: the sheep, the goats, and the brothers (Matthew 25:32,40). The Great White Throne judgment involves the unsaved dead (Revelation 20:12).
- *Different Basis:* The basis of judgment at the judgment of the nations is how Christ’s “brothers” were treated (Matthew 25:40); the basis of judgment at the Great White Throne is their works (Revelation 20:12).
- *Different Result:* The result of the judgment of the nations is twofold: the righteous enter into the kingdom; the unrighteous are cast into the lake of fire. The result of the Great White Throne judgment is that the wicked dead are cast into the lake of fire (the righteous are not mentioned).
- *Resurrection:* No resurrection is mentioned in connection with the judgment of the nations. A resurrection does take place in connection with the Great White Throne judgment (Revelation 20:13).⁵

A plain reading of the text indicates that these judgments are not one and the same. If I am correct, Gundry errs in synthesizing the “dead” in Revelation 20:12 with “all the nations” in Matthew 25:32. Yet Gundry seems unimpressed with these distinctions and insists that “all the nations” in Matthew 25:32 refers to the men of all ages — both Jew *and* Gentile, living *and* dead.

On the one hand, the term “nations” (ἐθνη) can be used to designate the whole human race living at one particular time.⁶ For example, in Mark 13:10 Jesus urges, “the gospel must first be proclaimed *to all nations.*” In Matthew 28:19 Jesus instructs His disciples: “Go therefore and make disciples *of all nations....*” In Romans 16:25-26 we read of the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed “to all nations.” In Revelation 15:4 we read, “Who will not fear, O Lord,

⁴ Robert Gundry, *First the Antichrist: Why Christ Won’t Come Before the Antichrist Does* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1997), p. 124.

⁵ See Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1986), p. 518.

⁶ See Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1980), p. 290.

and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. *All nations* will come and worship you....” In these verses, the term “nations” seems to be used in a broad, universal sense.⁷

On the other hand, it is important to observe that this same word (εθνη) is often used to denote Gentiles or “non-Jewish people.”⁸ For example, in Acts 11:1 we read, “Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that *the Gentiles* (εθνη) also had received the word of God.” In Acts 11:18 we read, “When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, ‘Well then, God has granted to *the Gentiles* (εθνη) also the repentance that leads to life.’” In Romans 3:29 we read, “Is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles (εθνη) also? Yes, of Gentiles also.”⁹ Scholars have long recognized that “in the Jewish sense, *ta ethne*, the nations, means the Gentile nations or the Gentiles in general as spoken of all who are not Israelites... (Matt. 4:15; 10:5; Mark 10:33; Luke 2:32; Acts 4:27; 26:17; Rom. 2:14; 3:29; *Septuagint*: Neh. 5:8,9; Is. 9:1; Ezek. 4:13; 27:33,36; 34:13; Jer. 10:3).... In the New Testament, *ethnos* generally designates a non-Jewish nation.”¹⁰

The context of the particular Scripture passage in view generally indicates which sense of “nations” is intended — the broad sense of “all people,” or the narrower sense of “non-Jewish people.”¹¹ Regarding context, a crucial point that bears consideration is the fact that Matthew (himself a Jew) was writing primarily to a Jewish audience in his Gospel, using terms a Jew would readily understand. His goal was to convince them that Jesus is the promised Jewish Messiah. Substantiation for the Jewish character of the book is found in the style of writing, the vocabulary, the subject matter, the Jewish customs that are mentioned, and the testimony of tradition. Moreover, Matthew’s Gospel contains about 130 Old Testament citations and allusions, more than any other Gospel (for example, 2:17,18; 4:13-15; 13:35; 21:4,5; 27:9,10). Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus is particularly relevant in this regard. Since Matthew’s Gospel was written to Jews, he needed to prove to Jews that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12:1-3) and the Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7:12-14). By tracing Jesus’ lineage to Abraham and David in the opening genealogy, Matthew accomplished this end (see Matthew 1:1).

I believe the Jewish character of the book suggests that “nations” in Matthew 25:32 refers to Gentiles only. Walter Edman observes that in regard to the “nations” in

⁷ “In 64 passages *ethnos* has no specialized sense. The reference is to a people or peoples.” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 201.

⁸ William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 217.

⁹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, p. 201. See also *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Collin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), 2:793.

¹⁰ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1992), p. 503.

¹¹ Walter Edman, “The Judgment of the Gentiles,” Th.M. Thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1980, p. 44.

Matthew 25, “the term normally designating Gentiles would not be expected to include Jews if the listeners were in fact Jewish.”¹² Moreover, God’s judgment of the nations was part and parcel of the Jewish expectation for the future (see, for example, Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3).¹³ Indeed, it was the Jewish belief that judgment would precede the messianic kingdom. Further, though not inspired as Scripture, Jewish apocalyptic texts have been discovered which shed light on Jewish beliefs in biblical times to the effect that the Jews fully expected that the (non-Jewish) nations would be judged for how they treated Israel.¹⁴

Gundry disagrees with all this, however, and argues that, especially when the word “all” (παντα) modifies “the nations” (εθνη), the term likely incorporates the Jews. Gundry is not without support here. A.T. Robertson, author of *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, says that the phrase “all the nations” (παντα τα εθνη) refers to “not just Gentiles, but Jews also.”¹⁵ *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* says that “‘all the nations’ (παντα τα εθνη, v. 32) means ‘all peoples’ and clearly implies that ‘all the nations’ includes more than Gentiles only... As the gospel of the kingdom is preached to Gentiles as well as Jews... so also must all stand before the King.”¹⁶ There are some pretribulationists too (including Dr. David Lowery and Dr. Thomas Constable), who believe “all the nations” must refer generally to “all people” (Gentile and Jew) — especially since reference is made to “all the nations.”¹⁷

While this view is possible, let us note that in Romans 15:11, the phrase “all the nations” (παντα τα εθνη) refers exclusively to “all you Gentiles.” Hence, the use of “all” in reference to “the nations” is not a definitive proof that both Gentiles *and* Jews must be in view in the judgment of the nations. Context must be the determining factor in what the term means. And what persuades me personally is the fact that the word “nations,” particularly in Jewish contexts, often refers to Gentiles.

Especially when one keeps in mind the fact that Scripture speaks of a *separate* and *distinct* judgment for Israel (Ezekiel 20:34-38),¹⁸ it makes sense that the judgment

¹² Edman, “The Judgment of the Gentiles,” p. 44.

¹³ Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 118.

¹⁴ Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, p. 118.

¹⁵ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, in Accordance, Oaksoft Bible Software.

¹⁶ *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, in Accordance, Oaksoft Bible Software.

¹⁷ See David Lowery, “Matthew,” in *The Bible Knowledge Key Word Study: The Gospels*, ed. Darrell Bock (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications, 2002), p. 103. See also Bible Study Notes of Dr. Thomas Constable, available at <http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes.htm>.

¹⁸ Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice write: “The tribulation is said to be a time in which God will make Israel ‘pass under the rod’ in order to ‘purge from you the rebels’ (Ezekiel 20:37-38). Thus, the tribulation is a time of judgment upon the nation of Israel, which will result in the death of two-thirds of the nation (Zechariah 13:8-9), so that of those who are left ‘all Israel will be saved’ (Romans 11:26) by coming to faith in Jesus as their

of the nations must be a judgment of non-Jews. “Taking the Ezekiel passage and the Matthew passage together, the whole population of the earth at the second coming of Christ is in view. If all Israelites are dealt with in Ezekiel, all the others described as the “nations” or the Gentiles are in the Matthew judgment.”¹⁹

Hence, with all due respect to Dr. Gundry, I believe he is incorrect to include the Jews as part of “all the nations.” Contextually, the term likely refers to Gentiles alone. However, there is another related issue we must touch on. As noted earlier, Gundry believes that “all the nations” includes not just Gentiles and Jews, but *living and dead* Gentiles and Jews.

From my understanding, the Greek word rendered “nations” (ἔθνη) is never, according to the uniform testimony of scholars, used to designate dead people, unless this be the lone example.²⁰ William Kelly writes: “Those gathered before [Jesus] are ‘all the nations’ — a term never used about the dead or the risen, but only applied to men here below.”²¹ Based on New Testament usage and context, I conclude that “nations” in Matthew 25 refers to *living* Gentiles.

This view harmonizes well with the pretribulational scheme. As J. Dwight Pentecost puts it, “this is a judgment upon all the *living* Gentiles who have *not been exterminated* through the wars and pestilences and judgments of the tribulation period.”²²

This view also harmonizes with the fact that the “times of the Gentiles” (in which Jerusalem is dominated by Gentiles) comes to an end at the Second Coming. It makes sense that there would be a *judgment* of the Gentiles upon completion of the *times* of the Gentiles, in preparation for the millennial kingdom.²³

Messiah.” (Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, *Charting the End Times* [Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2001], p. 122.)

¹⁹ Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, p. 89. Note that Gundry argues that “though Ezekiel 20:32-38 is often cited to prove that only saved Jews will enter the millennial kingdom, that passage deals with the restoration of a Jewish remnant to their land following the Babylonian exile long ago” (*First the Antichrist*, p. 128). Walvoord counters: “This was a prophecy which was not fulfilled in the return from the Babylonian and Assyrian captivities.... This important prophecy was never fulfilled in the history of Israel and is connected to the judgments at the Second Coming.... The purpose of God to bring Israel eventually to their Promised Land and permanently settle them here is one of the great lines of prophecy, beginning with Genesis 12:7 and continuing throughout the Old Testament.” (John F. Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990], p. 169.)

²⁰ George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1952), 2:374.

²¹ William Kelly, *Lectures on the Gospel of Matthew* (New York, NY: Loizeaux Brothers, 1943), pp. 478-79, insert added for clarification.

²² J. Dwight Pentecost, *Prophecy for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), p. 177.

²³ John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), p. 285.

Still further, this view harmonizes with key Old Testament Scriptures that relate to the judgment of the nations. An example is Joel 3:1-2,12, where we read:

For behold, in those days and at that time,
When I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem,
I will gather all the nations
And bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat.
Then I will enter into judgment with them there
On behalf of My people and My inheritance, Israel,
Whom they have scattered among the nations;
And they have divided up My land....
Let the nations be aroused
And come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat,
For there I will sit to judge
All the surrounding nations.
(emphasis added)

Notice in this passage that “all the nations” are distinct from the Jews (“My people and My inheritance, Israel”). When this is coupled with the fact that Matthew was writing to a largely Jewish audience (who, no doubt, knew of this prophecy, and its clear distinction between the nations and the Jews), it seems unlikely that they would have interpreted Matthew’s reference to “all the nations” (παντα τα εθνη) in Matthew 25 as being anyone other than living Gentiles.

The Jewish Abrahamic covenant also comes into play in the judgment in Matthew 25:31-46. Lewis Sperry Chafer observes:

There is no mere accident in the fact that the two words *blessed* and *cursed* appear in the Abrahamic covenant respecting the attitude of Gentiles toward Abraham’s seed according to the flesh (Gen. 12:1-3), and that these words appear again when Gentiles are being brought into judgment respecting their treatment of God’s elect people. In Genesis it is written, “I will *bless* them that bless thee,” and in the description of the judgment of the nations it is said, “Come, ye *blessed* of my Father.” In Genesis it is said, “I will *curse* him that curseth thee,” while in this same judgment it is said, “Depart from me, ye *cursed*, into everlasting fire.” Only because ye did it or ye did it not unto one of the least of these my brethren.²⁴

Thus, the Abrahamic covenant supports the view that “all the nations” (παντα τα εθνη) in Matthew 25:32 refers to Gentiles as distinct from the Jews.

To sum up, the view that “all the nations” refers to living Gentiles who survive the tribulation period is substantiated by etymological studies, the context of the book of Matthew, Old Testament prophecies, and the Abrahamic covenant.

²⁴ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 5:139.

The “Kingdom” in Matthew 25:34

In Matthew 25:34 we read: “Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’” Regarding this verse, Gundry raises the question, “Will the kingdom into which the sheep enter be the millennial phase or the eternal phase of God’s rule?”²⁵ Indeed, Gundry asserts that

we need to question the assumption that the immediate issue of the judgment of the nations will have to do with entrance into the millennial kingdom. The statement that the sheep will go into “eternal life” (Matt. 25:46) better lends itself to the view that Jesus refers to the eternal phase of the kingdom (cf. Luke 1:33). The immediate and prime issue of the judgment will then concern entrance into eternal bliss versus eternal punishment.²⁶

Gundry thus defines the “kingdom” in Matthew 25:34 as the “eternal life” mentioned in Matthew 25:46. He does not believe the millennial kingdom is in view here, and he is not without support for this view. William Biederwolf writes:

Some premillennialists make it to be the kingdom of Christ here on earth during the Millennium.... while Alford, Lange and all other premillennialists who place this judgment scene at the end of the Millennium, refer the kingdom to the time of the new heavens and the new earth after the Millennium.²⁷

Posttribulationist George E. Ladd adds:

The text itself makes it clear that it is not the millennium into which the blessed enter, nor is exclusion from the millennium the fate of the others. The text itself says: “And they (the wicked) will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (25:46). Eternal punishment and eternal life. This text speaks not of admission to or exclusion from a temporal earthly kingdom but of the state of final, everlasting punishment or reward.²⁸

Since the sheep enter the eternal phase of the kingdom, argues Gundry, this judgment must take place at the end of the millennium. If it took place at the second coming of Christ, there would be no room for the millennium.

A study of the kingdom concept in Matthew, however, would seem to dictate against Gundry’s view. Charles C. Ryrie points out that “Matthew uses ‘kingdom’

²⁵ Robert Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1980), p. 163.

²⁶ Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 166.

²⁷ William E. Biederwolf, *The Millennium Bible* (Chicago, IL: The Glad Tidings Publishing Co., 1924), p. 359.

²⁸ George E. Ladd, *The Last Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 99-100.

primarily in relation to the Messianic, Davidic, millennial kingdom.”²⁹ He further observes: “In Matthew the eternal kingdom is referred to infrequently (cf. 6:33; 12:28; 13:38, 43; 19:24; 20; 21:31).”³⁰ Chafer likewise writes, “There is no reason why the word kingdom should be given any other meaning in this passage than has been assigned to it throughout the Gospel by Matthew. The kingdom is Israel’s earthly, Messianic, millennial kingdom.”³¹

The Jews to whom the book of Matthew was addressed were anticipating and looking for the Messianic kingdom, not anything else. They were eagerly awaiting the long-prophesied King who would appear and reign from the Davidic throne.³² The ancient Jewish mind would not have understood the reference to the kingdom in Matthew 25:34 in any other way. Ironside thus concludes, “It is not to be confounded with the heavenly inheritance.”³³

At the risk of redundancy, I must repeat that Matthew’s Gospel is intimately related to the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. As noted previously, these covenants come into view in Matthew’s genealogy. Matthew’s Gospel begins with the words, “The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” The Abrahamic and Davidic covenants were the two unconditional covenants pertaining to the Messiah. Matthew, in beginning his Gospel this way, was calling attention to the fact that *Jesus came to fulfill the covenants made with Israel’s forefathers*.³⁴ It is thus concluded that Christ came to institute the covenanted Messianic kingdom.³⁵

If the kingdom in Matthew 25 refers to the millennial kingdom, then what are we to make of the reference to “eternal life” in Matthew 25:46? Gundry reasons that since the sheep enter into eternal life, the judgment must take place at the end of the millennium. But there is another option. As Pentecost explains, “According to the Jewish concept, having eternal life and entering the kingdom were synonymous and interchangeable ideas.”³⁶ Indeed, “the Jews equated having eternal life with entering the kingdom.”³⁷

The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology observes:

A survey of the synonyms used in the synoptic tradition for the term *basileia tou theou* [“kingdom of God”] is illuminating.... Following the question of the rich young man, “What must I do to inherit eternal life (*zoe aionion*) (Mk. 10:17),

²⁹ Charles C. Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1979), p. 92.

³⁰ Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, p. 76.

³¹ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 5:137.

³² Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, p. 76.

³³ H. A. Ironside, *Expository Notes on the Gospel of Matthew* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1948), p. 338.

³⁴ See Charles L. Feinberg, “The Eternal Kingship of Christ,” in *Jesus the King Is Coming* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1975), p. 185.

³⁵ See Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew*, p. 289.

³⁶ J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), pp. 236-37.

³⁷ Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p. 127.

Jesus remarks in conversation with his disciples “How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God — *ten basileian tou theou*. The phrase “to inherit eternal life” (Mk. 10:17) has a counterpart in “to inherit the kingdom prepared for you by God” (Matt. 25:34).³⁸

Thus, when Jesus asserts that the righteous will go “into eternal life” in Matthew 25:34, He is likely communicating in a way familiar to a largely Jewish audience that the sheep will enter into the kingdom.

Perhaps the reason “eternal life” is equated with “entering the kingdom” is because, in the Jewish mind, to possess one is to possess the other. One cannot enter the Messianic kingdom without being a possessor of eternal life. Conversely, one cannot be a possessor of eternal life and be excluded from the Messianic kingdom.

If I am correct that “eternal life” and “entering the kingdom” are essentially synonymous, then it is not necessary to place the judgment of the nations at the end of the millennium, as Gundry argues.

The “Brothers” in Matthew 25:40

Matthew 25:40 reads: “The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’” Regarding the “brothers” in this verse, Gundry writes:

All parties acknowledge that the treatment of the “brothers” of Christ will constitute outward evidence of inward salvation. But who will be those “brothers”? According to the pretribulational understanding, they will be the Jews as a nation. But that assumption becomes dubious when we recall that in the same book (Matt. 12:49, 50) Jesus defines His brothers as “whoever shall do the will of My Father.”³⁹

Rejecting the pretribulational understanding of the brothers, Gundry thus offers the following interpretation:

We do better to take the meaning that the sheep showed their love for Christ in their love to one another as Christ’s brothers (cf. 1 John 3:14), or even more specifically, in their loving acceptance of persecuted Christian witnesses and their message (cf. Matt. 10:11-42).⁴⁰

³⁸ *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, s.v. “King, Kingdom,” by B. Klappert, 2:387-88, insert added for clarification. William L. Lane notes: “‘Eternal life,’ ‘salvation,’ or ‘entrance into the Kingdom’ describe a single reality which must be bestowed as [God’s] gift to men.” (*The Gospel of Mark: The New International Commentary on the New Testament* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974], p. 370.)

³⁹ Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, pp. 165-66. Gundry is not alone in this viewpoint. See Robert M. Bowman, “The Sheep and the Goats: Who Are Jesus’ Brothers?” Atlanta Apologetics Project web site, www.atlantaapologist.org.

⁴⁰ Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 165.

Gundry subsequently draws the following conclusion concerning the treatment of the brothers as related to salvation in Matthew 25:40:

The resultant emphasis is that a loving deed to just a single one of Christ's most insignificant disciples is done to Christ Himself — and demonstrates true salvation. With this understanding of the “brothers,” the sheep represent the saved of all time and the goats the lost of all ages.⁴¹

In his book, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, Walvoord suggested that Gundry engaged in “extreme exegesis” in taking a reference 13 chapters away (Matt. 12:50), occurring in time two years earlier, as a definition for “brothers” in Matthew 25:40.⁴² Gundry, in his “Open Letter” to Dr. Walvoord, responded that this is the only definition of the term to be found in Matthew. He further argued that Walvoord cited no evidence that Jesus changed His use of the term between Matthew 12:50 and 25:40. “If you have none,” writes Gundry to Walvoord, “whose exegesis is ‘extreme’?”⁴³

The pertinent question to be asked is: What constitutes the proper use of context in determining the meaning of a word within the exegetical process?⁴⁴ The answer to this question will decide, in large measure, what definition of “brothers” is correct in Matthew 25:40.

John D. Grassmick, in *Principles and Practice of Greek Exegesis*, provides a key insight relevant to our study. Regarding contextual data, he writes:

Context embraces the surrounding words, sentences, paragraphs, the manner of their utterance, and, in the final analysis, the entire state of affairs at the time and place of this particular occurrence of the word plus all that has led up to it. Because of this, it becomes apparent again that no two meanings can ever be exactly the same because no two contexts are ever exactly the same.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 165.

⁴² John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), p. 135. See Gundry, *First the Antichrist*, p. 127.

⁴³ Robert H. Gundry, “An Open Letter to Dr. John F. Walvoord Concerning his Book *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*,” on file at Dallas Theological Seminary, p. 55.

⁴⁴ Note that in his discussion of the word ἀποστασία, Gundry writes: “The meaning and connotation of a New Testament word are determined from four sources: 1) other appearances in the New Testament; 2) the LXX; 3) the *koine* (of which New Testament Greek is a species); and 4) classical Greek” (*The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 115). H. Wayne House responds: “I find it extremely interesting that Gundry limits the determination of word meanings to four and omits (possibly by accident) the most important factor in determining the specific meaning of any given word; namely, context. Certainly, even in context a word cannot mean just anything one chooses, but within the range (i.e., semantic distance of a word) of meaning any given word may have, context is the most important consideration...” (House, “Apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3: Apostasy or Rapture?” in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, ed. Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy [Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1995], p. 279.)

⁴⁵ John D. Grassmick, *Principles and Practice of Greek Exegesis* (Dallas, TX: Dallas

Walvoord obviously agrees, noting:

Each statement of Scripture should be interpreted in its context. This usually means that a word should be interpreted in its immediate context... A common fallacy... is to read into a passage something that is found elsewhere in the Bible instead of allowing the immediate context to have primary weight.⁴⁶

With this in mind, we note that Matthew 12:50 reveals a considerably different context in which the word “brother” was used. Using the occasion of the arrival of His mother and brothers, Jesus said: “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother...” Many interpreters believe that while the context of Jesus’ words related specifically to His mother and brothers, a broader (and perhaps more important) context related to the Pharisees who were present (see Matthew 12:38-45). According to Pharisaic understanding, a person born into a Jewish family was a member of God’s family by birthright. The Pharisees placed a heavy emphasis on blood ties. In context, then, as soon as mention was made of Jesus’ mother and brothers, Jesus seized the moment to refute this Pharisaic “blood-ties” teaching that had led so many astray in Israel. A “brother,” Jesus said, was anyone who did the will of God.

In the context of Matthew 25:40, by contrast, Christ did not have Pharisees in his audience. (The disciples had come to Jesus *privately* — Matthew 24:3). His purpose and argument are *not* concerned with refuting the idea that a blood tie to Abraham entitles one to the kingdom of God. Further, contextually, the “brothers” in Matthew 25:40 are just one of three distinct classes of people mentioned: *the sheep*, *the goats*, and *the brothers*. And the brothers are seen to be distinct from the sheep and goats which comprise “the nations.” In view of the different contexts, it does indeed seem like extreme exegesis to demand that the term “brother” carry the same meaning in both passages.

Since “the nations” in Matthew 25:32 are made up of *only* the sheep and the goats, it would seem that the brothers must be distinct from the nations (or Gentiles). Thus, the “brothers” must be made up of Christ’s brothers *after the flesh* — redeemed Jews.

Pretribulationists offer two views here. Some believe the term “brothers” has reference to redeemed Jews in general. Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice are representative of this viewpoint in their book, *Charting the End Times*:

That many Jewish people will receive the Lord is seen in Ezekiel 11:19, when the Lord takes away their “heart of stone” and puts a “new spirit within them.... a heart of flesh.” This is also seen in Ezekiel 18:31. When will this take place? Right after the Antichrist desecrates the Temple in Jerusalem. The Jews will become so disillusioned that they will turn to their Messiah and flee to the wilderness of Petra, where they will be preserved supernaturally. There, God

Seminary Press, 1974), p. 145.

⁴⁶ John F. Walvoord, “Basic Considerations in Interpreting Prophecy,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139 (January-March 1982), Logos Bible Software.

“nourished them” for the last three-and-one-half years of the tribulation. These and all the other surviving Jews, which will probably include the 144,000 witnesses of Revelation 7, are believers who our Lord calls “brethren.”⁴⁷

Other pretribulationists believe the “brothers” may be a more specific group of redeemed Jews — the 144,000 that are mentioned in Revelation 7. Merrill F. Unger is representative of this viewpoint:

During the tribulation period, God will sovereignly call and save 144,000 Jews... So glorious and wonderful will be the ministry of the 144,000 saved Jews and so faithful will be their powerful testimony, the King on His throne of glory will not be ashamed to call them “My brothers.” More than that, He will consider Himself so intimately united to them that what was done or not done to them is the same as being actually done or not done to Himself.... The fact that the Lord’s brothers endured hunger, thirst, homelessness, nakedness, sickness, and imprisonment suggests their fidelity to their newfound Savior and Lord. They proved their willingness to suffer for Him amid the terrible persecutions and trials of the tribulation through which they passed. They proved their loyalty to their King. He attests His identity with them.⁴⁸

Pentecost says these individuals

will be under a death sentence by the beast. They will refuse to carry the beast’s mark, and so they will not be able to buy and sell. Consequently, they will have to depend on those to whom they minister for hospitality, food, and support. Only those who receive the message will jeopardize their lives by extending hospitality to the messengers. Therefore what is done for them will be an evidence of their faith in Christ, that is, what is done for them will be done for Christ.⁴⁹

Gundry, of course, has a different view regarding the identity of the 144,000. Departing from traditional understandings of the 144,000, he suggests in his book *The Church and the Tribulation* that this group of people is a Jewish remnant that includes both men and women who are *unsaved* throughout the tribulation period. Though unconverted during this time, they nevertheless escape God’s great wrath because they are “sealed.” Then, following the rapture, they witness their Messiah returning to earth

⁴⁷ Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, *Charting the End Times* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2001), p. 68.

⁴⁸ Merrill F. Unger, *Beyond the Crystal Ball* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1973), pp. 134-35. See also Arno C. Gaebelin, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1977), p. 546.

⁴⁹ Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p. 410. See also J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), p. 418. Interestingly, in language not unlike that in Matthew 25, Matthew 10:40 records Jesus speaking to His Jewish disciples: “He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent me.”

and are suddenly converted at that point.⁵⁰ They then enter into the millennial kingdom in their natural bodies and beget children.

Such a view does not accurately reflect Scripture. After all, in Revelation 7:3 these individuals are referred to as “bond-servants of our God” (δουλούς του θεου). This phrase carries the idea of “slaves of God.” A bond-servant is “one subject to the will and wholly at the disposal of another.”⁵¹ Such a one “does always and only the will of his Master.”⁵² How could these 144,000 individuals be bondservants or slaves of God and yet be unsaved? Revelation 14:4b says of these individuals, “These are the ones who *follow the Lamb wherever He goes*. These have been *purchased from among men as first fruits to God and to the Lamb*.” In short, these are redeemed Jews, not unredeemed Jews.⁵³

Now, in what follows I will address additional problems created by Gundry’s view. Before doing this, however, allow me to briefly recap the main points of our discussion thus far. Gundry’s view on the judgment of the nations in Matthew 25:31-46 hinges on the validity of his interpretation of the “nations” (Matthew 25:32), the “kingdom” (Matthew 25:34), and the “brothers” (Matthew 25:40). Contrary to his view, I have suggested that in the Jewish context of Matthew’s Gospel, the term “nations” likely refers to Gentiles only, who are alive at the time of the Second Coming. The term, “kingdom,” refers to the Davidic, Messianic millennial kingdom. The term, “brothers,” refers to Jews — either the broader group of redeemed Jews who live during the tribulation, or the narrower group of 144,000 Jewish messengers who evangelize during the tribulation. In view of these factors, and in view of the context of the Second Coming set for us in Matthew 25:31, it is concluded that the judgment of the nations takes place following the Second Advent.

Major Problems Created By Gundry’s View

Gundry’s view creates some theological problems worthy of note. For example, he posits unsaved people entering the millennium, a position that seems to contradict many passages of Scripture. Further, Christ’s brothers are seen to be naked, starved, and in prison in Christ’s millennial kingdom. Still further, Gundry is forced to insert a 1000-year gap in the middle of Matthew 25:31: “But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, [1000-year gap inserted here] then He will sit on His glorious throne.”

In my view, the only feasible means of avoiding these three problems is pretribulationism — with the judgment of the nations properly placed at the end of the tribulation. Let’s consider these problems in greater detail.

⁵⁰ Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, pp. 81-83.

⁵¹ Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, in Accordance, Oaksoft Software.

⁵² Charles C. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press), in Accordance, Oaksoft Software.

⁵³ See John Hartog III, “The Inhabitants of the Millennium and the Timing of the Rapture,” Part II, *Faith Pulpit*, July/August 2001.

The Unserved Enter the Millennium

Briefly stated, Gundry argues from Zechariah 14:16-19 that a number of unsaved people survive the tribulation and Second Coming, and then enter the millennium. He therefore concludes that the judgment of the nations cannot possibly take place before the millennium, for at this judgment, *all* the goats (unsaved people) are condemned to eternal punishment. Consequently, if this judgment took place *before* the millennium, no unsaved people would be spared to enter into it. In light of this, Gundry concludes: “We are therefore forced to put the judgment of the nations after the millennium.”⁵⁴

Zechariah 14:16 states, “And it shall come to pass that every one that is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall even go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the feast of tabernacles” (KJV). Then, verses 17 and 18 warn that whichever families refuse to go up to Jerusalem to worship the Lord will be judged immediately.

Regarding this passage, Gundry argues:

That those who enter the millennium will include wicked survivors of the tribulation derives from the phraseology — “everyone who is left of all the nations.” It also derives from the inclusion of those who attacked Jerusalem — i.e., the armies of the wicked who will converge on Palestine at the close of the tribulation — and from the implication that some of those who will enter the millennium may refuse to go to Jerusalem for the worship of the Lord, a refusal hardly characteristic of the righteous. This passage, therefore, goes against any interpretation which would prohibit the wicked from entering the millennium.⁵⁵

Gundry also notes: “That they are ‘left’ shows that they were not born during the millennium, but that they survived the tribulation and entered the millennium.”⁵⁶

However, this is not the only interpretation of this passage. A factor that bears consideration to the present discussion is the hermeneutical principle that difficult and obscure passages are to be interpreted in light of the more clear passages. For, as Paul Lee Tan observes: “Since Scripture cannot contradict Scripture, a doctrine clearly supported... cannot be contradicted ‘by a contrary and obscure passage.’”⁵⁷

The reason Zechariah 14:16-19 poses a hermeneutical problem for some is that Scripture, taken as a whole, seems to support the view that only saved people enter the millennium, while the wicked are cut off. If, then, Zechariah 14:16-19 is interpreted to mean that the wicked do enter the millennium, Scripture would seem to contradict itself.

Let us consider a few Scriptures which indicate that God will destroy His enemies before the establishment of the millennial kingdom.⁵⁸ In Revelation 19:11-18 we read:

⁵⁴ Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 166.

⁵⁵ Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 167.

⁵⁶ Gundry, “An Open Letter to Dr. John F. Walvoord,” p. 56.

⁵⁷ Paul Lee Tan, *Principles of Literal Interpretation of the Bible* (Rockville, MD: Assurance Publishers, 1978), p. 15.

⁵⁸ Pentecost, *Things to Come*, p. 504.

And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. His eyes are a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems; and He has a name written on Him which no one knows except Himself. He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses. From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, "KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS." Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and he cried out with a loud voice, saying to all the birds which fly in midheaven, "Come, assemble for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings and the flesh of commanders and the flesh of mighty men and the flesh of horses and of those who sit on them and the flesh of all men, both free men and slaves, and small and great." (emphasis added)

Likewise, in Isaiah 66:15-16 — a passage that refers to the Second Coming and the Messiah's establishment of His kingdom — we read:

For behold, the LORD will come in fire
And His chariots like the whirlwind,
To render His anger with fury,
And His rebuke with flames of fire.

For the LORD will execute judgment by fire
And by His sword on all flesh,
And those slain by the LORD will be many.
(emphasis added)

Still further, we read in 2 Thessalonians 1:6-9:

For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power. (emphasis added)

The book of Daniel certainly shows that the kingdom will be given to the saints. Indeed, in Daniel 7:18, a verse that will find its fulfillment at the Second Coming,⁵⁹ we read: "The saints of the Highest One will receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, for all ages to come" (emphasis added). Likewise, in verse 22 we read: "The time arrived when the saints took possession of the kingdom." While "the saints" in the

⁵⁹ See Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Handbook* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1998), p. 298.

context of Daniel 7 is referring to the saved Jewish remnant in the tribulation, the principle we derive from the passage is that *only the redeemed* enter into God's kingdom.

Estes notes that the word "saint" in Daniel has the connotation of "divine claim and ownership."⁶⁰ It connotes "that which is distinct from the common or profane." In fact, the word connotes that which "is not only distinct from the profane but in opposition to it as well."⁶¹ The use of this word supports the idea that only the redeemed enter into the kingdom.

Further, it seems inconceivable that the wicked and the saints could together inherit a kingdom universally characterized by *righteousness* (Isaiah 61:11), *peace* (Isaiah 2:4), *holiness* (Isaiah 4:3-4), and *justice* (Isaiah 9:7). How could these four words characterize the kingdom if wicked people were present?

In keeping with this, John Feinberg, in an extended quote, demonstrates that Gundry's view would require that God change His rules:

When John the Baptist preached the coming of the kingdom, he announced the need to repent. When Jesus came and offered himself as King, he demanded a right spiritual relationship with God in order to enter the kingdom. No one can be a member of the church (and thereby a member of the kingdom, now or later) unless he meets the spiritual entrance requirements of the kingdom. Dispensational pretribulationists typically say that Christ offered the full-blown kingdom at his first coming but postponed it because Israel refused to meet the spiritual entrance requirements of the kingdom. Despite all of this, Gundry wants us to believe that when the earthly kingdom actually arrives, God will change the rules for entrance. I find that hard to believe. If Christ begins His earthly reign with inhabitants of the kingdom who reject Him, then why not just begin the earthly reign 2000 years ago, despite his rejection by Israel as a whole? If some people can get into the kingdom at its outset without meeting its spiritual entrance requirements, then why not the Jews of Jesus' own day?⁶²

Toussaint concurs:

If the Scriptures teach anything, they say all unbelievers will be judged and not permitted to enter the millennial kingdom. Israel will be purged of rebels (Ezek. 20:37-38), and Gentiles who are lost will be consigned to eternal punishment (Matt. 25:31-33,41-46). Certainly, the warning of John the Baptist leaves no room for "escapees" to enter Christ's kingdom on earth (Matt. 3:7-12). The subject of judgment preceding the earthly kingdom is common enough in Matthew (cf. 8:12; 13:40-42,49-50; 22:13; 25:31-46). The parable of the pounds puts it graphically in Luke 19:27, where it refers to slaughtering the ones who rejected Christ as

⁶⁰ *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Saints," by David Foster Estes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1939), 4:261.

⁶¹ Estes, 4:261.

⁶² John S. Feinberg, "Arguing About the Rapture: Who Must Prove What and How," in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, pp. 201-2.

king.⁶³

In view of all this, how is Zechariah 14:16 to be interpreted? Again, the verse reads: “Then it will come about that any who are left of all the nations that went against Jerusalem will go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Booths.” How can this passage be harmonized with the view that only saved people enter the millennial kingdom? The explanation is not complicated. Simply put, there will be repentant and believing people among those nations that attacked Jerusalem. It is these individuals that will worship the King (Jesus, the Messiah) and celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.⁶⁴

Responding to Gundry and other posttribulationists, Ryrie explains:

No text requires that there be unsaved entering the Millennium. After a few years have passed there will be people, born during the early days of the Millennium, who will grow to adulthood rejecting the Savior-King in their hearts (though outwardly obeying Him). But no text requires that there be unsaved people among the survivors of the tribulation who enter the Millennium. Zechariah 14:16 (sometimes used to support this idea) refers to the first generation of millennial citizens who came through the judgments *as redeemed, not rebels*, and who will voluntarily go to Jerusalem to worship the King. But verses 17-21 move on to describe conditions throughout the Millennium, not just at the beginning. As time goes on, some will not obey the King and will have to be punished.⁶⁵

If this interpretation is correct, then Gundry is no longer “forced” to place the judgment of the nations at the end of the millennium. Since no passage of Scripture requires that unsaved people enter the millennium, and since the general tenor of Scripture supports the view that only the saved enter the millennium, this judgment is properly placed immediately after “the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him” (Matthew 25:31).

The Brothers Are Persecuted in the Millennium

The basis of the judgment of the nations in Matthew 25:31-46 is how the sheep and the goats treat the brothers. During the period preceding this judgment, the brothers are seen to be hungry, thirsty, naked, and in prison. If this judgment takes place after the Second Coming, then the period referred to would be the seven-year tribulation. However, if this judgment takes place after the millennium, then this period must at least include the millennium. Therein lies the problem. Such conditions *cannot* exist in the millennium.

⁶³ Stanley D. Toussaint, “Are the Church and the Rapture in Matthew 24?” in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, p. 245.

⁶⁴ *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Commentary*, ed. Earl Radmacher (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p. 1119. See also *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), p. 702.

⁶⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, *What You Should Know About the Rapture* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1981), p. 85.

Concerning this problem, Walvoord writes:

The nature of the good works of the sheep... seems to forbid its referring to a millennial situation where they are described as befriending brethren who apparently are unfairly in prison, who are starved and naked. This is certainly not a millennial picture of Israel, and yet Gundry was strangely silent on this contradiction in the text of his point of view.⁶⁶

Responding to Walvoord, Gundry, in his “Open Letter” to Dr. Walvoord, writes:

First, Israel is not particularly in view, unless we go against Matthew 12:50 to the definition of Christ’s “brethren” as Jews. Second and more pertinently so far as your question goes, the coming of the judgment of the entire human race after the millennium (my view that you’re criticizing) doesn’t necessarily imply that it deals with millennial conditions. As a general judgment of everybody throughout history it will deal primarily with nonmillennial conditions. You yourself put after the millennium the judgment of the wicked who lived before the millennium (the “great white throne judgment”). Naturally that judgment has to do with their conduct prior to the millennium. So what’s the problem in my view?⁶⁷

There are actually several problems to make note of. First, regarding the issue of the identity of the brothers, it must be acknowledged by all that *no matter who* they are, they simply can’t be hungry, thirsty, naked, and in prison during the millennium (more on this shortly). Regardless of whether they are Jews or “those who do the will of the Father,” their condition in the millennium is completely foreign to that which is described in Matthew 25:35-36.

Second, note that in his response to Walvoord, Gundry states: “As a general judgment of everybody throughout history it will deal primarily with nonmillennial conditions.”⁶⁸ If the judgment of the nations deals primarily with “nonmillennial conditions,” then the judgment must deal primarily with people who live *prior* to the millennium. This is where, I believe, Gundry’s view runs into some problems. Here’s my line of thinking: If the rapture of the church takes place at the end of the tribulation and before the millennium (as Gundry holds), then all the Christians who lived in the period from Pentecost on through the end of the tribulation are translated or resurrected, and are given their resurrection bodies at that point (before the millennium, and thus 1000 years before the judgment of the nations). As translated and resurrected believers, they would have no part in a “judgment of the nations” at the end of the millennium — unless Gundry posits glorified believers being judged to determine their worthiness to enter eternal life. But since no other believers exist during this period between Pentecost and the end of the tribulation other than those who are translated or resurrected at the rapture, then it seems to reason that there can be no sheep during this period who qualify for participation in the judgment of the nations (nor can there be any brothers, for

⁶⁶ Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, p. 192.

⁶⁷ Gundry, “An Open Letter to Dr. John F. Walvoord,” p. 55.

⁶⁸ Gundry, “An Open Letter to Dr. John F. Walvoord,” p. 55.

that matter, because Gundry defines the brothers as those who do the will of the Father [cf. Matthew 12:50]).

It would thus seem that the only period of time when these sheep and brothers could possibly fit on a time-line would be prior to Pentecost (since the periods from Pentecost through the tribulation, and then the millennium, are discounted). And since Pentecost occurred in such close proximity to the time Christ spoke these words in Matthew 25:31-46, the judgment of the nations must seemingly deal with people who lived prior to the time of Christ. But how likely is this?

Now back to the original problem (the brothers being persecuted in the millennium). Recognizing that a problem does exist with such a view, Gundry (as stated earlier) posits that the judgment of the nations “will deal primarily with nonmillennial conditions.”⁶⁹ Lest it be supposed that the brothers *could* somehow be hungry, thirsty, naked, and in prison during the millennium, let it be observed that the millennium is universally characterized by *peace* (Isa. 2:4; Ezek. 28:26; Mic. 4:2-3; Zech. 9:10), *joy* (Isa. 9:3-4; Jer. 30:18-19; Zeph. 3:14-17; Zech. 8:18-19), *holiness* (Isa. 1:26-27; Jer. 31:23; Ezek. 36:24-31; Joel 3:21; Zeph. 3:11; Zech. 8:3), *comfort* (Isa. 12:1-2; Jer. 31:23-25; Zeph. 3:18-20; Zech. 9:11-12; Rev. 21:40), *justice* (Isa. 9:7; Jer. 23:5, *sickness removed* (Isa. 33:24; Jer. 30:17; Ezek. 34:16), *healing of the deformed* (Isa. 29:17-19; Jer. 31:8; Mic. 4:6-7; Zeph. 3:19), *protection* (Isa. 41:8-14; Jer. 32:27; Ezek. 34:27; Joel 3:16-17; Amos 9:15; Zech. 9:8), *freedom from oppression* (Isa. 14:3-6; Zech. 9:11-12), *economic prosperity* (Isa. 4:1; Jer. 31:5; Ezek. 34:26; Mic. 4:1; Zech. 8:11-12; Joel 2:21-27; Amos 9:13-14), *unified worship* (Isa. 45:23; Zech. 13:2; Zeph. 3:9; Mal. 1:11; Rev. 5:9-14), *the manifest presence of God* (Ezek. 37:27-28; Zech. 2:2; Rev. 21:3), *and the fullness of the Spirit* (Isa. 32:13-15; Ezek. 36:26-27; Joel 2:28-29; Ezek. 11:19-20).

It seems inconceivable that these brothers could endure persecution in the midst of the ideal conditions that will exist in the millennium. These persecutions would fit more appropriately in a period of unrest, such as the tribulation. This period will be characterized by “*wrath* (Zeph. 1:15, 18; 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9; Rev. 6:16-17; 11:18; 14:10, 19; 15:1, 7; 16:1, 19), *judgment* (Rev. 14:7; 15:4; 16:5, 7; 19:2), *indignation* (Isa. 26:20-21; 34:1-3), *trial* (Rev. 3:10), *trouble* (Jer. 30:7; Zeph. 1:14-15; Dan. 12:1), *destruction* (Joel 1:15; 1 Thess. 5:3), *darkness* (Joel 2:2; Amos 5:18; Zeph. 1:14-18), *desolation* (Dan. 9:27; Zeph. 1:14-15), *overturning* (Isa. 24:1-4, 19-21), and *punishment* (Isa. 24:20-21).”⁷⁰

It is concluded that the brothers cannot endure hunger, thirst, nakedness, and imprisonment in the millennium. This problem is easily avoided by placing the judgment of the nations at the Second Advent. This view best synthesizes prophetic Scripture, and best reflects a plain, straightforward reading of Matthew 25:31-46.

A Gap Must Be Inserted in Matthew 25:31

Matthew 25:31 reads: “But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne.” How does the Second Coming relate to the judgment of the nations? A plain reading of verses 31ff. would seem to

⁶⁹ Gundry, “An Open Letter to Dr. John F. Walvoord,” p. 55.

⁷⁰ Pentecost, *Things to Come*, p. 195.

indicate that they are chronological. However, Gundry writes:

A gap may intervene between the second coming and this judgment: "But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him [*millennium*] then He will sit on His glorious throne." Or, "He will sit on His glorious throne. [*Millennium*] And all the nations will be gathered before Him." The prophets frequently fail to mention intervals of time such as the millennium.⁷¹

The above paragraph initiated a considerable amount of discussion. Ryrie, in his review of Gundry's book (*The Church and the Tribulation*) in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, argued against the possibility that a gap can be inserted between the Second Coming and the judgment of the nations.⁷² Responding to Ryrie, Gundry stated: "He must know that his premillennialism leads him to posit the same sort of gap in other passages."⁷³

Walvoord, similar to Ryrie, argued that "to interpret the action as occurring one thousand years later makes nonsense of this clause."⁷⁴

Gundry, in turn, responded:

If by "action" you mean the judging of the nations, your statement is just not true. The text reads that "when the Son of man comes ... then he will sit on the throne of his glory." The next clause doesn't have to be associated with the "then," and in fact most translations have a new sentence at this point, where the description of the judgment picks up.⁷⁵

In defense of his insertion of a gap in Matthew 25:31, Gundry points out that gaps are legitimately used elsewhere in Scripture:

The gap of two millennia which now exists between the first and second comings of Christ goes unnoticed in a number of passages (Isa. 9:6; 61:2; Zech. 9:9, 10; cf. Luke 4:16-21). And, as all premillennialists quickly agree, the millennium itself goes unnoticed in many passages. For example, the first and second resurrections stand side by side as though occurring at the same time (Dan. 12:2; John 5:28, 29). Yet one thousand years intervene (Rev. 20:4ff.).⁷⁶

Gundry is, of course, correct in his view that gaps do exist in prophetic passages of Scripture. Thus, the issue of debate does not center on the actual *existence* of gaps. Rather, the issue of debate centers on the proper *placement* of gaps.

What constitutes the proper use of gaps in the science of hermeneutics? What guidelines can be followed to insure that one's use of a gap is biblically justified, and is

⁷¹ Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 168.

⁷² Charles C. Ryrie, review of *The Church and the Tribulation*, by Robert F. Gundry, in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139 (April-June, 1974):179.

⁷³ Gundry, "An Open Letter to Dr. John F. Walvoord," p. 76.

⁷⁴ Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, p. 136.

⁷⁵ Gundry, "An Open Letter to Dr. John F. Walvoord," pp. 55-56.

⁷⁶ Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 169.

not simply forced on a text by a given theological system?

Tan notes:

Some interpreters conclude that *only history* will tell whether a gap exists in a prophecy. As C. Von Orelli says, “Only when the gaps emerge in history is it seen that an interval lies between.” This viewpoint makes the interpretation of prophecy enigmatical, for an interpreter is never quite sure of his interpretation until later history should prove him right.⁷⁷

The true guide to the determination of time gaps or foreshortening in a prophecy is to be found in the complete canon of Scripture, not in the unfolding history. The complete revelation of the prophetic Scripture will show the element of foreshortening in a given prophecy.

Charles Feinberg suggests:

No prophecy of the Word is to be interpreted solely with reference to itself... but all other portions of the prophetic revelation are to be taken into account and considered. Every prophecy is part of a wonderful scheme of revelation; for the true significance of any prophecy the whole prophetic scheme must be kept in mind and the relationship between the parts in the plan as well.⁷⁸

Walvoord further points out that the “whole doctrine of prophecy should be allowed to be the guide for the interpretation of details. The main elements of prophecy are far more clear than some of the details.”⁷⁹

Thus, it seems that a guiding principle for the proper placement of gaps in prophetic Scripture is: *What does the whole of Scripture reveal about God’s overall prophetic plan?* If a prophetic passage has a gap inserted into it by an interpreter, and the resulting chronology is clearly contradicted by other passages of Scripture, then it seems clear that this gap has been inappropriately placed.

The question now is, does a 1000-year gap in the middle of Matthew 25:31 seem likely? Do other passages of Scripture support or seem to forbid such an interpretation? Verses 35-40 in Matthew 25 give us the answer, for these verses cannot possibly describe millennial conditions (with Christ’s brothers being hungry, thirsty, naked, and in prison during His reign). Those who are disobedient to Jesus may be imprisoned during the millennium, but not Christ’s brothers.⁸⁰ Clearly, verses 35-40 preclude inserting a gap of 1000 years in verse 31. The judgment will immediately follow the coming of Christ and will test people on the basis of their heart reaction to conditions that will exist during the tribulation — conditions that will *not* be present during the Millennium for Christ’s followers.

⁷⁷ Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, p. 93.

⁷⁸ Charles L. Feinberg, *Premillennialism or Amillennialism* (Wheaton, IL: Van Kampen Press, 1954), p. 39.

⁷⁹ Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, p. 132.

⁸⁰ Ryrie, *What You Should Know About the Rapture*, pp. 87-88.

Is the Rapture or Judgment In View in Matthew 24:40-41?

Matthew 24:40-41 reads: "Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one will be left." Gundry argues that this passage refers to a posttribulational rapture of the church. According to posttribulationism, Matthew 24:40-41 indicates that at the posttrib rapture, there will be two men in a field. The saved one will be taken in the rapture, while the unsaved one will be left for judgment. Yet, in view of Zechariah 14:16-19, some of the unsaved will escape judgment and will enter into the millennial kingdom. If this interpretation is correct, then Matthew 24:40-41 is unrelated to the judgment of the nations.

Contrary to Gundry, many pretribulationists believe Matthew 24:40-41 is a preliminary phase to the judgment of the nations. The one "taken" in this passage is seen to be the same as the one taken for the gathering in Matthew 25:31-46 (i.e., *gathered for judgment*). Luke 17:34-37, a parallel passage, seems to support this view.

Gundry, however, rejects the "taken for judgment" scenario, and argues that

if all the wicked will be taken away in judgment at Christ's advent, who will remain to be the goats in the judgment of the nations?... We cannot resolve the difficulty by equating "one will be taken" with the judgment of the nations, for the two scenes obviously differ. Here people are scattered throughout the earth. There all nations assemble before Christ's throne.⁸¹

Responding to Gundry, Walvoord writes:

The argument of Gundry that one cannot harmonize this with the judgment of the nations is nonsensical. Before the Gentiles could be gathered in judgment, they obviously would have to be taken away as individuals. What is seen in Matthew 24:41,42 has its consummation in Matthew 25:31-46: they are parts of the same divine judgment that separates the saved from the unsaved at the beginning of the millennial Kingdom.⁸²

Thus, whereas Gundry holds that the one taken is *taken in the rapture*, pretribulationists hold that the one taken is *taken in judgment*. Matthew 24:40-41 is viewed as a preliminary phase to Matthew 25:31-46.⁸³

Pretribulationists argue that the comparison in Matthew 24:38-39 with Noah and the Flood supports their view. Consider verses 38-41 together: "For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and *took them all away*. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; *one will be taken* and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; *one will be taken* and the other left."

⁸¹ Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 137.

⁸² Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, p. 90.

⁸³ Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, p. 190.

Walvoord observes:

In the illustration from “the days of Noah,” those who are taken away by the flood are the ones who are drowned, and the ones who are left are ones who are left in safety in the ark. It would be strange to have a clear illustration like this be completely reversed in the application of verses 40-41.⁸⁴

Gundry objects, however, pointing out that a different Greek word is used for “taken” (αἶρω) in the Flood narrative (verses 38-39) than in verses 40 and 41 (παραλαμβάνω). He then argues that since the same Greek word used for “taken” in verses 40-41 is used in John 14:3 in reference to the rapture, then Matthew 24:40-41 must also refer to the rapture.

However, Walvoord counters: “While Gundry thought it quite impressive that *paralambano* is used for the rapture several days later in John 14:3, he was unwilling to treat the immediate context as determinative in this case.”⁸⁵ After all, no two meanings of the same word can ever be *exactly* the same because no two contexts are ever exactly the same.⁸⁶ While it is true that παραλαμβάνω is used in reference to the rapture in John 14:3, it is also true that the word is used of events quite *unlike* the rapture. For example, this word is used of the taking of Christ by the soldiers for scourging (Matthew 27:27), as well as to Christ’s crucifixion (John 19:16).⁸⁷ Obviously, both of these uses of the word indicate a taking *to judgment*.

The use of the word παραλαμβάνω is indecisive in itself. The context must be the important consideration.⁸⁸ It would seem that the two decisive questions are:

1. What does the context contribute to a proper understanding of Matthew 24:40-41?
2. What contribution does the parallel passage, Luke 17:34-37, make in the proper understanding of Matthew 24:40-41?

The first question has already been answered. The context of Matthew 24:40-41 is clearly that of judgment (see the illustration of Noah’s Flood in verses 38-39⁸⁹). Let us now consider Luke 17:34-37.

Matthew 24:40-41 and Luke 17:34-37

In Luke’s Gospel, Luke records Jesus’ words to the disciples concerning those who would be taken and those who would be left. The disciples then asked Jesus, “Where Lord?” And Jesus answered, “Where the body is, there also will the vultures be gathered.”

⁸⁴ Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, p. 188.

⁸⁵ Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, p. 189.

⁸⁶ Grassmick, *Principles and Practice of Greek Exegesis*, p. 145.

⁸⁷ W.E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (London: Oliphants, 1941), 4:105.

⁸⁸ Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, p. 90.

⁸⁹ See Toussaint, “Are the Church and the Rapture in Matthew 24?” p. 245.

Commenting on this verse, Walvoord writes: “It should be very clear that the ones taken are put to death, and their bodies are consumed by the vultures.”⁹⁰

“Very clear?”, asks Gundry. “Why can’t the ones taken escape the vultures by virtue of their being taken, and the ones left be consumed by vultures precisely because they are left? This is at least as easy to think as the other way around.”⁹¹

But is that what the text says? According to verse 34, the disciples heard Jesus say, “I tell you, on that night there will be two men in one bed; one will be taken, and the other will be left.” Clearly, the disciples knew where the one would be left... *in bed!* The unknown factor in their minds was where the other one would be taken.

Then, according to verse 35, “There will be two women grinding at the same place; one will be taken, and the other will be left.” Again, the disciples knew where the one would be left... *still grinding!* The unknown factor was where the other one would be taken.

Finally, according to verse 36, “Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other will be left.” Just as before, the disciples clearly knew where the one would be left... *in the field!* The unknown factor was where the other would be taken.

Thus, the question, “Where Lord?” (in verse 39) must be in reference to those who were taken. In each case, the disciples knew where the ones would be left (i.e., in bed, still grinding, in the field). However, in each case, the unknown factor was where the other ones would be taken. So, when Christ answered them with a proverb about judgment, the proverb clearly relates to those who were taken (i.e., they were taken in judgment). It is thus concluded that Matthew 24:40-41 *does not* refer to the rapture, but is a preliminary phase to the judgment of the nations, which takes place after the tribulation.

Summary and Conclusion

In closing, let us review what we have seen. Gundry places the judgment of the nations at the end of the millennium. He argues that the nations are the men of all ages — both Jew and Gentile, living and dead. The men of all ages will thus be gathered before Christ at the end of the millennium for judgment. The basis of this judgment is how these men treated Christ’s brothers. Gundry defines the brothers as whoever does the will of the Father (i.e., fellow believers). Those who treat these brothers well will inherit the eternal phase of the Kingdom, while those who fail to treat them well will depart into eternal punishment.

Gundry’s view of the judgment of the nations hinges on the validity of his interpretation of three key terms: the “nations” (Matt. 25:32), the “Kingdom” (Matt. 25:34), and the “brothers” (Matt. 25:40). In each case, I have suggested that the biblical data better fits the pretribulational scenario.

Contrary to Gundry’s view, I have argued that the term “nations” refers to Gentiles only, who are alive at the time of the Second Coming. The term “Kingdom” refers not to the eternal phase of the kingdom, but to the Davidic, Messianic, millennial kingdom. The term “brothers” refers either to that broad group of Jews who are saved during the tribulation, or more specifically to the 144,000 Jewish messengers living

⁹⁰ Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, p. 90.

⁹¹ Gundry, “An Open Letter to Dr. John F. Walvoord,” p. 33.

during the tribulation who proclaim the message of Christ. Based on an examination of this data, I have argued that the judgment of the nations takes place after the Second Advent.

Gundry's view of the judgment of the nations creates some unique problems for him, problems of such magnitude that the validity of his conclusions becomes strongly suspect. First, he has unsaved people entering the millennium, a position contradicted by many passages of Scripture. Second, the brothers are seen to be hungry, thirsty, naked, and in prison during the millennium. It was demonstrated that no one can be hungry, thirsty, naked or in prison in the millennium because of the ideal conditions brought about by the rule of Christ. Gundry's proposal that the judgment of the nations deals mainly with nonmillennial conditions doesn't solve the problem. And third, Gundry is forced to insert a 1000-year gap in the middle of Matthew 25:31, an insertion that I believe to be hermeneutically unsound.

Each of the above problems seems to dictate against the view that the judgment of the nations takes place at the end of the millennium. The most viable view that synthesizes Scripture best is pretribulationism, with the placement of the judgment of the nations at the end of the tribulation.

Finally, the posttribulationist view that Matthew 24:40-41 refers to the rapture is not convincing. Not only does the context of this passage argue against the rapture view, but Luke 17:34-37, a parallel passage, seems to settle the issue. The passage was shown to relate to judgment (and not the rapture), and it appears that Matthew 24:40-41 is the preliminary phase to the judgment of the nations in Matthew 25:31-46.

When Christ comes, the times of the Gentiles will be over, and all the Gentiles will be gathered before Him for judgment. Those found worthy will enter the Davidic, messianic, millennial Kingdom, while those who rejected Christ will be put to death. What an awesome and sobering day that will be!