

English Language resources: Bible texts analysis – Matthew 25: 31-46

A textual analysis of a passage from the King James Bible

The text is the *King James Bible* translation of Matthew 25:31-46. The analysis is to show the way in which language has changed over time.

Audience

The original audience of the Gospel of Matthew was Christian converts from Judaism and other pagan religions, and dated from the late first century AD, although there is much uncertainty about authorship, location and the nature of the original 'Matthew community'.

The *KJB* audience (from the seventeenth century onwards) was a Christian society with limited access to the Bible until the *KJB* appeared. The translation maintains ceremony and tradition. It was used in church where the minister would read it aloud for the congregation, but increasingly families and individuals with growing literacy had access to the text. The lexical choices in the *KJB* were intended to suit a wide audience and most of the population would either read or hear the text.

Modern audiences of the text are widespread and multiple: the Gospels are regularly read and studied throughout the Christian Church, and have inspired works of art and numerous film versions, which address the life of Jesus, the main narrative strand of the Gospels.

Purpose

The primary purpose of the text is to instruct, and it gives clear examples of the consequences of several good and bad actions. The lesson is delivered using the symbols of sheep and goats, and the right and left sides of Jesus. With each group there is a dialogue about the nature of their actions, to

clarify why these actions were good or bad. Within the dialogues, the actions are listed, and lead to the exposition of a key point: 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.'

One of the purposes of Matthew's Gospel is to assert the authority of Christ in relation to judgement, an attribute questioned by some of his original Jewish audience. The phrase 'Son of Man' in reference to Jesus alludes to an Old Testament prophecy about a coming Saviour, which Jesus applied to himself. Using this image fulfils the writer's intention to assert that Jesus was both human yet also divine (and therefore qualified to judge).

A further purpose of the text is to afford pleasure to listeners and readers who would appreciate the crafting of the text and its use of familiar and reassuring symbolism, leading to the unambiguous achievement of 'life eternal'.

Content / genre

This is a sacred text, specifically from New Testament of the Bible. This text is part of the Gospel of Matthew, written by Matthew to proclaim the life of Jesus, and dealing here with the Judgement of the Nations, as described by Jesus to his followers. The passage is often characterised as a parable, since the image is one of sheep and goats being separated as a representation of the blessed and the cursed. The text is highly patterned, using parallelism as a key feature.

Charity or acts of 'ministering to' (giving to) people in need is encouraged by the text, and it is evident that this is considered the responsibility of all, rather than being the work of an organisation or a government. There is an assumption in the text that the audience needs motivating to give help.

The concept of a duty to the poor is expanded to include having respect for those of lower status, based on the fact

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that Jesus identifies himself with these groups. The value of the poor and needy is not intrinsic, however, but depends on the understanding that they are equivalent to Jesus ('inasmuch as...').

The text is an account of a hidden test of virtue, where the 'rules' are not overtly stipulated. In one way, this seems arbitrary or unfair, but may be said to rely on the application of deeper principles of Judaism (and subsequently Christianity) which Jesus expects his audience to know. The message is that adherence to 'rules' is not enough, it's about following in your heart what you know to be right.

This is being communicated to the audience as a warning, with the consequences for accepting or rejecting this being outlined. As with other texts that address the idea of a future final judgement, the allegory is a powerful way to encourage goodness in the present time.

Discourse

A key structural and rhetorical device in this text is antithetical parallelism. The major opposing structures are v.s 34-40 and 41-46, outlining two distinct modes of behaviour and their consequences. Key phrases are repeated in these sections, such as 'Verily I say unto you'. Within sentences, there is more parallelism as in 'the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left' and 'I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink'. The sense of balance and order this creates is profound, and presented as very simple and natural by the image of a shepherd separating sheep and goats. This image is very familiar to the audience, recurring many times in the Bible. (See <http://www.crossref-it.info/articles/25/Goats>.)

The speaker of this text is Jesus, as the passage is part of a longer discourse by him about the events at the end of the world, which begins in Matthew 24. The text uses the third person pronoun for

Jesus' own account of his future actions and first person pronoun 'I' for the dramatic elements where he represents what will be said to the 'nations' once they have been separated. The first person plural pronoun 'we' is also used for the responding speeches of the 'sheep' and 'goats' themselves. The use of 'we' is significant as it represents how this scenario is not one applying to individuals but to all humanity. The sub-text is that everybody will need to explain their behaviour.

Graphology

In the King James Bible (*KJB*) the text is divided into chapters and verses with a new line for each verse. References to God or Jesus are identified by the use of initial capitals, and the onset of speech is also indicated by the use of a capital in the middle of a line (rather than inverted commas).

Grammar

There are some grammatical aspects of the *KJB* text which have since changed. The inflection 'eth' ('divideth') is no longer used, and some constructions have changed, such as the question structure 'when saw we thee a stranger...?'. The inversion of 'saw we' now uses the auxiliary 'do' as in 'did we see'. Similarly the negative structure of 'ye took me not in' would also now use auxiliary 'do' to produce 'you didn't take me in'. This particular structure in *KJB* being repeated ('ye clothed me not', 'ye visited me not'), adds phonological emphasis to the negative 'not', building up to the climax of 'ye did it not to me'. Starting the sentence with 'ye' also focuses on individual responsibility, whilst the negative at the end suggests that the individual has somehow fallen short.

Syntactic inversion is quite common in this passage, so we find 'then shall he sit upon the throne' as a statement (if it were used today, this would be seen as a question). The final inversion of this passage is 'life eternal' where the adjective is placed in the predicative

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position, again for emphasis. Modern usage would tend to avoid this word order, except in poetic or highly rhetorical texts.

The modal auxiliary 'shall' in 'he shall set the sheep on his right hand' would now be replaced with 'will', although the distinction between these two auxiliaries is now unclear to many users.

The text has many marks of formality, with some long sentences and use of subordination. The first verse, with its 'When... then...' structure, also uses the phrase 'and all the holy angels with him' as an extension of the earlier subject 'the Son of man', creating a compound subject which is separated in the sentence. There is perhaps a greater focus on the majesty of God in the KJB whereas the primary focus in modern texts is clarity/simplicity.

Lexis

The *KJB* text would have been accessible to most people from the seventeenth century onwards as the lexis would have been familiar.

Many nouns are common and concrete, e.g. 'shepherd', 'sheep', 'goats', 'meat', 'drink', 'prison', 'throne', 'devil' and 'angels'. These common/concrete nouns are used to explore more abstract concepts in tangible ways. The abstract nouns include familiar concepts to the Christian audience: 'glory', 'everlasting fire', 'everlasting punishment', 'life eternal', 'the righteous', 'ye blessed' and 'ye cursed'. (See above for notes on the phrase: 'Son of Man'.)

While the language of the *KJB* was chosen to be familiar and accessible to the majority of the audience at the time, some words have since undergone lexical and semantic change. For example, 'Verily', 'unto', 'ye', 'thee', 'athirst', and 'an hungred' are now archaic, while 'brethren' is declining in use, surviving mainly in religious contexts. Similarly, the verb 'minister

(with 'to')' is now less frequently found, and considered to be very high register.

Semantics

Other words from the text remain in use, but have changed meaning. For example, the word 'meat' has narrowed in meanings, so that the more general meaning of 'food' is now lost.

The word 'righteous' is still in use in some higher registers and with the same meaning of 'virtuous' and 'those who conform to divine law'. However, it has also acquired some negative associations because the more commonly heard phrase is 'self-righteous', used as a criticism of those who are overly proud of their goodness. This is not quite an example of semantic pejoration but demonstrates how words are affected by the meanings of similar words.

Concepts

The word 'brethren' is problematic today as it is clearly masculine but is intended to apply generally to all people; modern writers may prefer to use gender-neutral terms instead.

At the time of the *KJB* the Christian church was central to society whereas now we live in a more multi-faith but also more secular society. Many in a modern audience may be unfamiliar with the ideology of eternal judgement. The text's presumption that Jesus is the eventual judge of all is perhaps also a more sensitive issue in a modern multicultural society. In addition, the concept of judgement based on mutual responsibility for the well-being of others runs counter to a more individualised modern culture.

Context

The cultural references are those of an agrarian society, where animal husbandry is used to explain God's treatment of humans. The later audiences of this text, such as the seventeenth century audience of the *King James Bible* and audiences until fairly recently, would probably still understand these references, but a

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modern audience is less likely to appreciate this comparison. Nevertheless, the phrase 'separate the sheep from the goats' has become a familiar metaphor in English, and often means to determine the difference between something good and something bad. (See <http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/big-ideas-bible/Sheep,-shepherd-and-lamb.>)

Other references are to social groups who would have been considered to have lower status or be in need of help. The basic needs in the examples cited

are for food, drink, clothing and a home ('I was a stranger and ye took me in'), but there is also an expectation of being visited if someone was sick or in prison. This is not dealt with in any detail, but when the text was originally written and at the time of writing the *KJB*, visitors performed far more than just the social duties we expect today: they might bring food and clothing, essential medicines and communications from the outside world. Prison inmates would be awaiting conviction rather than serving a sentence (a more modern use of jails) and the conditions of the prisons themselves were normally life-threatening.

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³¹When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:

³²And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats:

³³And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

³⁴Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

³⁵For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

³⁶Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

³⁷Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

³⁸When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?

³⁹Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

⁴⁰And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

⁴¹Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:

⁴²For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink:

⁴³I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.

⁴⁴Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?

⁴⁵Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.

⁴⁶And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.