

## My Problem with John Hagee – Scripture 1

John Hagee pastors a large church in San Antonio, Texas and is founder of 'Christians United for Israel' (CUFI) and a major US financial and political supporter of Israel. So, what's my problem with Mr. Hagee; after all, he has thousands attending his church, many more watching on-line and millions of US evangelicals support him in supporting Israel? There are I believe good reasons to question Mr. Hagee – on his understanding of history and especially on his approach to theology.

Challenging a Christian brother is something not to be done lightly. My own stance has been heavily criticized by Israel supporters in very dismissive terms as 'going against God's will'. But the questions won't go away because, in struggling to know the truth revealed in scripture, I and many others find answers that don't correspond to those of Mr. Hagee. Indeed sometimes in his writing Mr. Hagee leaves himself open to the charge that he is misleading God's people.

Turning from history (see John Hagee – my Problem - History) to theology I find little improvement. For example, on page 7 of his book Hagee writes:

There is a verse in Matthew chapter 25 that few Christians understand in context. Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine you did for me" (verse 40, NIV).

"The expression "these brothers of mine" in this verse is a Greek term that refers to "relatives according to the flesh."

Jesus was speaking about the Jewish people when He said, "I was hungry and you didn't give Me food. I was thirsty and you didn't give Me water. I was naked and you didn't clothe Me."

"When did we see You in that condition?" the disciples asked Him.

Jesus replied that it was whenever they saw one of His "relatives" in that condition.

Whenever Christians have seen the relatives of Jesus suffering – for instance, in the Holocaust – and done nothing, it was as if they had ignored the suffering of Christ Himself.<sup>1</sup>

This novel interpretation of Matthew 25 is wrong on almost every point with potentially disastrous consequences. To begin with, whilst Jesus is teaching his disciples, he is not, as Mr. Hagee claims, speaking to them. (The capitalisation of 'Me' and 'Him' in his 'quotation' is a misleading distortion of the text.) It is the *'king'* who is *'the Son of Man'* (verses 34 and 31), who is speaking at the final judgement to two groups of people, one identified as 'sheep' the other as 'goats', with the disciples, by implication, 'listening in'. That's why it is teaching. The first group are the *righteous*, the second are *accursed* and these two groups represent the whole of humanity, *all the nations will be gathered*. Mr. Hagee's approach is the equivalent of my coming from a lecture with 100 other students and saying to a friend "the lecturer told me...".

Mr. Hagee continues the error when he has the disciples asking Jesus, "*When did we see You in that condition?*", for it is not the disciples but *'the righteous'* who ask that question *'when was it ...'*. The disciples are still 'listening in'. Jesus' reply is to the righteous in the first instance and the unrighteous or accursed in the second, (verse 40 and 45). Matters are made worse for Mr. Hagee through the absence of any reference in the original to 'these brothers of mine' at verse 45, which simply says in the Greek, *these the least ones*.

It is clear from the context that Jesus is not asking his disciples to do anything, contrary to what Mr Hagee thinks. This is the concluding section of teaching which began at chapter 24. It is teaching about what they are to expect soon and what will happen eventually at the judgement. So, who are *'the least ones'*?

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<sup>1</sup> John Hagee, *In Defense of Israel*. Front Line, 2007

The NRSV translates the Greek word '*adelphon*' as 'members of my family' with the margin note '*these my brothers*' (NIV - '*brothers of mine*'). So, does this word mean 'relatives according to the flesh', and did Jesus mean 'Jews'? We find the answer from Jesus himself, also in Matthew. Apart from those places where Jesus refers to specific familial relationships, for example the calling of James and John, there are two passages that cast light on Jesus' use of the word, *adelphon*. Following the crucifixion, (ch.28:10) the two Mary's went to the tomb only to find it empty. As they ran to tell the disciples Jesus met them, and he said *go and tell my brothers (adelphois) to go to Galilee*. The word *adelphois*, used here, from the same root as *adelphon* refers specifically to Jesus' disciples, it cannot mean 'the Jews' as a collective.

The other passage is Matthew 12:46-50 where we learn that Jesus had been preaching, teaching and healing when his mother and brothers arrived. Jesus was told,

*"Look, your mother and your brothers (adelphoi) are standing outside, waiting to speak to you", the text continues: 'but to the ones who had told him this Jesus replied, "who is my mother, and who are my brothers (adelphoi)?" and pointing to his disciples, he said, "here are my mother and my brothers (adelphoi). For whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother (adelphos) and my sister and mother"*.

Could Jesus be any clearer than that last sentence that his 'family' is those who do God's will. Nothing to do with ethnicity or race. We still need to take care; we can't assume that *adelphon* in chapter 25 means disciples as in chapter 28 or all God's family as in chapter 12. The fact that Jesus defines them differently in different contexts means that we have to look to *this* context for help.

Here in Matthew chapter 25, the peoples, all of them, (*panta ta ethne*) are gathered<sup>2</sup> for judgement, it's the final act of the drama. They are separated, sheep on one side and goats on the other. Whatever our nationality or ethnicity, whether Jew or Briton, American, German or Arab, Chinese or Brazilian, the division will be according to righteousness or unrighteousness. What Mr. Hagee has done by ignoring context is to change the meaning of the text, he could hardly be more badly adrift. Following his methodology we have a circular argument with the disciples being told to be nice to themselves!

It is Mr. Hagee who has failed to 'understand in context' for his reading creates a conundrum; what happens to the Jews? If they are *the least of these* in verse 40 (and, by implication then, in verse 45), then, according to Mr. Hagee, the two groups whose future is under consideration at the judgement are those who have been good to Jews, and those who have been bad to Jews. The former go into eternal life and the latter to eternal punishment, verse 46. So, where do the Jews go and what happens to those who have been good (or bad) to non-Jews? And what happens to those who have never had the opportunity to do good or bad to Jews? In his desire to reinterpret this scripture to his satisfaction Mr. Hagee has created something worse than purgatory. All the nations have been gathered but most have been left hanging about, including God's 'chosen'. This is not what one expects from an 'evangelical pastor'.

To show how far astray Hagee is he claims in support of his argument that 'this is the only time in scripture that Jesus asked those who followed him to do something specific for him'.<sup>3</sup> I suggest he read, for example, Matthew 26:36-46; and 28:10, 19 with parallels too numerous to mention.

What are we being taught in this text? Aside from the sermon on the mount, (Matthew chapters 5-7) this is the longest teaching of Jesus that Matthew gives us, commencing in chapter 24 with the 'signs of your coming'. The disciples question is prompted by Jesus prophecy concerning the stones of the temple. We need to read these two chapters together; that will give us a better sense of the whole. Each of the parables Jesus uses in chapter 25 point to the one event, the coming of the 'Son of Man', and the need for 'watchfulness'.

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2 Verse 32. In the original the word nations/people is not repeated.

3 Op cit. Page 7.

The first part, chapter 24: 1- 44, shows us how to recognise the coming events. It is 'eschatological and, yes, we are in the 'end times', we have been since the ascension, nearly two thousand years and waiting. But not counting, that's not our business as the texts show. So, during this period of waiting what should Jesus' followers, God's people, be doing? That is the subject of 24:45 to 25:30; we are to keep awake, stay faithful and act righteously. And so we come to the final passage that deals with the judgement. The conclusion, surely apparent, is to be about the fathers business of justice, righteousness and truth and leave everything else to God.