

WHO WILL BE LEFT BEHIND?  
RETHINKING THE MEANING OF  
MATTHEW 24:40-41 AND LUKE 17:34-35

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Nobody likes to be left behind. Often children cry “unfair” when their older siblings are allowed to go out but they are left behind. The president of the United States even instituted an education program with the catchphrase, “No Child Left Behind.” The same is true when we think of biblical eschatology. Some of us have watched “A Thief in the Night” (and the three other films that followed in that series), and can still sing Larry Norman’s “I Wish We’d All Been Ready” (chorus: “There’s no time to change your mind, the Son has come and you’ve been left behind”). More recently, we have read or heard about the twelve-volume *Left Behind* series written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Thus, we assume that the language of being left behind in Matt 24 and Luke 17 refers to something negative.

Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. (Matt 24:40-41)<sup>1</sup>

I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left. (Luke 17:34-35)

Many interpret these texts to mean that those who are taken are raptured to be with the Lord but those who are left behind will remain on earth to receive God’s judgment.<sup>2</sup> It is my contention, however, that those who are left behind are the

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture texts are taken from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> So Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28* (WBC 33b; Dallas: Word, 1995), 720; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), 668; Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 442; John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 994; Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34* (WBC 35b; Dallas: Word, 1993), 862; Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 636; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1437; Leon Morris, *Luke* (TNTC 3; rev. ed.; Leicester: InterVarsity, 1988), 286; Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 614; R. T. France, *Matthew* (TNTC; Leicester: InterVarsity, 1985), 348; William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 870; Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 809; Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary* (2 vols.; rev. and exp.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 526; Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan,

ones who are blessed whereas those who are taken are the ones who are judged by God. I will demonstrate this thesis in three steps. First, I will establish that the imagery the prophets used to describe the destruction of the northern and southern kingdoms, and especially Jerusalem, is that those taken were judged by God but the remnant that was left behind was shown mercy. Second, I will investigate the concepts of being taken and left behind in Jesus' teaching, including the contexts of Matt 24 and Luke 17 where Jesus employed judgment and exile imagery that is reminiscent of the OT prophets. This dependency on OT imagery favors interpreting these passages to mean that those left behind receive salvation. Finally, I will consider the precise language of Matt 24:40-41 and Luke 17:34-35, particularly by way of answering several objections. Our thesis will then be confirmed by Jesus' comparison of the people in Noah's day who were "taken" in judgment to those who are "taken" when the Son of Man returns.

### I. *Left Behind in the Old Testament*

In order to understand the concepts of being taken and being left behind, it will be helpful to examine these concepts in the OT. The prophets constantly warn Israel and Judah that their enemies will come and destroy their cities as a punishment from God. But God will not utterly destroy them. In his grace God will leave behind a remnant who will cry out for help and salvation. It is those who are left behind who are the blessed ones. This pattern is seen many times in the OT prophetic books.

For example, Isaiah prophesies concerning the future of Jerusalem.

In that day the branch of the LORD shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors (פְּלִיטָה; LXX, τὸ καταλειφθέν)<sup>3</sup> of Israel. And he who is left (רָחַשׁ; LXX, τὸ ὑπολειφθέν)<sup>4</sup> in Zion and remains (רָחַשׁ; LXX, τὸ καταλειφθέν)<sup>5</sup> in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning (Isa 4:2-4)

2004), 801; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Luke 10–24* (AB 28A; New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1172; E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 212.

<sup>3</sup> For uses of פְּלִיטָה in reference to a remnant or those left behind, see Gen 45:7; Judg 21:17; 2 Kgs 19:30, 31; Ezra 9:8, 13, 14, 15; Neh 1:2; Isa 10:20; 37:31, 32; Ezek 14:22; Joel 2:32; Obad 1:17. For uses of καταλείπω in reference to remnant or left behind, see Gen 7:23; 14:10; Exod 14:28; 1 Kgs 19:18; 2 Kgs 10:11; 25:11, 22; 2 Chr 21:17; 30:6; Ezra 1:4; 9:8, 15; Neh 1:2, 3; Isa 7:22; 10:20, 21; 11:11, 16; 17:6; 24:6; 37:31, 32; 39:6; 49:21; Jer 40:6; 41:10; 42:2; 47:6; 49:2; 50:6; 52:16; 1 Macc 2:18; 13:4; 16:8.

<sup>4</sup> For uses of רָחַשׁ in reference to a remnant or those left behind, see Gen 7:23; 14:10; Exod 14:28; 1 Kgs 15:29; 16:11; 19:18; 2 Kgs 10:11, 14, 17; 17:18; 19:30; 24:14; 25:11, 12, 22; 2 Chr 21:17; 30:6; 34:21; Ezra 1:4; 9:8, 15; Neh 1:2, 3; Isa 10:20, 21, 22; 11:11, 16; 17:6; 24:6; 37:31; Jer 39:9, 10; 40:6; 41:10; 42:2; 50:20; 52:15, 16; Ezek 9:8; 17:21; Amos 5:3; Zech 3:12; Hag 2:3. For uses of ὑπολείπω in reference to a remnant or those left behind, see 1 Kgs 15:29; 19:10, 14; 2 Kgs 17:18; 19:30; 20:17; 24:14; 25:12; Prov 2:21; Jer 50:20; Ezek 12:16; 14:20-22; Amos 5:3; Zeph 3:12; Zech 13:8.

<sup>5</sup> For uses of רָחַשׁ in reference to a remnant or those left behind, see 1 Kgs 18:22; 19:10, 14; 2 Kgs 20:17; 25:11; Prov 2:21; Isa 1:9; 39:6; Jer 39:9; 52:15; Ezek 6:8; 12:16; 14:22; Zeph 2:9; Zech 13:8; 14:2.

This text is a prophecy concerning the destruction of Jerusalem and the consequent exile. Notice that those who are left and remain are the holy remnant. In Isa 3 the prophet describes how the Lord is “taking away” from Jerusalem and Judah their leaders (vv. 1-3). Because of their unfaithfulness God will wash away the filth of the ungodly people and Zion will be cleansed. But those who are left behind are considered the righteous remnant. Later in Isaiah we again read about the coming judgment of God through the Babylonians. Isaiah prophesies to Hezekiah that in the coming days all that the royal house possessed would be carried to Babylon: “Nothing shall be left (רָחַץ; LXX, καταλιπῶσιν), says the LORD, And some of your own sons, who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon” (Isa 39:6-7). The idea of judgment is consistently bound up with the concept of being taken away.

Isaiah, however, is not the only prophet to employ such imagery. Jeremiah likewise prophesies concerning the impending disaster that will come upon Jerusalem: “Flee for safety, O people of Benjamin, from the midst of Jerusalem . . . for disaster looms out of the north, and great destruction” (Jer 6:1). Because the people refused to repent and seek the Lord, they would soon experience the wrath of God. In 6:11-12 the Lord condemns Judah.

Therefore I am full of the wrath of the LORD; I am weary of holding it in. “Pour it out upon the children in the street, and upon the gatherings of young men, also; both husband and wife shall be taken, the elderly and the very aged. Their houses shall be turned over to others, their fields and wives together, for I will stretch out my hand against the inhabitants of the land,” declares the LORD.

The imagery here is similar to that found in the Isaiah texts. The Lord is going to punish his people for their sin by bringing judgment on them from other nations. These nations will destroy the city and kill many of its inhabitants. Although in this passage there is no mention of those who are left behind, it is clear that those who are taken away are the ones judged by God.

Although many other texts might be noted, it will suffice to mention two others from the Minor Prophets. Zephaniah describes God’s judgment upon Jerusalem for their open rebellion. Therefore the Lord declares that he will “remove” from their midst those who are proud and arrogant (Zeph 3:11). He continues, “But I will leave (שָׂאֲרִיתָ; LXX, ὑπολείψομαι) in your midst a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD, those who are left (שָׂאֲרִיתָ; LXX, οἱ κατάλοιποι) in Israel” (Zeph 3:12-13). According to this text, the unjust will be taken but the righteous will be left behind. Finally, the prophet Zechariah speaks the words of the Lord to the rebellious people: “In the whole land, declares the LORD, two thirds shall be cut off and perish, and one third shall be left alive (רָחַץ; LXX, ὑπολειφθήσεται)” (Zech 13:8). Again, those who are taken (or “cut off”) are those who perish whereas those who are left behind remain alive.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Those who are left alive are not necessarily righteous, but in his grace God grants them physical salvation that they may turn to him. Some of these who are left may be taken into captivity, but in

Like the prophets of the OT, Jesus announces the coming destruction of Jerusalem and he does so using the language of the prophets—language that reminds the hearer or reader of God’s judgment upon Jerusalem. Jesus’ original audience would have been well aware of such prophetic descriptions. They would have understood that to be taken was negative and to be left behind referred to something positive.<sup>7</sup>

## II. *Left Behind in Jesus’ Teaching*

Many who interpret the Matt 24 and Luke 17 passages as meaning that those taken are raptured to be with the Lord often cite 1 Thess 4:17 in their defense.<sup>8</sup> In this text Paul seeks to comfort the Thessalonian believers who were afraid that those Christians who died before the return of the Lord would miss out in the future kingdom. Paul, however, assures them that just as Jesus died and rose again, so also those who already died in Christ would be resurrected at his return (cf. 1 Cor 15:50-52). In fact, their resurrection would precede the gathering of believers who are still alive. Paul writes, “Then we who are alive, who are left (οἱ περιλειπόμενοι), will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord” (1 Thess 4:17). The picture here is that believers are taken to be with the Lord.

There are at least three problems with using this text to interpret Matt 24 and Luke 17. First, we must be somewhat cautious of immediately interpreting Jesus (and the Gospel writers) through Paul. Although we should take all Scripture as inspired by God and therefore unified in its message, it is best to look first for interpretive help in the same writer (in this case Matthew or Luke). Second, Paul’s words are found in an epistle. He is writing a letter to friends in order to correct their misunderstanding about the Lord’s return. Jesus’ words are in the context of a prophetic/apocalyptic section of the Gospels. Thus, it would seem more helpful to consider similar passages from prophetic or apocalyptic literature. Finally, the context of Paul’s words in Thessalonians is much different than Jesus’ words in the Gospels. Paul is writing to comfort and offer hope whereas Jesus’ words are found in the context of judgment.

The imagery of being taken as a sign of God’s judgment is found elsewhere in Jesus’ teaching. In the Parable of the Weeds (Matt 13:24-30, 36-43) Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a man who sows good seed in a field. But while he was sleeping, the enemy sowed weeds among the wheat. Consequently, the wheat and the weeds had to grow up together only to be separated at the harvest. Jesus interprets this parable by stating that the field is the world and

their captivity many will repent and seek the Lord when they see the judgment of God. Consequently, God will bring them back into the land (e.g., see Ezek 6:8-10; 14:21-23; 39:21-29; Dan 9:4-19).

<sup>7</sup> I am not arguing that all of Matt 24 was fulfilled in A.D. 70 but that Matt 24:40-41 is found in the immediate context where the destruction of Jerusalem is mentioned.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Hendriksen states, “What does ‘taken’ mean? The answer is found in I Thess. 4:17, ‘They shall be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air’” (*Luke*, 809). Similarly, Morris writes, “Jesus does not explain what he means by *taken*, but evidently it means taken to be with him (cf. 1 Thes. 4:17)” (*Luke*, 286).

that the wheat represents children of the kingdom whereas the weeds are children of the evil one. The time of the harvest represents the end of the age and the reapers are the angels. He continues, “The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace” (Matt 13:41-42). Although we must be cautious of pressing the details of a parable, it is worth noting that in this passage it is the unrighteous who are taken away so that those left behind can enjoy the kingdom. “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of the Father” (Matt 13:43).<sup>9</sup>

Similar to the OT prophetic passages depicting God’s wrath upon Jerusalem, Matt 24 is also colored with the theme of judgment. The conversation between Jesus and his disciples begins when Jesus predicts that the temple will be utterly destroyed (v. 2). In answering the disciples’ questions about when the temple will be destroyed and the signs of the end of the age, Jesus warns the disciples about false Christs, false prophets, and how lawlessness will increase and love will grow cold (vv. 3-14). The judgment language of Jesus is then intensified as he specifically uses judgment imagery from the OT to describe the situation in Jerusalem when it will be decimated.

[L]et those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! (Matt 24:16-18; cf. Luke 17:31-32)

The picture here is of a powerful enemy coming to conquer the land and kill its inhabitants. There is no time to gather one’s belongings. People will have no time to enter their homes to collect their possessions or turn back from the fields to collect their cloaks. Pregnant women and nursing mothers are to be pitied because of their limitations in attempting to run away from the enemy. This imagery is reminiscent of the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Just as the Babylonians ransacked the city and slaughtered many of its residents, so too there will be great tribulation when God again judges the city. In order to avoid being “taken away” by the enemy, it is necessary to flee to the hills and run for your life.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that Rev 14:14-20 indicates two separate times the earth is reaped—a grain harvest (v. 16) and a grape harvest (v. 19). There are two common views on this text: first, both harvests represent the judgment on the wicked, so G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 770-78; David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16* (WBC 52b; Waco: Word, 1998), 801-3; R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920), 2:18-26. Also see Morris who does not commit to this view but states, “There is nothing in the context to show that the righteous are in view” (Leon Morris, *Revelation* [rev. ed.]; TNTC 20; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 179). In another common interpretation of Rev 14:14-20, the first (grain) harvest represents the gathering of the church, and the second (grape) harvest symbolizes the gathering of the wicked for judgment, so Dennis E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2001), 209-14; George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 198-202; William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (1940; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967), 154-56; H. B. Swete, *Commentary on Revelation* (3d ed.; 1911; repr., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), 190.

The context of the left behind passage in both Matthew and Luke includes a comparison with Noah and the great flood (Matt 24:37-39; Luke 17:26-37). As in the days before the flood when people were living life as usual, so it will be when the Son of Man returns. He will come at a time when people are unaware and, like those during the days of Noah, they will be swept away. It is clear from the Genesis account that the flood was brought upon the earth to judge its rebellious inhabitants. Similarly, the Son of Man will return when people least expect. Some will be taken away like those in the flood but others will be left behind and experience salvation similar to that of Noah and his family.

In the Lukan account there is the additional comparison of Lot and the city of Sodom (Luke 17:28-29). On the day that Lot departed from Sodom “fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all” (Luke 17:29). Luke then adds the powerful warning, “Remember Lot’s wife” (Luke 17:32). What needs to be emphasized at this point is that this event is a vivid reminder of God’s judgment on the ungodly. Those who seek to turn back, like Lot’s wife, will fall under condemnation.

Matthew also relates the return of Christ to that of a thief (Matt 24:42-44). A thief comes to steal at night when the owner of the house is sleeping. Jesus, like the thief, will return at a time when many are not ready and they will consequently be judged. Using another analogy, Jesus also warns his audience by informing them that those wicked servants who act unrighteously because their master is delayed will be condemned, cut into pieces, and thrown into a place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt 24:48-51). A final illustration that emphasizes the judgment element of Jesus’ teaching is found in the Lukan narrative. Luke ends the section on the coming judgment with the proverbial statement, “Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather” (Luke 17:37).

The reason for examining the context of the Matt 24 and Luke 17 passages is to demonstrate that the sayings of Jesus concerning one being taken away and one being left behind are couched in a prophecy that stresses God’s judgment. Similar to the days of Noah, Lot, and the destruction of Jerusalem, so it will be when the Son of Man returns. Many, because they are unprepared, will be taken away to destruction, whereas those left behind will receive grace and salvation.

### III. *Left Behind in Matthew 24:40-41 and Luke 17:34-35*

In both the OT and NT the picture of God’s judgment involves the ungodly being taken away while the righteous are left behind. The question before us, then, is whether or not this same pattern is found in Matt 24:40-41 and Luke 17:34-35. In order to demonstrate that this is indeed the case we will now examine the particular language of these passages, primarily by way of answering several objections.

Interestingly, most commentators interpret the notion of being taken away as something positive and being left behind as something negative. For example, Geldenhuys maintains that the text refers to “the faithful being taken up to

meet Him [Jesus] and the unbelievers being left to undergo the judgment.”<sup>10</sup> What reasons are offered for this position? France argues that the verb “taken” (παραλαμβάνω, Matt 24:40-41; Luke 17:34-35) “implies to take someone to be with you, and therefore here points to the salvation rather than the destruction of the one ‘taken’.”<sup>11</sup> Although it is true that the verb is normally used in the positive sense (e.g., Jesus “taking along” his disciples), this usage is by no means exclusive. Matthew 27:27 states, “Then the soldiers of the governor took (παραλαμβάνοντες) Jesus into the governor’s headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before him.” In this usage of the verb, it is clear that the person being taken is not being taken along as a friend or companion. Rather, Jesus is being taken away to be beaten, mocked, and judged by the Roman leaders. Another negative use of the verb is found in John 19:16 where Pilate hands over Jesus to the Jews to be crucified: “So he delivered him over to them to be crucified. So they took (παρέλαβον) Jesus.” Again, it is evident that the verb is used negatively. Thus, the argument that the verb παραλαμβάνω inherently communicates a positive notion cannot be sustained.<sup>12</sup>

A stronger argument favoring the interpretation that being left behind is something negative is found in the usage of the verb “left” (ἀφίημι, Matt 24:40-41; Luke 17:34-35). It is sometimes noted that this verb is consistently used to refer to something that is abandoned or forsaken (e.g., see Matt 4:20, 22; 19:27, 29; 23:38; 26:56). Although this argument is certainly valid, there may be a reason why Matthew and Luke use the verb ἀφίημι. In Matt 24:2 Jesus prophesies, “Truly, I say to you, there will not be left (ἀφεθή) here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” In this text Jesus is indicating that God’s judgment will come against Jerusalem and particularly the temple. Nothing, not even one stone, will escape the coming judgment. But later, regarding his Second Coming, he states that some people will escape the judgment of God. One will be taken but, because of God’s mercy, one will be left. God’s judgment will not visit this one but rather it will leave (or abandon) him. Thus, because the visitation of God’s judgment is the focus of the passage, it seems fitting to express the escaping of such judgment as being left behind (similar to the tenth plague in Egypt where the obedient Israelites were passed over—i.e., they were not taken by God’s wrath but were left behind). They are not ultimately left behind or abandoned by God, but are those whom God’s wrath passes over and leaves behind. Those who

<sup>10</sup> Geldenhuys, *Luke*, 442.

<sup>11</sup> France, *Matthew* (TNTC), 348. France later changed his position. He writes, “The verb [παραλαμβάνω] in itself does not determine the purpose of ‘taking,’ and it could as well be for judgment (as in Jer 6:11) as for refuge. In light of the preceding verses, when the Flood ‘swept away’ the unprepared, that is probably the more likely sense here” (R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], 941).

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps a more difficult text is John 14:3 which uses παραλαμβάνω in the context of Jesus taking believers to be with him: “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take (παραλήψομαι) you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” This context, however, is notably different. Here, Jesus is consoling his depressed disciples whereas the Matthew and Luke left behind passages occur in the context of judgment. There is also no mention of others being left behind but only of the disciples who will be taken.

are left behind ultimately experience salvation and the fullness of God's loving presence.

Another argument that those taken receive salvation whereas those left behind are judged is based on a comparison with Matt 24:31. In this text Jesus declares that the Son of Man "will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."<sup>13</sup> It is thought that the concepts of gathering and being taken can be equated, although it should be noted that the same verb is not used.<sup>14</sup> Just as Matt 24:31 teaches that God will gather his elect, so also vv. 40-41 teach that God's chosen will be taken and gathered to be with Christ. But there are at least two factors that cast doubt on such an interpretation. First, the verb "gather" (ἐπισυνάγω) used in Matt 24:31 is a cognate verb to that found in the Parable of the Weeds where Jesus says, "Gather (συλλέγω) the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather (συνάγω) the wheat into my barn" (Matt 13:30).<sup>15</sup> What is important to notice here is that the gathering of the elect takes place after the unbelievers are first gathered (or taken). Thus, when the Son of Man comes, the unbelievers will be gathered first and then he will gather those who remain to enjoy the kingdom with their King.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps this is also what takes place in 1 Thess 4:17. The unbelievers are taken and those "who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air."<sup>17</sup>

Others claim that the imagery of Noah and Lot suggests that those who are left behind are the ones left for judgment.<sup>18</sup> Commenting on Luke's version of

<sup>13</sup> For example, Hagner writes, "Presumably those who are 'taken' are among the elect whom the angels of the Son of Man are to gather at his coming (v. 31), while those who are left await the prospect of judgment" (*Matthew 14-28*, 720). Also see Wilkins, *Matthew*, 801.

<sup>14</sup> Matt 24:31 = ἐπισυνάγω ("gathered"); Matt 24:40-41 = παραλαμβάνω ("taken").

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, the verb used to describe the gathering of the children of the devil (συλλέγω) is different from the verb used for the gathering of the children of the kingdom (συνάγω).

<sup>16</sup> This interpretation also fits OT imagery of the remnant being gathered from the nations of the world. For example, Isa 11:12 states, "He will raise a signal for the nations and will assemble the banished of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth." Similarly, Isa 27:13 declares, "And in that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt will come and worship the LORD on the holy mountain at Jerusalem." At least three points of comparison can be made with the Isaiah texts and Matt 24:31. First, the verb "gather" (συνάγω, LXX) in Isa 11:12 is a cognate verb to that found in Matt 24:31 (ἐπισυνάγω). Second, Isa 11:12 and Matt 24:31 speak of God gathering his people from the four "corners" or "winds" of the earth. Third, both Isa 27:13 and Matt 24:31 mention a trumpet that will be blown. These parallels suggest Jesus (and/or Matthew) is deliberately using imagery of God gathering his people from the exile. That is, God will gather his people who have been left behind. Although the unrighteous have already been burned and killed, a remnant will survive and be scattered over the face of the earth. But after a time, God will gather his people to regain possession of the land.

<sup>17</sup> Could Paul's use of οἱ περιλειπόμενοι ("those who are alive/remain") be a reference to those who are not merely alive when Jesus returns but those who also are not taken away? These who are left behind are then gathered to Christ and will descend with him to experience the fullness of the kingdom.

<sup>18</sup> For example, Nolland comments, "In the Lukan (and Matthean setting) the imagery of Noah and Lot encourages us to understand that being taken off is the image of deliverance and being left



the passage, Darrell Bock claims, “The most natural reading, based on the previous examples of Noah and Lot, is that one is taken for salvation.”<sup>19</sup> This reasoning is not difficult to follow. Noah and his family entered the ark whereas everyone else was left behind and died in the flood. Lot and his family departed from Sodom and those left behind experienced God’s fierce wrath. Thus, in both cases it could be argued that those left behind were judged. The problem with Bock’s analysis is that it fails to take into account the notion of being taken. For, although it might be argued that the people of Noah’s day and the people of Sodom were “left behind,” it is not convincing to argue that Noah and Lot were “taken away.” With the example of Lot, he and his family fled the wrath of God. This imagery is similar to Jesus’ teaching that those on the housetops should not enter their houses and those in the fields should not turn back for their cloaks. Instead, they must immediately flee or face the enemy who is coming to carry out the judgment of God. Thus, the analogy fails because the issue is not that some are taken for salvation while others are left behind for judgment. Rather, the issue is that the enemy is coming and whoever wishes to save his life must flee—and those who do not flee will be taken by the wrath of God.

A similar analysis could be made with the example of Noah. There is little doubt that Matthew views those who were killed by the flood as being “taken away.”

For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be. (Matt 24:38-39 NASB)

Verse 39 states that the flood came and “took away” (ἦρεν) the people. Although this verb is different than the “taken” (παραλαμβάνεται) in vv. 40 and 41, the proximity of these phrases strongly suggests that they are parallel. Supporting this view Gundry notes, “But Matthew’s parallelistic insertion of ἦρεν in v 39, where judgment is in view, makes the taking judgmental in his gospel. Hence, being left means being spared from instead of exposed to judgment.”<sup>20</sup> Just as the people of Noah’s day were taken away, so too those who are not prepared will be

behind is the image of abandonment to destruction” (Luke 9:21–18:34, 862). Also see Fitzmyer, *Luke 10–24*, 1172.

<sup>19</sup> Bock, *Luke*, 1437.

<sup>20</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 494. This conclusion is also affirmed by Blomberg who states, “In fact, ‘taken’ of vv. 40–41 (though a different verb in the Greek) parallels ‘took’ of v. 39 and suggests that those taken away are taken for eternal judgment (not ‘raptured’), while those left behind remain with Christ” (Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew* [NAC 22; Nashville: Broadman, 1992], 366). Similarly, Wright comments, “It should be noted that being ‘taken’ in this context means being taken in judgment. There is no hint, here, of a ‘rapture’” (N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], 366). Also see Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew* (NIBCNT; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), 229; John MacArthur, *Matthew 24–28* (Chicago: Moody, 1989), 75; MacArthur, *The Second Coming: Signs of Christ’s Return and the End of the Age* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999), 143–44; France, *Matthew* (NICNT), 941; Ray Summers, *Commentary on Luke* (Waco: Word, 1972), 205.

taken away for judgment when the Son of Man returns.<sup>21</sup> Regarding the Lukan version of the account Summers comments, “*One will be taken in judgment. Since judgment is the sole emphasis in the total passage this must be the meaning here. The other will be left to the happy union with the returning Son of Man.*”<sup>22</sup>

This analysis is confirmed by the OT reference to Noah and the flood. Genesis 7:23 states, “He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens. They were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left (ἄριστος; LXX, κατελείφθη), and those who were with him in the ark.” In this text the idea of being left behind is contrasted with being killed or judged by God. The people on earth were taken by God and thus blotted out. But Noah and his family were left behind and received God’s mercy. This is a common pattern in the OT. The remnant that is left behind is often contrasted with those who are killed, destroyed, or blotted out.<sup>23</sup> Thus, in echoing the Genesis text, Jesus is teaching us that those who are taken are judged whereas those who left behind receive salvation.<sup>24</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

Although many assume that those taken in Matt 24:40-41 and Luke 17:34-35 are taken to be with Jesus and those left behind are left for judgment, this interpretation should be rejected. Throughout the context of these passages Jesus uses judgment language reminiscent of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the subsequent exile of its inhabitants. Those who were taken away were the ones judged by God whereas those left behind were the remnant who received grace. Furthermore, the teaching of Jesus confirms this thesis. In the Parable of the Weeds the Son of Man sends his angels to gather out the children of the devil and throw them in the fiery furnace whereas the wheat is left behind (Matt 13:36-43). The context of Matt 24 and Luke 17 also suggests Jesus is intentionally using

<sup>21</sup> Turner agrees at this point: “During Noah’s flood those taken were swept away by the water, and those who were left were protected by the ark” (David L. Turner, *Matthew* [BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008], 590). Likewise Summers states, “Noah and Lot are representative of those who are *left*, that is, those who do not fall under God’s judgment. The people of Noah’s day, the people of Lot’s day, and Lot’s wife are representatives of those who are *taken*, who perish under God’s judgment” (*Luke*, 205).

<sup>22</sup> Summers, *Luke*, 205.

<sup>23</sup> For example, see Gen 42:38; Exod 8:9, 11; Num 21:35; Deut 2:34; 3:3; Josh 8:22; 11:22; Ruth 1:3, 5; 2 Kgs 7:13; 10:11, 17; 17:18; 2 Chr 30:6; Isa 10:20; 24:6; Jer 39:9-10; Ezek 17:21; Zech 11:9.

<sup>24</sup> Some who hold to a pretribulation view of the rapture insist that those taken are judged whereas those left behind are blessed in order to combat a posttribulation view of Matt 24 which teaches that the return of Christ takes place after the tribulation mentioned earlier in the chapter. If Matt 24:31 is a reference to the rapture (Jesus secretly coming to gather his people), Matt 24:40-41 could not also be a reference to the rapture but is viewed as a reference to the Second Coming of Jesus; so John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation: A Biblical and Historical Study of Post-tribulationism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 89-90; Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton; Victor Books, 1986), 492-93; Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology* (4 vols.; Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2005), 4:625-26. It is more likely, however, that both texts refer to the same event (i.e., the Second Coming).

judgment and remnant language. Such language naturally brings up images of the former destruction of Jerusalem where the enemy came and “took away” (i.e., killed) those in the city. Finally, the parallel with Noah and the flood in the preceding verses strongly confirms our thesis. Just as in the days of Noah the people were taken away by the great flood, so those who are not prepared will be taken away when the Son of Man returns.



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