

## Who are “the least?” *Ἐλάχιστος* (Mt 25:31-46) – a hermeneutical reconsideration

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**ABSTRACT.** The present paper deals with the interpretation of one of the Matthean texts that still raises problems to modern exegesis, namely the one relating to the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46), and this because of a term – *ἐλάχιστος* (v. 40) – translated with “the least”. The question to which the author tries an answer is: “Who are the little ones?” The approach of the work is not so much one of an exegetical nature, but it is of a hermeneutical nature. Beyond the difficulties that modern exegesis seems to have failed to overcome, the real challenge is the spiritual interpretation of this text, an interpretation which depends very much on identifying those who are “the least”.

This work attempts to harmonize the textual exegesis with the patristic interpretation, having the stated purpose of applying this text to the spiritual life, both relating to the person and community.

**Keywords:** *ἐλάχιστος*, the little ones, the least, the Gentiles, reversed pyramid.

### Introduction

One of the Matthean texts that still raises problems to modern exegesis is the one relating to the Last Judgment (Mt 25: 31 46), and this is because of a term – *ἐλάχιστος* (v. 40) – translated with “the least”. The word used here for “the least” is *ἐλάχιστος* (least in rank or estimation<sup>1</sup>), which is used as the superlative of *μικρός* (small)<sup>2</sup>. The latter is used by Matthew in 10:40, which is,

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<sup>1</sup> Henry George Liddell et al. eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 530.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Arndt et al. eds., *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 314.

as U. Luz states, “the closest parallel to 25:40”<sup>3</sup>. Nonetheless, this is the fact that presents to us the first problem in interpretation, because in 10:40 it is very clear that the evangelist refers to Jesus’ disciples, and no one can argue against this. So, here in 25:40, “the question is whether He means those who are hungry, sick, or in prison, and is giving a standard by which, He will judge all (Mt 5:3-10), or whether He is identifying Himself with the fate of the disciples and making their affliction His own (Mt 10:40-42)”<sup>4</sup>.

The exegetes did not agree on the identity of “the least”, primarily because of the lack of textual proofs. That makes things more difficult for universalist approach supporters because the Matthean use of *ἐλάχιστος* (2:6 and 5:19) cannot clarify the situation, thus giving more credit to those who extend the meaning from 10:40 to 25:40.

### **The two major interpretations: the “universalist”, and the “specific” ones**

Several directions of interpretation have tried to answer this question, but all of them can be summated in two directions: “universalist” – which translates this phrase with “all people” and “specific” – which translates this phrase with “the Christians” (either the missionary or all the Christians). The answer I propose in this paper will try to bring them both together, although it leans more towards the universalist one.

The truth is that only by literary means one cannot support convincingly one or another position. In our interpretation, we can only try to speculate, starting with the developing narrative in Matthew’s Gospel.

It is very clear that humility is the way of God, and that must be also the criteria of growth, both as an individual and as a community. As M. Silva says, “The kingdom of God is not attained by quarrels over precedence and lust for greatness but by being least, by self-effacing service, and by poverty, which relies entirely on the sufficiency of God’s help. The sayings about the little grain of mustard seed that becomes a great tree (Mt 13:31-32 par. Mk 4:30-32; Lk 13:18-19), the little flock (Lk 12:32), and those who are ‘least in the kingdom of God’ (Mt 11:11 par. Lk 7:28) are also to be interpreted from this standpoint.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, in Helmut Koester ed., *Hermeneia – a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2005), 281.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Otto, “μικρός (ἐλάττων, ἐλάχιστος),” in Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley, & Gerhard Friedrich eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (electronic ed., vol. 4) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 656-7.

<sup>5</sup> Moisés Silva ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 303-4.

Although he didn't emphasise that, we can draw from his observation that we can observe in Matthew's Gospel a development of his spiritual care for his community, taking as an analogy, the mustard seed. So, we can observe an evolution, a kind of crescendo, sustained by a few details. In the first place, we must observe the transition from the diminutive *μικρός* to the superlative *ἐλάχιστος*. Then when for the first time Jesus sent his disciples, He was very specific, telling them *not* to go to the Gentiles or Samaritans (10:6), but in the end, they were sent to all the nations (28:19), although they doubted (v. 18). Also, first time the disciples were told nothing about teaching the people of Israel, whereas in the end Jesus begun exactly with teaching: "Go therefore and teach all nations" (Mt 28:19).

I think that this is something that helps us make a convincing case for the "universalist" approach. It is true that in 10:40 Jesus refers to the disciples or maybe, as Savas Agourides considers, to "a group of young disciples who were not held in great esteem in some circles in the church"<sup>6</sup>. Although Agourides said that "Matthew's aim everywhere is to establish their function and ministry in the church,"<sup>7</sup> this can be applied with success only to 10:40, and not so much to 25:40.

Origen's allegorical approach is a "specific" one, emphasizing the responsibility of the Christians for catechumens: "Those who are newly born in Christ are small, or those who remain such without growth as if they were newly born, for whom spiritual milk is necessary, who still belong to the flesh, as the apostle says, and are little ones in Christ incapable of taking adult food (1 Cor 3:1-2)."<sup>8</sup> D.E. Garland, who doesn't seem to like very much the ethical interpretation (although he didn't "negate the imperative to attend the needs of hungry, naked, and imprisoned that resounds throughout Scriptures"), agrees with the fact that "the least" are Christian missionaries. So, their proclamation would be the criteria for the judgment, stating that "those who scorned and despised Christians will discover that they scorned and despised the son of man who has all authority in heaven and earth."<sup>9</sup> These points of view raise another important question, very relevant to our purpose.

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<sup>6</sup> Savas Agourides, "'Little Ones' In Matthew," *The Bible Translator* 35.3 (1984): 329-34, at 334.

<sup>7</sup> Agourides, "'Little Ones' In Matthew," 334.

<sup>8</sup> Origen, *The Commentary Of Origen On The Gospel Of St Matthew*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 421.

<sup>9</sup> David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys Pub., 2001), 249.

## Who are those to be judged?

One might think that the answer is obvious, given that this parable is regarded as an image of the Universal Judgment. But the text does not support this fact, mainly because of the term *τὰ ἔθνη*, which, it is clear, refers to the “Gentiles,” that is, to those outside the Church. However, how this text is being accepted, at least nowadays, is beyond doubt. Because it is the Universal Judgment we speak about, then all will be judged. If those on trial are only the “Gentiles,” then it would follow that “the least” are Christians in general or the disciples or missionaries. This is the “specific” perspective.

If those being judged are all people – the universalist perspective – then “the least” can also be all those who – regardless of their position towards the Church – need help. This approach is also called the ethical perspective.

It is important to note that the verb “to inherit” *κληρονομήσατε*<sup>10</sup> from v. 34, can only refer to those who follow Christ and receive what rightfully accrues to them as sons. However, that implies only the quality of the addressees of that parable, without directly involving the “the least,” who may be in any category, in part or in general. I say all of this, to highlight the impasse from which exegesis fails to come out satisfactorily. What I want to point out here is that the existing tension is not testing either exegesis or hermeneutics alone. The tension exists *between* these two.

The exegetes did not agree on who was “the least,” mainly due to a lack of textual evidence. This makes things more difficult for the advocates of the universalist approach since the Matthean use of *ἐλάχιστος* (2:6 and 5:19) cannot clear the situation, indirectly giving more credit to those who extend the meaning from 10:40 to 25:40. To remain true, it becomes quite clear that only by literary means one cannot hold convincingly onto one position or another. In our interpretation, we can only try to speculate, starting with the developing narrative in the Gospel of Matthew.

Sherman Grey, although considering that “‘the least’ are Christians in general and not any specific group of Christians,”<sup>11</sup> sees that one of the “obvious points of the parable is that those who are gathered are the ones who are separated and judged.”<sup>12</sup>

Making a standing point from the parallel place (10:40-42), U. Luz argues the universalist approach, stating that we cannot have a case by saying

<sup>10</sup> *κληρονομέω* – v.imper.aor.act.2nd pers.

<sup>11</sup> Sherman W. Gray, *The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25: 31-46: A History of Interpretation* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Pr., 1989), 358.

<sup>12</sup> Gray, *The Least of My Brothers*, 353.

that those who will be judged are the Gentiles or the Jews who failed to accept the Christians. On the contrary, the word of God is mandatory for everyone, including Christians because "they also belong to 'all the nations,' and they will be judged by the same criterion as all other people. ... Thus, there is for Matthew no special group of the 'lowliest brothers' who have a special place and who are not subjected to judgment. In terms of the image of the parable, for Matthew, the 'lowliest' are mixed in with the others."<sup>13</sup> Here, U. Luz's point of view emphasizes that the Christians are the first responsible.

So, from the perspective of the judgment, *πάντα τὰ ἔθνη* (Mt 25:32) has a universalist interpretation, but is also clear that no one can make, and convincingly so, a clear interpretation (based on the text only) of this problem of the identity of "the least". This is the reason why I agree with the universalist approach but seen from the Church's spiritual perspective.

### **The orthodox response to an exegetical crux**

As I stated before, it is very clear that no one, relying solely on the text, can convincingly make a clear interpretation of this problem of the identity of the "the least," especially from a Matthean point of view. This is the main reason why, exegetically speaking, I agree with the universalist approach, but continued with the spiritual approach of the Church, more because, as Sava Agourides insisted, there is a major mistake that even modern interpreters make, ignoring the context that positions everyone the text speaks of, within the limits (of the Church)<sup>14</sup>.

The patristic interpretation extracts from the answer to the question put in Matthew, chapter 18 (answer given in vv. 3-4), the quality of humility, interwoven with innocence, and cleanliness. Modern exegetes, remaining faithful to the historical-critical approach, add to what the Holy Fathers said and their willingness to accept the insignificant position that children routinely held in Jewish society.

St. John Chrysostom says that "'the Gentiles' refer to all the people on earth."<sup>15</sup> But St. John does not stop here, but continues, basing his ending on the fact that Christ calls these "the least," his brothers: "What do you say, Lord? Are they your brothers? Then what do you call them "the least" for? That's why are they, my brothers. They are humble because they are discarded and disregarded.

<sup>13</sup> Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, 281-2.

<sup>14</sup> Agourides, *Little Ones*, 330.

<sup>15</sup> Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilia la Matei*, in *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 23, trans. by Dumitru Fecioru (București: IBMO, 1994), 896.

One of these is called brothers by Christ; people that the world does not want to know about, whom the world despises. I speak not only of these monks and of those who dwell in the mountains, but of every believer; even though he lives in the world, if he is hungry and dies of hunger, if he is naked and alien, Christ wants him to enjoy all this care. Baptism and communion with the Holy Sacraments make us brothers.”<sup>16</sup>

Also, Origen, as expected, develops from this text, an allegorical interpretation by which we emphasize the responsibility of all of us in the Church to give to the needy the spiritual goods with which we have been endowed by God<sup>17</sup>, leaving us to understand – as we have shown above – that the addressees are nevertheless those within the Church.

We’re all responsible for someone in the Church. We all have the same goal – to approach (all of us!) the Holy Chalice and unite with Christ. All those who depend on someone are actually “the least” in comparison with him because their growth depends on his actions. Both approaches can be applied here: universalist and specific. The expression can be applied – at the same time – to the disciples of Jesus<sup>18</sup>, who towards Him (being in direct relation of dependence on Him) are “the least,” but also to all Christians who, because in the Church they are seated in hierarchical levels, depend on those on the upper level (both hierarchical and spiritual). Again, at the same time, they can apply to all those within the Church, but also to those outside the Church, because the expression is uttered in the context of the Last Judgment, at which time the Gospel was already preached to everyone. Also, in 5:44-48, Matthew shows the same universalist point of view, and we can recognize here the “ripple effect” I was talking about. In all these cases, those who are judged are those who are on the higher levels (hierarchical and/or spiritual), because they are the ones who carry the burden of responsibility (Lk 12:48). Of course, this “rule” also applies in the case of those outside the Church. In this case, everyone *inside* the Church – all Christians – are judged, because they are first asked to fulfil (by imitating Jesus) God’s desire, “that they may all be one” (Jn 17:21). This imitation – in love – of Jesus is the one described in Jn 13:1, 14-15. It is obvious that “the least” are those who are “needy”, as Origen (and other exegetes as well), but it is equally obvious that we are not all on the same level in terms of need, and these needs can be met by others (Ps 133:1-3).

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<sup>16</sup> Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omiliile la Matei*, 897.

<sup>17</sup> Origen, *Commentary on Matthew 72*, in Manlio Simonetti ed., *Matthew 14-28*, coll. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, vol. 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 233.

<sup>18</sup> So, Luz, who understands the phrase as referring to those who are in the ministry of teaching. Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, 265-66.

The perspective that I propose in this paper is not a simple answer to the initial question – otherwise, it has been seen from what has been said so far that such an approach is almost impossible – but tries to unite in a less usual way, the two perspectives – universalistic and specific. The “the least” may be forgotten, and disregarded by all, but at the same time being “the least” is also a calling, an ideal that Christ puts before us. Only an ethical solution would be simply not enough for a true Christian. Of course, seeing Christ in every man is a good and necessary thing. But, being a “brother” of Christ, becoming like Him and uniting with Him... Here is the real call! It is a reversal of hierarchical principles, an overturning of the paradigm that Christ, through Holy Evangelist Matthew, is proposing to us.

My thesis is that “the least” are all “the dependents”. It is almost the same thing as saying that “the least” is “the needy”, but from a different perspective. The emphasis here is put on the responsibility. A “dependent” is someone who, at some point, is someone’s responsibility. This is an important nuance because it answers the question: Who are those to be judged? This approach states that everybody will be judged, because, to some extent, we all are responsible for someone, and at the same time everyone is someone’s responsibility, regardless of their beliefs (5:44-48). What is important here is that our responsibility has a “ripple effect”, beginning from those very close to us – who depend on us to a higher degree – and stretching towards those who are further away from us and, consequently, depending to a lesser degree upon us.

### **Saint Sophrony Sakharov’s inverted pyramid**

There is a way to corroborate all the aspects previously presented to this point and concentrate them into an image of the Church – which we know about from Saint Sophrony Sakharov – as an inverted pyramid resting on the shoulders of Christ himself. On his shoulders stood the patriarch and above them the metropolitans, the bishops, the clergy, and people, directed upwards; each rank bearing the burdens of those above him. This image will lead us eventually to the conclusion that we shall consider that the “little ones” are all those who, relying on our help, are above us: “Our Lord took this pyramid and inverted it, and put Himself at the bottom, becoming its Head. He took upon Himself the weight of sin, the weight of the infirmity of the whole world. ... Christ alone holds the pyramid, but His fellows, His Apostles, and His saints come and share this weight with Him.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Archimandrite Zacharias Zaharou, *The Enlargement of the Heart* (Mount Thabor Publishing, 2006), 199-20.

Reading these words of St. Sophrony, we see much clearer the paradigm shift proposed by Matthew. Moreover, instead of asking ourselves, “Who are the least?” we now ask ourselves “How could we become the least?”

Father Sorin Bora brings forth a very relevant interpretation. Speaking of “the strong” in 1 Cor 8-10, he highlights the connection that the Holy Apostle Paul makes between knowledge/experience and power<sup>20</sup>, which together are the subject of love. If the matter of knowledge begins with me, he says, the matter of love begins with the other<sup>21</sup>. This, Rev. Ion Bora suggests, reminds us that being “strong” (or in our case “the least”) can become a matter of personal choice, for the love of Christ. Also, he argues that “the little ones” can be those from the Gentiles, who are potentially Christians, those who want to come closer to God<sup>22</sup>. I think that this perspective is a “sample” (to say the least) of an orthodox approach.

## Conclusion

In this parable, it seems that Christ reminds us that our goal was from the beginning to earn likeness to Him. Why then should we not interpret this parable – more so as it seems to be a truly final one – from the perspective of deification? From the point of view of biblical theology, I believe that the ethical interpretation is at least insufficient. That is why I propose this ending which combines reading in a universalist key – adopted by most experts – with the application of this perspective on a very personal level. I think it is the reading that St. John Chrysostom proposes.

Of course, just a simple analysis of the Scriptural text, cannot unquestionably support what I have said. However, as we saw, no exegete manages to do this. It is enough, a modern exegete would say, not to dangerously distance yourself from the text, so that your interpretation will alter its primary meaning. Honesty therefore requires us to recognize that moving apart from the is necessary to gain a vantage point, and this is rarely just for us, but for all those “dependents” to us. This is my conviction and testimony: reading the parable of the Last Judgment we are always challenged. And the smaller we become, to the point of being “the least,” the more challenged we are.

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<sup>20</sup> Ion-Sorin Bora, “‘Cei tari’ și ‘cei slabi’, după 1 Corinteni 8-10,” *Altarul Banatului* 7-9 (2012): 58-79, at 64.

<sup>21</sup> Bora, “‘Cei tari’ și ‘cei slabi’,” 65.

<sup>22</sup> Bora, “‘Cei tari’ și ‘cei slabi’,” 71.



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