

What is the "Sheep and Goats" Judgment About?

Introduction

One of the most well-known passages in the New Testament describes the "sheep and goats" judgment. That is one of the judgments that Jesus will carry out, after he returns to the earth. Here is the passage in question:

Matthew 25:31-46 (ESV):

³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from 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 welcomed me, 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, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

⁴¹ "Then he will say to those on his left, '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 welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Many Christian churches believe that the above passage concerns the salvation of individuals. In other words, the "mainstream" doctrine is that the above passage describes whether **specific people** will be granted everlasting life or not - based upon each **individual's** behavior.

So, in the mainstream doctrine, the *individual people* in the "sheep" category will be granted everlasting life, while the *individual people* in the "goats" category will be condemned to everlasting punishment. As a result, the mainstream doctrine identifies the people in the "sheep" category as Christians; and the people in the "goats" category as non-Christians.

From what I can see, there are (at least) three significant "issues", with the mainstream doctrine about the sheep and goats judgment. The sections below describe those issues.

Issue 1 - Salvation Requirements

The first issue concerns salvation - in particular, the "requirements" for an individual to be saved. Scripture is clear that the only way for individuals to be saved is through *faith in Jesus*. In other words, good works - alone - can never allow *anyone* to be saved.

Interestingly, the sheep and goats passage does *not* contain **any** information about faith in Jesus - it only speaks about good works (feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, etc.). From the passage, the sheep group **has** performed those good works, and the goats group has **not** performed them.

Of course, every person has the ability to perform those good works - whether a person has faith in Jesus or not. In other words, a person who has consistently *rejected* Jesus could certainly perform all of the good works listed in the passage. As a result, **if** that passage is about individual salvation, then that would imply that good works, alone, **does** allow for salvation - because it would mean that a non-Christian could "earn" salvation, so to speak! That idea is contradicted by Scripture, of course; so that is a *major* issue with the mainstream doctrine.

Issue 2 - Individual vs. National Judgment

Another significant issue with the mainstream doctrine deals with **who**, exactly, is *being* judged. In order to describe that issue, it is necessary to discuss a "translation problem" with the passage. Basically, many English translations of that passage include the word "people" in it. For example, in the ESV translation above, the passage contains the following phrase: "and he [Jesus] will separate **people** one from another..."

Of course, with that translation, the implication is that each **individual person** is being judged - i.e., every specific person is placed into the appropriate group, based on his own, individual merits.

The trouble with that translation is that the Greek text does not contain the word "people" in it at all! Here is an interlinear comparison of the above phrase, of the Greek text with the English:

καὶ	ἀφορίσει	αὐτοὺς	ἀπ’	ἀλλήλων
and	he will separate	them	from	one another

As shown, the third Greek word in that phrase - autous - does **not** mean "people"; it is a pronoun meaning "them". That pronoun refers back to the noun **nations** earlier in the verse. So, the **nations** are gathered before Jesus - and then Jesus separates the **nations** from one another. The NASB translation accurately conveys the meaning of that verse:

Matthew 25:32 (NASB):

³² All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats;

Of course, nations are *comprised* of people; so people will certainly be "affected" by that judgment. However, given that **nations** are being separated, that indicates that the judgment is based on the overall actions of **nations** - rather than being based on the actions of **individuals**.

As noted, the mainstream doctrine states that the "sheep and goats" passage concerns individuals - i.e., about whether each **individual** will be saved, based upon that **individual's** behavior. That passage actually refers to nations being judged, though - so the "individual judgment" tenet does not look correct.

Issue 3 - The Number of "Groups"

There is one final issue to note about the mainstream doctrine. As mentioned, that doctrine only identifies **two** groups in the passage: the "sheep" group - which it identifies as Christians; and the "goats" group - which it identifies as non-Christians. Of course, those two groups, together, comprise **all** of humanity - because every single person is either a Christian or a non-Christian.

The issue is that there are actually **three** groups listed in that passage - the sheep, the goats, and the group referred to as "these my brothers". For example, Jesus states "as you did it to the least of these my brothers, you did it to me". So, if the "sheep" group represents people who are Christians - and if the "goats" group represents people who are non-Christians - then *who*, exactly, is in the "my brothers" group?

In other words, if the sheep group contains all Christians, and if the goats group contains all non-Christians, then that does not leave *anyone* to be in the "my brothers" group. So, the mainstream doctrine does not take into account the fact that there are actually three groups in the passage.

Searching for a Solution

So far, the following items have been discussed, about the mainstream doctrine's beliefs about the sheep and goats judgment:

- The mainstream doctrine asserts that the sheep and goats judgment is about the salvation of individuals; but that judgment does not make any mention about faith in Jesus - which is required for an individual to be saved.
- The mainstream doctrine states that that judgment is based upon the actions of individuals; but that judgment is evidently based on the overall actions of nations, instead.
- The mainstream doctrine identifies two groups in that judgment - the sheep (Christians) and the goats (non-Christians); but there are actually three groups in that judgment - including the "my brothers" group.

As a result, it appears unlikely that the mainstream doctrine about the sheep and goats judgment is correct.

Of course, the obvious follow-up question then becomes: what is the sheep and goats judgment about? That is, if the mainstream doctrine is not correct, then *what*, exactly, is Scripture describing in Matthew 25:31-46? In order to answer that question, it is necessary to investigate further into Scripture.

Links between the Old and New Testaments

As it turns out, the **vast majority** of the information in the New Testament is "related" - either directly or indirectly - to information in the Old Testament. As a result, if an event is listed the New Testament, then it is extremely likely that there is a reference to that event in the Old Testament - either through direct prophecy, or through "foreshadowing" of the event.

Here are some examples of events in the New Testament, which have references in the Old Testament:

- In Philippians 2:9-11, the New Testament tells us that God has exalted Jesus to a position of authority over the earth; so that all people will confess Jesus as Lord. The Old Testament prophesies this in Daniel 7:13-14 - in which God gives Jesus dominion over the earth, so that all peoples, nations and languages will serve him.

- In Revelation 21:1-8, the New Testament tells us that in the next age, there will be a new heaven and a new earth - and that in the new earth there will be no mourning, no crying, and no pain. The Old Testament prophesies this in Isaiah 65:17-25, in which God creates new heavens and a new earth - and that in the new earth there will *never* be the sound of weeping or the cry of distress.

- In Romans 5:6-11, the New Testament tells us that we have been forgiven of our sins - and saved from everlasting death - through the blood of Jesus. The Old Testament foreshadows this in Exodus 12:1-13, in which the blood of the Passover lambs saved the Israelites from the tenth plague - the death of the firstborn.

- In John 3:16, the New Testament tells us God was willing to sacrifice his beloved son - Jesus - so that the world could be saved. The Old Testament foreshadows this in Genesis chapter 22, in which Abraham was willing to sacrifice his beloved son - Isaac.

Another Old Testament Reference

Since most of the events in the New Testament have references in the Old Testament, it stands to reason that the "sheep and goats" judgment would also have a reference in the Old Testament. In order for an Old Testament judgment reference to "match" the sheep and goats judgment, the judgment in question would have to contain the following characteristics:

- The judgment in question must be a "single event" - as opposed to an "ongoing process". In other words, it must be "judgment" in the sense of "executing a sentence" - as opposed to "ruling over a kingdom for 1000 years".

- The judgment in question must be executed on nations - rather than on individuals. In other words, the judgment will be based on the *collective* actions of nations - rather than on the *separate* actions of individuals.

- The judgment in question must be executed on behalf of a **third** party. In other words, the basis of the judgment is: the manner in which nations treated this third party. (The sheep and goats judgment refers to this third party as "these my brothers".)

With all of the above criteria in mind, consider the following Old Testament passage:

Joel 3:1-3,9-12,16-17 (ESV):

1 "For behold, in those days and at that time,
When I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem,
2 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.

³“They have also cast lots for My people,
Traded a boy for a harlot
And sold a girl for wine that they may drink.

⁹ Proclaim this among the nations:
Prepare a war; rouse the mighty men!
Let all the soldiers draw near, let them come up!

¹⁰ Beat your plowshares into swords
And your pruning hooks into spears;
Let the weak say, “I am a mighty man.”

¹¹ Hasten and come, all you surrounding nations,
And gather yourselves there.
Bring down, O Lord, Your mighty ones.

¹² Let the nations be aroused
And come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat,
For there I will sit to judge
All the surrounding nations.

¹⁶ The Lord roars from Zion
And utters His voice from Jerusalem,
And the heavens and the earth tremble.
But the Lord is a refuge for His people
And a stronghold to the sons of Israel.

¹⁷ Then you will know that I am the Lord your God,
Dwelling in Zion, My holy mountain.
So Jerusalem will be holy,
And strangers will pass through it no more.

Here is a summary of the judgment in the above Joel 3 passage:

- The judgment in the passage is a "one time event" - i.e., it is "executing a sentence";
- The judgment in the passage is executed on nations, rather than on individuals;
- The judgment in the passage is executed on behalf of a third party.

In other words, the Joel 3 passage contains **all** of the characteristics mentioned above - i.e., that passage contains the same characteristics as the "sheep and goats" passage. So, could the judgment listed in Joel 3 be a reference to the sheep and goats judgment in Matthew 25?

Other Factors to Consider

The Joel 3 passage describes events that will occur in the end times - i.e., after Jesus returns. The passage states that that judgment will be passed on all the **nations** - and the basis of that judgment will be the manner in which the nations treated **Israel**. That is, the judgment is being made on behalf of Israel.

So, if the sheep and goats judgment refers to the judgment in Joel 3, then that means that Jesus will judge the nations, based upon the nations' behavior towards national Israel - i.e., the Jewish people. As it turns out, there are many passages in Scripture which **explicitly** state that nations will be judged, based upon their treatment of national Israel. For example:

Genesis 12:1-3 (ESV):

¹ Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Zechariah 2:6-9 (ESV):

⁶ Up! Up! Flee from the land of the north, declares the Lord. For I have spread you abroad as the four winds of the heavens, declares the Lord. ⁷ Up! Escape to Zion, you who dwell with the daughter of Babylon. ⁸ For thus said the Lord of hosts, after his glory sent me to the nations who plundered you, for he who touches you touches the apple of his eye: ⁹ "Behold, I will shake my hand over them, and they shall become plunder for those who served them. Then you will know that the Lord of hosts has sent me."

Psalms 83:1-4,13-18 (ESV):

¹ O God, do not keep silence;
do not hold your peace or be still, O God!
² For behold, your enemies make an uproar;
those who hate you have raised their heads.
³ They lay crafty plans against your people;
they consult together against your treasured ones.
⁴ They say, "Come, let us wipe them out as a nation;
let the name of Israel be remembered no more!"

¹³ O my God, make them like whirling dust,
like chaff before the wind.
¹⁴ As fire consumes the forest,
as the flame sets the mountains ablaze,
¹⁵ so may you pursue them with your tempest
and terrify them with your hurricane!
¹⁶ Fill their faces with shame,
that they may seek your name, O Lord.
¹⁷ Let them be put to shame and dismayed forever;
let them perish in disgrace,
¹⁸ that they may know that you alone,
whose name is the Lord,
are the Most High over all the earth.

So, there is abundant evidence that nations will be judged based upon their behavior towards Israel.

Interestingly, some groups claim that national Israel is no longer favored by God - i.e., some groups believe that God has *rejected* national Israel, and "replaced" them with the Church. Scripture **contradicts** that belief, however:

Romans 11:1-2 (ESV):

¹ I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ² God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.

Another item to note is that the Hebrew word for "nations" is *goyim*. In the Hebrew culture, that word is generally used to mean nations other than Israel. In other words, in the Hebraic mindset, "nations" refers to gentiles - that is, people *other than* Jews. Of course, it is "nations" that are being judged in the sheep and goats judgment - as well as in Joel 3.

Not only that, but in the "sheep and goats" judgment, Jesus executes his judgment on behalf of a group he calls "these my brothers". Of course, Scripture tells us that Jesus is **genetically Jewish** - i.e., he is a biological descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. As a result, in the context of that judgment, it would make sense for Jesus to refer to the Jewish people as "these my brothers" - because he is *biologically related* to the Jewish people.

The final item to note is that the sheep and goats judgment contains two "classes" of nations - the sheep group, which will be rewarded, and the goats group, which will be punished. In other words, that judgment indicates that some nations will have *blessed* Israel, while other nations will have *cursed* Israel. The Joel 3 passage, itself, does not show us this "differentiation" between the nations - but many *other* Old Testament passages do. For example, one of the "related" passages listed above is Zechariah 2:6-9. That passage also describes a judgment of the nations, based upon their treatment of Israel - and it continues on as follows:

Zechariah 2:10-12 (ESV):

¹⁰ Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for behold, I come and I will dwell in your midst, declares the Lord. ¹¹ And many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day, and shall be my people. And I will dwell in your midst, and you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you. ¹² And the Lord will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem."

As shown, that passage states that in the end times, many gentile nations will become *joined to Israel* - and will therefore become the **people of God** as well. There are many other Old Testament passages which state that fact as well. So, the concept of "two classes" of nations is well established in the Old Testament - even though it is not *explicitly* mentioned in Joel 3.

For all of the above reasons, it certainly appears that the "sheep and goats" judgment is a reference to the judgment listed in Joel 3. That is, the sheep and goats judgment evidently refers to the judgment that Jesus will execute on the **nations** - based upon their treatment of **Israel** - **when** he returns.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, it appears that the "sheep and goats" judgment is a judgment on nations - not on individuals. The nations will be judged based upon their treatment of national Israel - the Jewish people.

Some groups would undoubtedly dispute the concept that the sheep and goats judgment has anything to do with national Israel. There are two primary reasons for this. First, as mentioned above, some groups believe that God has **rejected** the Jewish people - and **replaced** them with the Church. Second, some groups assert that national Israel does not have any importance any longer - i.e., that there is **no** "prophetic significance" to Israel any longer.

It turns out that both of the above doctrines are contradicted by Scripture. Here are links to two articles, which discuss those two doctrines in detail:

Are the Jews still the chosen people?

[The Olive Tree Symbolism in Romans 11](#)

Does Israel have any significance any longer?

[The Land of Israel in the Kingdom Age](#)

I hope this article was useful to you!