

# THE “OUTER DARKNESS” IN MATTHEW’S GOSPEL: SHEDDING LIGHT ON AN OMINOUS WARNING

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## ABSTRACT

*On three occasions Jesus referred to persons who would be cast into “the outer darkness.” This was augmented with a description of their destiny in a place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Debate centers on whether these warnings are aimed at unbelievers who have rejected his messianic claims or unfaithful believers who will be sternly rebuked and suffer during the millennial kingdom.*

*Careful study of the terminology employed in intertestamental literature and contextual consideration of the relevant New Testament passages demonstrates that the main persons in view in these passages are those among the Jews who were resisting Jesus as Messiah.*

## INTRODUCTION

ON THREE OCCASIONS DURING HIS EARTHLY MINISTRY, Jesus warned of the danger of being cast into the “outer darkness” (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; and 25:30).<sup>1</sup> Jesus also noted that in this place there would be “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” This latter expression occurs seven times, all in Matthew’s account (8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30), except for Luke 13:28.

This article examines these ominous warnings to determine to whom Jesus gave them, the nature of the fate that awaited these people, and the reason they were to be consigned to this end. Some evangelicals hold that these passages apply to true but disobedient believers who will receive a stern rebuke at the judgment seat of

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the NASB.

Christ and lose rewards.<sup>2</sup> This article argues that these words of warning were aimed at those who rejected Jesus as Messiah, especially the religious leaders of Israel, and whose destiny would be in a place of eternal torment.

#### RELEVANT PASSAGES AND INITIAL ASSUMPTIONS

Of the seven passages sharing this terminology, all but one are parables of Jesus, the exception being the report of the healing of the centurion's servant.

Verse	Pericope	“outer darkness”	“weeping and gnashing of teeth”
Matt. 8:12	Healing of the Centurion's Servant (Matt. 8:5–13)	Yes	Yes
Matt. 13:42	Parable of the Wheat and Tares (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43)	No	Yes
Matt. 13:50	Parable of the Net (Matt. 13:47–50)	No	Yes
Matt. 22:13	Parable of the Wedding Banquet (Matt. 22:1–14)	Yes	Yes
Matt. 24:51	Parable of the Good and Wicked Servants (Matt. 24:25–51)	No	Yes
Matt. 25:30	Parable of the Talents (Matt. 25:14–30)	Yes	Yes
Luke 13:28	Parable of the Narrow Door (Luke 13:22–30)	No	Yes

Three verses in Matthew have a form of the verb ἐκβάλλω (“cast out”) followed by εἰς τὸ σκότος τὸ ἕξώτερον (“into the outer darkness”) (8:12; 22:13; 25:30). Given that all three occurrences of the “outer darkness” also mention “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” it is safe to assume that Jesus meant the same thing in each place and that

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Gregory P. Sapaugh, “A Call to the Wedding Celebration: An Exposition of Matthew 22:1–14,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 5 (Spring 1992): 10–34; Michael G. Huber, “The ‘Outer Darkness’ in Matthew and Its Relationship to Grace,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 5 (Autumn 1992): 10–25; Marty Cauley, *The Outer Darkness: Its Interpretations and Implications* (n.p.: CreateSpace Independent Publ. Platform, 2012); and Zane Hodges and Robert Wilkin, *What is the Outer Darkness?* (n.p.: Grace Evangelical Society, 2016).

the four other mentions of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” most likely have the same punishment in view. Looking at these collectively affords a greater field of data for reaching conclusions, and clearer passages should guide the exegesis of vague passages.

#### USE OF THE EXPRESSIONS OUTSIDE THE NEW TESTAMENT

Did Jesus coin these expressions himself, or were they already known to his listeners? Assuming that Matthew wrote primarily for a Jewish audience, were these expressions known from Jewish biblical and extrabiblical literature?

##### THE EXPRESSION “OUTER DARKNESS”

“Outer darkness” is mentioned rarely in extrabiblical literature.<sup>3</sup> The only extant passage with the exact phrase τὸ σκότος τὸ ἐξώτερον (“the outer darkness”) appears to be the Greek Apocalypse of Ezra 4:37, but this document is dated long after Jesus’s ministry (after AD 150) and so could not be the basis for Jesus’s use of the phrase. The only other document with a similar expression is the Apocalypse of Paul, thought to be a gnostic work of the latter fourth century AD. One section describes the fate of the unrighteous awaiting eternal punishment: “Let him therefore be delivered unto the angel Tartaruchus (Gr. Temeluchus) that is set over the torments, and let him cast him into the outer darkness where is weeping and gnashing of teeth, and let him be there until the great day of judgment” (Apoc. Paul 16).<sup>4</sup> In section 18, Tartaruchus has the task of taking the unrighteous to hell.

In several cases, however, a place of punishment is referred to simply as the “darkness.” In Jubilees 7:29 Noah instructs his sons: “And no man who eats blood or sheds the blood of man will remain upon the earth; . . . they will go down into Sheol, and into the place of judgment they will descend. And into the darkness of the depths they will all be removed with a cruel death.”<sup>5</sup> Here “darkness” was

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<sup>3</sup> For a helpful article surveying the concept of “darkness” in both biblical and extrabiblical documents, see Richard D. Patterson, “Deliverance from Darkness,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 8 (Spring 2004): 70–85. New Testament verses involving “darkness” as an eschatological punishment include 2 Peter 2:4, 17; and Jude 6, 13. Believers have been enlightened, called “out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9), and “rescued from the domain of darkness” (Col. 1:13).

<sup>4</sup> M. R. James, trans., *Apocalypse of Paul*, accessed August 3, 2017, <http://www.interfaith.org/Christianity/apocrypha-apocalypse-of-paul-1/>.

<sup>5</sup> O. S. Wintermute, “Jubilees,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 70. According to Wintermute,

used to describe a place of judgment following death, though the eternal fate of the transgressor is not entirely clear.

In the Psalms of Solomon, “darkness” was linked with “destruction” as a fate awaiting sinners in Hades, in contrast to “life” that awaited the righteous: “Therefore their inheritance is Hades, and darkness and destruction; and they will not be found on the day of mercy for the righteous” (Psalms of Solomon 14:9; cf. 15:10).<sup>6</sup> The idea of “darkness” being associated with judgment can be found in numerous other passages (e.g., 1 Enoch 103:7; 108:14–15; Tobit 14:10).

Probably the most significant parallel for this study is 1 Enoch 10:4, where wicked angels are condemned for taking wives from among the daughters of men prior to Noah’s flood. As the Lord was about to send the great deluge, he called for special judgment on the wicked angel Azaz’el: “The Lord said to Raphael, ‘Bind Azaz’el hand and foot (and) throw him into the darkness! And he made a hole in the desert which was in Duda’el and cast him there; . . . in order that he may be sent into the fire on the great day of judgment” (1 Enoch 10:4–6).<sup>7</sup> The similarity with Jesus’s words in Matthew 22:13 (“Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness”) cannot be missed.<sup>8</sup> Although 1 Enoch is generally regarded as a composite work written at different times, chapters 6–11 (part of the Book of the Watchers) are generally regarded as having been written prior to the time of Christ.<sup>9</sup> This similarity strongly suggests either that Jesus was drawing on 1 Enoch or that this imagery (binding someone hand and foot to cast into the dark-

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the “paleographic dating of the earliest fragments points to a date prior to 100 B.C.” (p. 43).

<sup>6</sup> R. B. Wright, “Psalms of Solomon,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 664. Wright suggests that the widest limits for dating are between 125 BC and the early first century AD (p. 641).

<sup>7</sup> E. Isaac, “1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 17.

<sup>8</sup> David C. Sim, “Matthew 22.13a and 1 Enoch 10.4a: A Case of Literary Dependence?,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 15 (July 1992): 3–19.

<sup>9</sup> For discussion of the composite nature of 1 Enoch and the dating of the book, see Isaac, “1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch,” 6–7. Kevin Sullivan concluded, “Presumably both the author of the text and its intended audience were Jews of the mid-to-late Second Temple Period” (“The Watchers Traditions in 1 Enoch 6–16: The Fall of Angels and the Rise of Demons,” in *The Watchers in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. A. Harkins, K. Baultch, and J. Endres [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014], 92–93). George Nickelsburg has suggested a date in the third century BC for this section of 1 Enoch (*1 Enoch 1: A Commentary on the Book of Enoch Chapters 1–36; 81–108*, Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001], 170, 230).

ness) was commonly understood in the first century AD as eternal punishment of the wicked.

#### THE EXPRESSION "WEEPING AND GNASHING OF TEETH"

The expression "gnashing of teeth" was certainly used prior to the first century AD in both biblical and extrabiblical literature. The Hebrew word  $\text{קָרַךְ}$ , meaning to "gnash the teeth," is found five times in the Old Testament (Job 16:9; Pss. 35:16; 37:12; 112:10; and Lam. 2:16). In each instance it is used of one who is angry or desires to viciously attack another (a sense also found in Acts 7:54).

Yet Jesus used "gnashing of teeth" differently, coupling this expression with the word "weeping," which signified extreme emotions of despair and regret. This sense is found in the Sibylline Oracles 2:203 in a scene depicting a fiery judgment to be poured out on earth: "And then a great river of blazing fire will flow from heaven. . . . All the souls of men will gnash their teeth, burning in a river, and brimstone and a rush of fire"<sup>10</sup> (cf. Dan. 7:10–11). Several other passages mention "gnashing of teeth" in conjunction with the wicked suffering in Gehenna (see Sib. Or. 2:305, 332; 8:86, 105, 125, 231) or perishing in a fiery hell, weeping and lamenting (e.g., 1 Enoch 108:3, 5). Such usage in extrabiblical literature suggests that "gnashing of teeth" expresses the grief of the wicked in eternal torment.

#### THE PARABLE OF THE WEDDING BANQUET (MATT. 22)

The parable in Matthew 22:1–14 is perhaps the clearest passage and the key to interpretation. It culminates in verse 13 with the disqualified one being cast into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Only Matthew provides the parable of the wedding banquet, although there are certain affinities with Luke 14:16–24. The chapter preceding Matthew 22 is key to understanding the parable itself. Matthew 21 opens with the triumphal entry. Shortly thereafter, Jesus entered the temple complex, where he was confronted by a delegation of the chief priests and elders who asked, "By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?" (v. 23). Barbieri clarifies, "By 'these things' they probably meant His Triumphal Entry into the city, His

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<sup>10</sup> J. J. Collins, "Sibylline Oracles," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 350. Collins acknowledges the difficulty of dating this material (pp. 331–32). Other examples from extrabiblical literature are found in Sirach 51:3 and Sibylline Oracles 4:160 (both used as an expression of anger).

reception of praise from the people, His clearing of the temple, His healing of the blind and the lame (vv. 8–14), and His teaching (v. 23). The leaders understood Jesus was claiming authority as Messiah and wanted to know where He got such authority.”<sup>11</sup> Their challenge to his authority led to a discussion of the authority of John the Baptist (21:24–27), followed by three parables aimed at discrediting these Jewish religious leaders. Matthew 22:15 makes note of their departure, marking the end of this extended confrontation. Thus Matthew 21:23–22:14 must be seen as a unit in which Jesus answers the challenge to his authority through a series of parables.

Significantly, each of these parables is aimed at the religious leaders of the nation who had rejected him as Messiah. This led to Jesus’s trial before the Sanhedrin, in which he was falsely charged with blasphemy, officially rejected as Messiah (26:57–68), and finally crucified.

THE FIRST PARABLE: THE TWO SONS WORKING  
IN THE VINEYARD (MATT. 21:28–32)

Each of the three parables in Matthew 21:23–22:14 reflected Jesus’s response to the challenge of his authority. The first parable (21:28–32), concerning the two sons who worked in their father’s vineyard, concluded with the pronouncement, “The tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you” (v. 31). In verse 32 the verb “believe” is used three times to emphasize the leaders’ failure to respond to Jesus in faith. These religious leaders had refused to acknowledge John’s authority, and now (ironically) Jesus revealed that their lack of faith at John’s message would result in their exclusion from the kingdom of God.

THE SECOND PARABLE: THE VINEYARD AND  
THE VINE GROWERS (MATT. 21:33–44)

In this parable, which draws on the vineyard parable of Isaiah 5, the issue was the murderous nature of those responsible for the vineyard. These Jewish religious leaders had been entrusted with the care of the nation—God’s vineyard. They had an obligation to recognize and submit to the Messiah who would rule over the kingdom of God. The killing of the son obviously depicted their rejection of Jesus and putting him to death. Jesus declared, “The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people [ἐθνῶν] producing the fruit of it” (Matt. 21:43). In Exodus 19:6, God offered

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<sup>11</sup> L. A. Barbieri Jr., “Matthew,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 69.

Israel the role of being his unique people: “You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation [ἔθνος, LXX].” The religious leaders were the caretakers of God’s earthly kingdom, but that privilege was now being withdrawn. Carson explains, “Up to this time the Jewish religious leaders were the principal means by which God exercised His reign over His people. But the leaders failed so badly in handling God’s ‘vineyard’ and rejecting God’s Son that God gave the responsibility to another people who would produce the kingdom’s fruit.”<sup>12</sup> This new “people”—the messianic community of believers, which would eventually come to include Gentiles—would be given oversight of God’s kingdom work. They would be God’s “people,” knowing no national boundaries, by virtue of the new covenant (cf. 1 Pet. 2:4–10).

A brief interlude followed the second parable before the third and final parable. Although only two verses long (Matt. 21:45–46), the interlude is crucial for understanding the final parable. According to verse 45, “When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them.” Despite the chapter break that follows, Matthew 22:1 must be understood in light of this comment. The third parable begins by saying, “Jesus spoke to them again in parables” (22:1). Just as the first two parables of the trilogy were aimed at the Jewish leaders who rejected him, so was the third parable.<sup>13</sup>

THE THIRD PARABLE: THE IMPROPERLY DRESSED GUEST  
AT THE WEDDING FEAST (MATT. 22:1–14)

Jesus introduced the parable with the words “the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for a son” (Matt. 22:2). The issue of the kingdom had been prominent in each of the preceding parables (note 21:31 and 21:43). More specifically, each parable conveyed God’s view of the religious leaders with respect to the kingdom of heaven/God. This third parable, centered on a wedding feast, conveyed truths about the banquet to inaugurate the messianic kingdom (for background imagery, see Isaiah 25:6–9). As the invitation to the feast went out, some were unwilling to come (Matt. 22:3), while others reacted with hostility, mistreating the king’s slaves and even killing them (v. 6). This

<sup>12</sup> D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:454.

<sup>13</sup> Sapaugh argues that the pronoun “them” in Matthew 22:1 refers to “the multitudes” (τοὺς ὄχλους) in 21:46, the nearest antecedent (“A Call to the Wedding Celebration,” 12), but the word “again” (πάλιν) in 22:1 (“Jesus spoke to them again”) clarifies that this is another parable for the religious leaders.

prompted an angry reaction by the king; he sent armies to destroy the murderers and set their city on fire (v. 7). France explains, “Most interpreters agree that this is a specific allusion to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, when large parts of the city were burned by the conquering Romans (Josephus, *War* 6.353–55, 363–64, 406–8).”<sup>14</sup>

The final scene of the third parable shows the king entering the wedding hall and noticing a man improperly dressed. To say that the man’s presence shows that he is “saved” pushes the details of the parable too far.<sup>15</sup> His presence depicts an ultimate confrontation with the Jewish religious leaders. The change of setting at verse 11 does not mean that the Jewish religious leaders are no longer in view. It would be very strange for a parable that began by addressing the religious leaders (so 22:1)—as did the parables before it—to suddenly shift to the topic of the judgment seat of Christ for Christians. Notice that the religious leaders do not depart until verse 15. Nor does the fact that the king calls the man “friend” in verse 12 suggest that the man is saved. Elsewhere Jesus also addressed Judas as “friend” (26:50), though Jesus referred to Judas as the “son of perdition” (John 17:12).

The improperly clothed man was simply unqualified to participate, and the story places him in the wedding hall to highlight this fact. His fate was to be bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness (Matt. 22:13). The man was not merely consigned to a place of lesser light; he was also bound hand and foot, totally restricted.<sup>16</sup> This is what was in store for each of the Jewish religious leaders. They may have expected to enter the kingdom, but they would not be able to while rejecting Jesus as Messiah and being dressed in self-righteousness. The striking similarity of Matthew 22:13 to 1 Enoch 10:4 suggests that the “outer darkness” imagery

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<sup>14</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 825.

<sup>15</sup> “If the man in question were an unbeliever then it seems that he would not be present at the banquet in the first place” (Sapaugh, “A Call to the Wedding Celebration,” 24). Sapaugh reasons that the wedding attire should be understood, in light of Revelation 19:7–9, as “good works,” which are not a basis of salvation. Yet the other details of Matthew 22:1–14 argue against his conclusion, especially the fact that the parable is addressed to the religious leaders (v.1) and the conclusion in verse 14 that “few are chosen.”

<sup>16</sup> “Binding hand and foot” is certainly a metaphor, but to suggest this represents the forfeiture of reigning with Christ is unwarranted. There is no clear indication of that idea in the context, whereas judgment of the unsaved religious leaders is very much the subject of discussion.



must have been a commonly understood way of speaking of eternal damnation.

To say that the weeping and gnashing of teeth in Matthew 22:13 merely describes the regret a carnal believer will feel over having wasted his life on earth does not do justice to the context or the terminology employed here. Furthermore, it does not square with the final statement of the parable: "Many are called, but few are chosen" (22:14). In this context, "called" (κλητοι) is used of being invited to the wedding feast, not in the Pauline sense of "called" of God (Rom. 1:6). Notice the cognate verb καλέω in Matthew 22:3. Many were "called," that is, invited; but most despised the opportunity and refused the invitation. Yet God has his "chosen ones." "Chosen" (ἐκλεκτοι) is commonly used in the New Testament of God's elect (Matt. 24:31; Luke 18:7; Rom. 8:33; Col. 3:12). France notes, "The term will recur in 24:22, 24 to designate God's true people, threatened but protected through the time of trial, and in 24:31 for those summoned from all over the world to make up the new people of God after the failure of the old regime."<sup>17</sup>

Matthew 22:14, then, explains why the king refused the improperly dressed man entry and pronounced such a harsh sentence on him. He was not one of God's "elect" (his covenant people). The fate awaiting him was "outer darkness." God's purposes, however, would not be thwarted by the rejection of the religious leaders, for his "elect" would ultimately emerge victorious and would make up the new *ethnos* promised in Matthew 21:43. This third and final parable was the most sobering of the trilogy of parables that Jesus spoke to the Jewish religious leaders who challenged his authority.

#### THE HEALING OF THE CENTURION'S SERVANT (MATT. 8:5–13)

Of particular concern in this healing account is the Lord's affirmation of the remarkable faith of the Roman centurion. "I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel" (Matt. 8:10). It was ironic that this Gentile officer would believe in Jesus when many among the "seed of Abraham" would not. As in the parable of the wedding banquet, Jesus chose to reflect on the implications that his audience's unbelief would have for them in the kingdom. The imagery of reclining at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob called

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<sup>17</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 827. Regarding ἐκλεκτός in the Septuagint as a term for God's covenant people, see Psalms 105:6; 106:4–5; Isaiah 43:20; 65:9; and Sirach 46.1.

to mind the kingdom banquet.<sup>18</sup> Since the comment about many coming from east and west responded to the Gentile centurion, this no doubt referred to Gentiles who would be in attendance. Yet “the sons of the kingdom” were in for a surprise, for they were headed for a miserable fate rather than this kingdom banquet.

The expression “the sons of the kingdom” is used only one other time in the New Testament, in the parable of the wheat and tares (13:38).<sup>19</sup> In that context, the “sons of the kingdom” are the “good seed,” the “righteous” who “will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (v. 43). In contrast the tares are gathered up and burned with fire at the end of the age (v. 40). Verse 42 adds that the angels “will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (cf. vv. 49–50). In Matthew 13, then, the “sons of the kingdom” do not experience the furnace of fire where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.<sup>20</sup>

What then did Jesus mean in Matthew 8:12 when he said that “the sons of the kingdom” would be cast into outer darkness, where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth? The only way these passages can be harmonized is to conclude that in 8:12, Jesus was speaking figuratively with sarcasm. Bullinger explains that irony and sarcasm occur “when the speaker intends to convey a sense contrary to the strict signification of the words employed: not with the intention of concealing his real meaning, but for the purpose of adding greater force to it.”<sup>21</sup> Jesus was pointing out that they were

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<sup>18</sup> Carson notes, “The picture is that of the ‘messianic banquet,’ derived from such OT passages as Isaiah 25:6–9 (cf. 65:13–14) and embellished in later Judaism. . . . These embellishments did not usually anticipate the presence of Gentiles at the banquet, which symbolized the consummation of the messianic kingdom (cf. 22:1–14; 25:10; 26:29)” (“Matthew,” 202).

<sup>19</sup> For a helpful discussion comparing the use of “sons of the kingdom” in Matthew 8 with that in Matthew 13, see Michael Stallard, “Hermeneutics and Matthew 13; Part II,” *Conservative Theological Journal* 5 (December 2001): 323–59. The expression “sons of the kingdom,” though not found elsewhere in Scripture, is one example of the Jewish idiom “son(s) of,” meaning “belonging to” (a certain class/category) or “destined for.” For example, we find “the sons of this age” in Luke 16:8 contrasted with “the sons of light” (cf. Luke 20:34). In condemning the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:15, Jesus referred to them as “son[s] of hell” (υἱὸν γεέννης). Jesus referred to the righteous destined for heaven as “sons of the resurrection” (τῆς ἀναστάσεως υἱοί). For further examples and discussion, see Adolf Deissmann, *Bible Studies*, 2nd ed., trans. Alexander Grieve (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1909), 161–66.

<sup>20</sup> For the relation of the “furnace of fire” to Gehenna, see Hans Scharen, “Part 1: Gehenna in the Synoptics,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (July–September 1992): 323–37; and “Part 2: Gehenna in the Synoptics,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (October–December 1992): 453–70.

<sup>21</sup> E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1898; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), 807.

not “sons of the kingdom” at all but only thought of themselves as such (i.e., they vainly expected to enter the kingdom).<sup>22</sup> What really awaited them was not kingdom entrance, but being cast into the outer darkness, where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Hence, the expressions in Matthew 8 carry the same meaning as those in Matthew 22.

#### THE OUTER DARKNESS IN THE OLIVET DISCOURSE

(MATT. 24:45–51; 25:14–30)

Finally, two parables in the Olivet Discourse need to be considered. The first, in Matthew 24:45–51, mentions weeping and gnashing of teeth, while the second, in 25:14–30, has the outer darkness as well as weeping and gnashing of teeth.

##### THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD AND WICKED SERVANTS (MATT. 24:45–51)

In this parable a “master” goes away on a journey and leaves his slave in charge of the household in his absence. Should the master return and find the slave doing his duty properly, the master will reward him appropriately. If, however, the slave turns out to be an “evil slave” (ὁ κακὸς δοῦλος)—treating the other household members cruelly and wasting his energy in drunkenness—then the master will punish that slave. The master will “cut him in pieces” and “assign him a place with the hypocrites” (τῶν ὑποκριτῶν), where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (24:51).

In the parable, the “evil slave” refers to the master as “my master” (μου ὁ κύριος) (v. 48). Some have concluded from this that the slave is really a “believer” (saved), though a disobedient one. This interpretation, however, must be examined in light of both the larger context and the exegetical details of the passage.

Jesus gives the parable in the context of teaching about who will be “alert and ready” for his return in glory. The Olivet Discourse can be divided into two parts: the predictions of the coming tribulation leading up to the Lord’s return (vv. 1–31) and the parables stressing the need to constantly “be ready” (vv. 32–25:46). The parable of the good and wicked servants (vv. 45–51) follows the parables commending readiness for Christ’s return (vv. 37–44).

As for the parables commending readiness, part of the concern is for those headed to destruction for not having believed in Christ. For example, verses 37–39 discuss those who were not prepared for Noah’s flood. So it should surprise no one that the following para-

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<sup>22</sup> For another example of Jesus’s use of sarcasm, see Matthew 9:13.

bles would be concerned for those who had not yet turned to Christ as well as for believers. This does not prove that the “evil slave” is an unbeliever, but having an unbeliever in the story would not be out of place in the Olivet Discourse.

Upon his return the master cuts the evil slave in pieces. The expression “cut in pieces” (one word in Greek, διχοτομήσει), is used elsewhere in the New Testament only in the parallel passage in Luke 12:46. Elsewhere διχοτομέω is used literally of cutting a ram into pieces as part of the priestly ordination ceremony (Exod. 29:17, LXX). In 3 Baruch 16.3, διχοτομέω is used of general punishment: “Punish [διχοτομήσατε] them [sinners among mankind] with the sword and death, and their children with demons.” In *Antiquities* 8.31, Josephus relates the account of Solomon pronouncing judgment for the two women who both claimed to be the mother of a baby (cf. 1 Kings 3:16–28). To determine the real mother, Solomon ordered the baby “cut in two” (διχοτομέω). From the limited data we have, then, relevant options for διχοτομέω in the context of Matthew 24:51 would be a literal cutting in two of a person or a metaphorical expression of severe punishment. But the guilty one is not literally cut in pieces, because he lives on in the place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. This word then means “punishment” but certainly connotes more than mere verbal rebuke or mild chastisement. Loss of reward is one thing, but severe punishment as suggested by διχοτομέω is another (cf. John 5:24). Based on this survey, the word is quite inappropriate for describing a believer in Christ, even one who might have been thoroughly disobedient and unfaithful.

The other action taken by the master was to “assign [the slave] a place with the hypocrites,” a place where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth. The word “hypocrites” (ὑποκριτής) is used seventeen times in the New Testament, all of which are found on the lips of Jesus. All but two occurrences (Matt. 7:5 and Luke 6:42) are used as strong rebukes against the Jewish religious leaders (e.g., Matt. 23:13). Bock notes, “To be placed with the hypocrites is to receive their punishment.”<sup>23</sup> The use of ὑποκριτής in Matthew 24:51 points in the direction of the evil slave being an unbeliever. Furthermore, in the parallel account in Luke 12:41–48, the evil slave is assigned a place, not with the “hypocrites,” but with “the unbelievers” (τῶν ἀπίστων, v. 46).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1183.

<sup>24</sup> The plural form of ἄπιστος in the New Testament always has non-Christians in view (e.g., 1 Cor. 6:6; 2 Cor. 4:4; 6:14), while the singular form rarely means any-

Finally, though the evil slave spoke of the master as "my master," this should not be taken to mean he possessed eternal life. This is a parable (not an allegory), and so most of the details are there as scenery for the story.<sup>25</sup> In this case, the slave obviously belongs to a master, but nothing more should be read into this. A parallel situation is found in the parable of the two sons working in the vineyard (Matt. 21:28–32). This parable contrasts the Jewish religious leaders who rejected Jesus with the seemingly unworthy tax collectors and prostitutes who believed, though both had the role of "sons" in the parable. The relationship role they have in the parable does not automatically translate into an analogous role in reality. The Jewish religious leaders were not *sons of God* (John 1:11–12), and neither is the evil slave in Matthew 24:48. This conclusion is supported by (1) the general context of Matthew 24, which mentions unbelievers who are unprepared for Christ's return, and (2) terms like "cut in pieces," "hypocrites," and a place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth," which beg to be understood as the destiny of one who has never believed upon Christ.

#### THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS (MATT. 25:14–30)

The parable of the talents involves a man going away on a journey. Before going, he entrusts his possessions to "his own slaves" (Matt. 25:14), but he gives each a different amount to trade with (each according to his own ability). The fact that they are the master's "own slaves" raises the possibility that all three might be true believers having eternal life. The third slave gained nothing with the talent that was entrusted to him, but merely hid it in the ground. So upon his return the master rebuked him as a "wicked, lazy slave." Finally, in verse 30 the master gave the order, "Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Although he is entrusted with his master's possessions, a strong case can be made that the third slave does not represent a true believer. First, the final statement about being cast into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth has been shown everywhere else to represent the destiny of unbeliev-

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thing else (see John 20:27 for an exception).

<sup>25</sup> Bernard Ramm wisely points out, "A parable is not like an allegory for in the latter, most of the elements have meaning. . . . A parable is a truth carried in a vehicle. Therefore there is the inevitable presence of *accessories* which are necessary for the drapery of the parable, but are not part of the meaning. The danger in parabolic teaching at this point is to interpret as meaningful what is drapery" (*Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970], 283).

ers, with particular emphasis on the Jewish religious leaders who rejected Christ. Second, it was pointed out in the discussion of Matthew 24:45–51 that relationships in parables do not necessarily correspond to spiritual relationships in reality. Third, the wicked slave’s view of the master is telling. He knew him to be a hard man, reaping where he did not sow and gathering where he had not scattered seed (v. 24). In the slave’s view the master got all the benefits without doing any of the work. In calling the master a “hard man” (σκληρὸς ἄνθρωπος), the slave used a word meaning “harsh, cruel”; that is, he deemed him to be hard-hearted with no compassion, no grace. But this reveals that the wicked slave did not really know his master at all.

### CONCLUSIONS

This article has examined the use of the expressions “outer darkness” and “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” The expression “outer darkness” is not clearly attested prior to the first century AD, though in both biblical and extrabiblical literature “darkness” is commonly used to refer to a place of punishment for the wicked. “Weeping and gnashing of teeth” is a common expression conveying strong emotions of sorrow and grief.

The parable of the wedding feast was shown to be part of a longer unit directed at the unbelieving Jewish religious leaders who rejected Jesus as Messiah and challenged his authority. In each parable in the unit, Jesus made a point that they would be excluded from his kingdom. The final parable (Matt. 22:1–14) went even further: they were destined to be bound hand and foot and cast into a place of outer darkness where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth, a common idiom for a place of eternal damnation. Significantly, Jesus’s choice of words was so strikingly similar to 1 Enoch 10:4 (which described a place where the wicked angel Azazel was cast as he awaited final judgment in “the fire”) that, if Jesus did not have 1 Enoch 10:4 in mind, he was clearly drawing upon a commonly understood idiomatic expression that his audience would have understood.

A study of these expressions in other parables of Matthew yielded similar results. In Matthew 8:5–13, Jesus warned those of Jewish stock who thought they should be at the messianic kingdom banquet that they would be excluded because of their unbelief and rejection of him. Finally, two parables from the Olivet Discourse involving “outer darkness” and “weeping and gnashing of teeth” were examined (24:45–51 and 25:14–30). In the first, the wicked slave was to be “cut in pieces” (διχοτομέω), which speaks of utterly

severe punishment, and he would be sent to a place with the “hypocrites,” a term commonly used of the Jewish religious leaders who rejected Jesus. The slave in Matthew 25:14–30 proved he did not know his master’s true nature.

When all evidence is taken into account, the best exegetical conclusion is that Jesus used “outer darkness” and “weeping and gnashing of teeth” to speak of a place of eternal torment for the wicked, and that these expressions were particularly fitting for the religious leaders who rejected him as Messiah and who would be excluded from the kingdom. Therefore, the doctrine that certain unfaithful Christians may have to suffer confinement to “the outer darkness” during Christ’s millennial rule needs to be reconsidered and rejected.

While it is true that there will be differing degrees of reward for believers, it is quite another thing to assert there will be post-resurrection punishment in store for certain unworthy Christians. The teaching of “outer darkness” for believers seems very out of character with saving grace. If one of the criminals crucified with Jesus—having nothing to show for his life other than last-minute faith—could be promised that he would be immediately with Jesus in paradise (Luke 23:43), it hardly seems congruent that others would be punished with a destiny of outer darkness. Such a doctrine could potentially burden a Christian with undue frustration, for how would one know what was necessary to “make the cut” and escape such a sad destiny? Surely the kingdom is “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).