

The “Outer Darkness” in Matthew’s Gospel; Shedding Light on an Ominous Warning

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I. INTRODUCTION

On a number of occasions in Jesus’ earthly ministry, he announced that people would be held accountable for the way in which they responded to him and his preaching of the kingdom message. Those who responded by believing him to be the promised Messiah of Israel were assured of eternal life with the confidence of entering the kingdom of God. On the other hand, there would also be those whose response would be deemed inadequate or unfit, and as a result would be cast into the “outer darkness.” Jesus referred to this ominous warning of the “outer darkness” on three occasions, all of which are recorded only in Matthew’s Gospel (Matt 8:12; 22:13; and 25:30).¹ In each instance, Jesus also noted that in this place there would be “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” This latter expression occurs seven times in the Gospels, all in Matthew’s Gospel account (Matt 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; and 25:30), except for one case in Luke 13:28.

The purpose of this paper is to examine these ominous warning expressions to determine whom Jesus had in mind, the nature of the fate that awaited them, and the reason they were to be consigned to this end. There are certainly good evangelical teachers today who hold that these passages have true (yet disobedient) believers in view, ones who will be in for the Lord’s stern rebuke at the judgment seat of Christ and a loss of rewards.² In this paper, however, I will argue that the Lord had something much different in mind. I submit that a careful study of these phrases in Matthew’s Gospel indicates that Jesus’ words of warning were aimed at those who rejected him as Messiah, especially the religious leadership of Israel, and whose destiny would be in a place of eternal torment.

II. SURVEY OF THE RELEVANT PASSAGES

Of the seven passages sharing this similar terminology, all but one of them comes from the parables told by Jesus. The one exception is the healing report of the centurion’s servant found in Matt 8:5-13. The following chart provides a summary of the seven relevant passages:

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scriptural references are from the NASB.

² See, for example, Gregory P. Sapaugh, “A Call to the Wedding Celebration: An Exposition of Matthew 22:1-14,” *JGES* 5:1 (Spr 1992) 10-34. Sapaugh’s article is based on his earlier master’s thesis, “An Interpretation of Matthew 22:1-14” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Seminary, 1991). Cf. Michael G. Huber, “The ‘Outer Darkness’ in Matthew and Its Relationship to Grace,” *JGES* 5:2 (Aut 1992) 10-25; and Marty Cauley, *The Outer Darkness: Its Interpretations and Implications* (CreateSpace Independent Publ. Platform, 2012). Arguing just the opposite from a lordship salvation perspective is Karl E. Pagenkemper, “Rejection Imagery in the Synoptic Gospels,” *BSac* 153:610 (Apr 1996) 178-98; and *BSac* 153:611 (Jul 1996) 307-31. Yet one need not go to the extreme of denying rewards for faithful Christians in arguing that the outer darkness is a place of eternal judgment of the lost (so Craig L. Blomberg, “Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven?” *JETS* 35 [1992] 159-72).

Verse	Pericope	Title	"outer darkness"	"weeping and gnashing of teeth"
Mt 8:12	Mt 8:5-13	Healing of the Centurion's Servant	Yes	Yes
Mt 13:42	Mt 13:24-30, 36-43	Parable of the Wheat & Tares	No	Yes
Mt 13:50	Mt 13:47-50	Parable of the Net	No	Yes
Mt 22:13	Mt 22:1-14	Parable of the Wedding Banquet	Yes	Yes
Mt 24:51	Mt 24:45-51	Parable of the Good and Wicked Servants	No	Yes
Mt 25:30	Mt 25:14-30	Parable of the Talents	Yes	Yes
Lk 13:28	Lk 13:22-30	Parable of the Narrow Door	No	Yes

Given the fact that all three occurrences of the "outer darkness" are accompanied by the unique note that in this place is "weeping and gnashing of teeth," I will proceed on the assumption that Jesus meant the same thing in each of the three places in which he used the expression "outer darkness." Furthermore, I think it is reasonable to assume that in the four other cases in which "weeping and gnashing of teeth" are mentioned but without reference to the "outer darkness," these most likely have the same punishment in view. This assumption will, of course, need to be verified by examining each passage carefully to ensure that there is no contradiction in terms of the target group and their response/relation to Jesus. The value in looking at these collectively is that they give us a greater field of data on which to base our conclusions, rather than having to depend on any one passage in particular. Since some passages may be vague about those in view and the nature of the fate that awaits them, passages that are clearer should be allowed to guide the exegesis.

III. USE OF THE EXPRESSIONS OUTSIDE THE NEW TESTAMENT

A relevant question to ask is whether Jesus coined these expressions himself or whether he utilized expressions already known to those listening to him. Other than the one occurrence of "weeping and gnashing of teeth" found in Luke 13:28, all other occurrences are found in Matthew's Gospel. Why does Matthew make such frequent use of this, but the other Gospel writers (with the one exception in Luke) do not? Assuming that Matthew wrote his Gospel primarily for a Jewish audience, would this possibly suggest that these expressions were more apt to have been familiar to those acquainted with Jewish Biblical and extra-Biblical literature? Of particular interest are the usage of these terms and concepts outside the NT.

1. *The Expression "Outer Darkness."* In Matthew's Gospel, three times we have a form of the verb ἐκβάλλω ("cast out") followed by εἰς τὸ σκοτός τὸ ἐξώτερον ("into the outer darkness"). There are several cases where a place of punishment is referred to as the "darkness" in extra-Biblical literature, but only rarely do we find words similar to "outer darkness."³ In *Jubilees* 7:29, for instance, we find these words supposedly passed on by Noah to his sons in regard to the shedding of

³ For a helpful article surveying the concept of *darkness* in both Biblical and extra-Biblical documents, see Richard D. Patterson, "Deliverance from Darkness," *SBJT* 8:1 (Spr 2004) 70-85. Relevant NT verses pertaining to ultimate judgment would include 2 Pet 2:4, 17; and Jude 6. Regarding the false teachers of 2 Peter 2 we read, "These are springs without water and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has been reserved" (2 Pet 2:17).

man's blood: "And no man who eats blood or sheds the blood of man will remain upon the earth; and neither seed nor posterity will remain alive for him under heaven. For 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."⁴ Although it is not entirely clear what eternal fate awaits those guilty of this sin, the idea of "darkness" was used to describe a place of judgment that one descended to following death.

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. But the devout of the Lord will inherit life in happiness" (*Psalms of Solomon* 14:9).⁵ Later we read, "And the inheritance of sinners is destruction and **darkness**, and their lawless actions shall pursue them below into Hades" (*Psalms of Solomon* 15:10). In these passages, the judgment is quite clear: those consigned to Hades will experience destruction and darkness. The idea of "darkness" being associated with judgment can be found in numerous other passages. In *I Enoch* 103:7, for instance, sinners (in contrast to the righteous) face God's judgment after death involving both darkness and burning fire: "You yourselves know that they will bring your souls down to Sheol; and they shall experience evil and great tribulation—in **darkness**, nets, and burning flame" (cf. 108:14-15).⁶ Also in *Tobit* 14:10 "darkness" is the destiny of a wicked man named Nadab: "See, my son, what Nadab did to Ahikar who had reared him. Was he not, while still alive, brought down into the earth? For God repaid him to his face for this shameful treatment. Ahikar came out into the light, but Nadab went into **the eternal darkness**, because he tried to kill Ahikar" (NRSV).

The only passage with the exact phrase τὸ σκότος τὸ ἐξώτερον ("outer darkness") appears to be the *Greek Apocalypse of Ezra* 4:37. In a context describing the Antichrist, we are told that "the opponent, having heard the terrible threat, **will hide himself in the outer darkness**" (κρυβήσεται εἰς τὸ σκότος τὸ ἐξώτερον).⁷ However, the document is dated quite some time after the writing of the Gospels, roughly between AD 150 and 850.⁸ Jesus' utterances in Matthew would not have been dependent upon this writing; rather the reverse would be true.

The expression "outer darkness" is attested in a couple of non-Greek documents, however. We find, for example, the expression "outer darkness" in the Armenian document, *Questions of Ezra*, a work that purports to relate a dialogue between the prophet Ezra and the angel of the Lord. The opening paragraph concerns the fate of the righteous and sinners following death. According to verse three, "The angel replied and said to the prophet, 'Great joy and eternal light have been prepared for

⁴ O. S. Wintermute, "Jubilees; A New Translation and Introduction," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1985) 70. According to Wintermute (43), the "paleographic dating of the earliest fragments points to a date prior to 100 B.C."

⁵ R. B. Wright, "Psalms of Solomon; A New Translation and Introduction," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1985) 664. Wright (641) suggests that the widest limits for dating are between 125 BC and the early first century AD.

⁶ E. Isaac, "1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch; A New Translation and Introduction," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983) 84.

⁷ M. E. Stone, "Greek Apocalypse of Ezra; A New Translation and Introduction," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983) 576.

⁸ *Ibid.* 563.

the righteous and for the sinners there have been prepared **the outer darkness** and the eternal fire.”⁹ Clearly in this context, “outer darkness” does refer to a place of eternal punishment awaiting sinners that involves “eternal fire.” Unfortunately, there is no clear basis for establishing the date of the document, though Stone has concluded that “the writing is a Christian composition clearly based on Jewish models.”¹⁰ Hence, this does not provide an example of the expression “outer darkness” predating the first century.

The only other document with a similar expression is the *Apocalypse of Paul*, thought to be a gnostic work dating to the later part of the fourth century AD. This work, supposedly based on the apostle Paul’s visit to the third heaven, has a section describing the fate of the unrighteous who await God’s judgment of eternal punishment. In *Apoc. Paul* 16, we read of the unrighteous soul, “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.”¹¹ In section 18, Tartaruchus has the task of taking the unrighteous to hell.

Regarding the adjective ἐξώτερος (“outer”), this is rare in the NT, found only in the three passages having the expression “outer darkness.” Outside the NT, we find it twenty times in the LXX, but always used adjectivally in the sense “outer” or “outermost.” For instance, we have “the outermost curtain” in Exod 26:4, or the “outer court” in Ezek 10:5. It appears only once in the Greek Pseudepigrapha (see above for the *Greek Apocalypse of Ezra* 4:37), none in Philo, and twice in Josephus in the sense “out of reach” in regard to darts being thrown (*Wars of the Jews*, 5.298, 303). We find it five times in the Greek Apostolic Fathers, all in the *Shepherd of Hermas* (see “The Parables,” 9.7.5; 9.8.3, 5, 7; and 9.9.3). When used substantively in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, ἐξώτερος can mean “the outside” (9.7.5) or “the exterior” (9.8.3). Otherwise, we have the more normal adjectival use with the meaning “outer” or “exterior.” For example, the adjectival use occurs in *Hermas* 9.9.3 in the words ἤρμισαν εἰς τὰ ἐξώτερα μέρη τῆς οἰκοδομῆς (and the virgins took them [the stones] and “fitted them into **the exterior portion** of the building”). Based on the data we have, the NT expression εἰς τὸ σκότος τὸ ἐξώτερον should be translated “into the outer [or outermost] darkness,” not “into the darkness outside.”

Perhaps the most significant parallel for this study is the use of “darkness” in *1 Enoch* 10:4. This occurs in a context of condemnation of the wicked angels prior to Noah’s flood who took wives from among the daughters of men (see *1 Enoch* 6). One of the wicked angels named Azaz’el is introduced in *1 Enoch* 8:1, who, among other things, “taught the people (the art of) making swords and knives, and shields, and breastplates.”¹² According to 9:6, he also “taught all (forms of) oppression upon the earth.” As the Lord was about to send the great Deluge upon the earth, he had Raphael carry out special judgment on Azaz’el:

⁹ M. E. Stone, “Questions of Ezra; A New Translation and Introduction,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983) 596.

¹⁰ Ibid. 592.

¹¹ Quotation from the translation by M. R. James of *Apocalypse of Paul* can be found online at <<http://www.interfaith.org/christianity/apocrypha-apocalypse-of-paul-1/>>. According to the introduction provided on the website, “Greek copies of it are rare, and the texts they contain are disfigured by many omissions. Of the Eastern versions—Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic—the Syriac is the best. But possibly the full Latin version is superior to all other authorities.”

¹² All quotation of *1 Enoch* are taken from E. Isaac, “1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch; A New Translation and Introduction.”

“And secondly 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; he threw on top of him rugged and sharp rocks. And he covered his face in order that he may not see light; and in order that he may be sent into the fire on the great day of judgment” (*1 Enoch* 10:4-6).

The similarity with Jesus’ words in Matt 22:13 (“Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness”) cannot be missed.¹³

Matt 22:13 δῆσαντες αὐτοῦ πόδας καὶ χεῖρας ἐκβάλετε αὐτὸν εἰς τὸ σκότος τὸ ἐξώτερον

Common Terms: Δέω πούς καὶ χεῖρ ἐκβάλλω αὐτός εἰς τὸ σκότος

1 Enoch 10:4 Δῆσον τὸν Ἀζαήλ ποσὶν καὶ χερσίν, καὶ βάλε αὐτὸν εἰς τὸ σκότος

In *1 Enoch*, this “darkness” was a place where the wicked angel Azaz’el was cast as he waited final judgment in “the fire.” Given the presence of fragments of *1 Enoch* among the DSS, scholars have concluded that most of *1 Enoch* (including chapters 6-11) was written prior to the time of Christ.¹⁴

Although “darkness” can be used in extra-Biblical literature to describe a place of punishment in Hades (e.g. *Psalms of Solomon* 15:10), we do not have any clear-cut cases predating the first century AD where the exact expression “outer darkness” is used as a place one is sentenced to by divine judgment. The only instance where we find the Greek expression used (*Greek Apocalypse of Ezra* 4:37), it is used of the Antichrist hiding himself there, so as not to be found and punished. Otherwise, the few cases where the expression “outer darkness” occurs are in documents later than the first century AD, and are most likely reliant upon the NT expression for their origin. Yet the parallel of Matt 22:13 with *1 Enoch* 10:4 strongly suggests that Jesus was either drawing on this source, or there was an imagery (of binding someone hand and foot to cast into the darkness) that was commonly understood in the 1st century AD of eternal punishment of the wicked.

2. *The Expression “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”* In contrast to the “outer darkness,” the expression “gnashing of teeth” was clearly used prior to the first century AD.¹⁵ Usually, however, this was in the sense of anger or with the desire to destroy another. Job even described God this way: “His anger has torn me . . . , He has gnashed at me with His teeth” (Job 16:9).¹⁶ More often it is used

¹³ David C Sim, “Matthew 22.13a and 1 Enoch 10.4a: A Case of Literary Dependence?” *JSNT* 15:47 (Jul 1992) 3-19.

¹⁴ For discussion of the composite nature of *1 Enoch* and the dating of the book, see E. Isaac, “1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch; A New Translation and Introduction,” 6-7. Cf. John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 44. Regarding the dating of chapters 6-16, Sullivan has concluded, “Presumably both the author of the text and its intended audience were Jews of the mid-to-late Second Temple Period” (Kevin Sullivan, “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. Angela K. Harkins, Kelley C. Bautch, and John C. Endres, 91-106 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014) 92-93. George W. E. 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 Press, 2001] 170, 230).

¹⁵ Neither Philo nor Josephus use the term “gnashing,” whether in verb or noun form.

¹⁶ In *Sibylline Oracles* 4:160, the verb βρῶκω is used to describe God “gnashing His teeth” in angry wrath at sinful mankind.

in the Psalms to describe the vicious attitude of the wicked toward the righteous: "They gnashed at me with their teeth" (Ps 35:16; cf. 37:12; 112:10; Lam 2:16).¹⁷ In Acts 7:53, certain Jews were gathered about Stephen in violent rage: "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him."

Obviously Jesus used "gnashing of teeth" differently, coupling this expression with the word "weeping." Rather than anger, the combined expression signified extreme emotional feelings of grief, utter despair, and regret. This sense is found in the *Sibylline Oracles* 2:203 in a scene depicting a fiery judgment to be poured out upon earth reminiscent of Dan 7:10-11: "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."¹⁸ A number of other passages mention "gnashing of teeth" in conjunction with God's judgment upon the wicked and for those suffering in Gehenna (see *Sib.Or.* 2.305, 332; 8:86, 105, 125, 231). One passage of interest is *Sib.Or.* 2.332 where one of the rewards of the righteous is being able to plead mercy for men that have been assigned to punishment in raging fire: "Whenever they ask the imperishable God to save men from the raging fire and **deathless gnashing**, he will grant it, and he will do this." There are other passages that describe the fate of the unrighteous perishing in a fiery hell with mention of their weeping and lamenting (e.g. *1 Enoch* 108:3, 5). Such usage in extra-Biblical literature would prompt one to understand this terminology as the grief of the wicked whose fate was that of eternal torment.

IV. THE KEY TO INTERPRETATION: THE PARABLE OF THE WEDDING BANQUET IN MATTHEW 22

If we accept the hermeneutical principle that clearer passages should be allowed to guide the interpretation of less clear passages, then the parable of the wedding banquet in Matt 22:1-14 is the most appropriate starting point for our investigation of the relevant Biblical texts. The passage culminates in verse 13 with the disqualified one being cast into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. The key to a proper understanding of the parable is to see this in its contextual setting.

Only Matthew of all the Synoptic writers provides the parable of the wedding banquet, although there are certain affinities with a parable presented in Luke 14:16-24. To understand the parable of the wedding banquet, we must see how this parable fits into the immediate context of Matthew's account of Jesus' final week on earth before the crucifixion. Chapter 21 of Matthew opens with the account of the triumphal entry. Shortly thereafter, Matthew indicates that Jesus entered the temple

¹⁷ Usually in the LXX "gnashing" is a translation of the verb βρόκω (which renders the Hebrew verb קָרַקַ, "to gnash or grind the teeth"). The noun βρυγμός occurs in LXX in the sense of hostility in *Sirach* 51:3, "In the face of my adversaries you have been my helper and delivered me . . . from grinding (teeth) [βρυγμῶν] about to devour me" (NRSV). Cf. Prov 19:12 where the noun βρυγμός is translated "roaring" (of a lion). This sense also occurs in the *Testament of Solomon* 11:1.

¹⁸ J. J. Collins, "Sibylline Oracles; A New Translation and Introduction," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983) 350. Collins (331-32) acknowledges the difficulty of dating this material. In footnote o2 (p 350), he states, "This passage refers to the sufferings involved in the destruction of the world by fire, not yet the eternal punishment of the damned." This seems confirmed by *Sib.Or.* 8:337-358, where the expression "gnash their teeth" occurs again in line 350.

complex where he was confronted by a delegation consisting of the chief priests and the elders of the people—members of the Sanhedrin (Matt 21:23). These religious leaders asked him, “By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?” Barbieri is probably correct when he states, “By ‘these things’ they probably meant His Triumphal Entry into the city, His 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. He certainly had not received it from them!”¹⁹ Their challenge of his authority leads to a deeper discussion, first concerning the authority of John the Baptist (21:24-27), and then a series of three parables aimed at discrediting the Jewish religious leaders at Jerusalem. The notice in Matt 22:15 of their departure (“the Pharisees went and plotted together how they might trap Him in what He said”) is a clue that the pericope of the confrontation had ended (i.e. this round of confrontation). Thus, Matt 21:23—22:14 must be seen as a self-contained unit in which Jesus answers the challenge to his authority, albeit not directly but through a series of parables.

Matthew 21:23–22:14

Jesus’ Authority Challenged	-----> <i>Jesus Responds in Parables</i>			
21:23-27	<i>Parable 1 — The Two Sons Working in the Vineyard</i>	<i>Parable 2 — The Landowner’s Vineyard and the Murderous Vine-growers</i>	<i>Interlude — The Reaction of the Chief Priests and Pharisees</i>	<i>Parable 3 — The Improperly Dressed Guest at the Wedding Feast</i>
21:23-27	21:28-32	21:33-44	21:45-46	22:1-14

The significance for this study of Matt 22:1-14 is that each of these parables is aimed at the religious leaders of the nation that have rejected him as Messiah. In fact one of the major sub-themes of Matthew’s Gospel is the continual and progressive animosity that the religious leaders at Jerusalem had against Jesus. They utterly resented the fact that many among the populace heralded him as the promised Messiah with accolades like “Son of David” (e.g. Matt 12:23). They sought to dismiss him by attributing his miracles to Beelzebul (a term for Satan) and repeatedly attempted to test him with trick questions that they hoped would discredit him. Now here he is in Jerusalem for the final time (Matt 21:1ff). This will lead to an official rejection of him as Messiah at his trial before the chief priests and Sanhedrin in which he will be falsely charged with blasphemy (Matt 26:57-68), followed by their coercion of Pilate to have him crucified.

1. *The First Parable (Matt 21:28-32)*. Of importance to this study is to see how each of the three parables in Matt 21:23–22:14 contributes to Jesus’ response to their challenge of his authority. The first parable (21:28-32) concerns the two sons who worked in their father’s vineyard. The point of the parable comes in verse 31: “the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God

¹⁹ L. A. Barbieri, Jr., “Matthew,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985) 69.

before you.” The following verse (Matt 21:32) clarifies why. Three times the verb “believe” (πιστεύω) is used in verse 32 to emphasize the fact that these self-righteous religious leaders had failed to make the most basic response to John’s introduction of the nation’s Messiah by “believing,” in contrast to the fact that many who were considered unworthy by the religious leaders did believe. In the previous paragraph, the religious leaders refused to acknowledge John’s authority, and now (ironically) Jesus reveals that their lack of faith at John’s message will result in their exclusion from the kingdom of God.²⁰

2. *The Second Parable (Matt 21:33-44)*. This parable also concerned a vineyard, but this time the issue was not a matter of whether or not one worked in the vineyard but the murderous nature of the workers. This parable obviously built on the vineyard parable of Isaiah 5. The vine-growers are those responsible for the vineyard, meaning that 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 (the rightful heir) in the parable obviously depicted their rejection of Jesus and having him put to death. Their response to Jesus’ question (“He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers”) ironically reflected what God would do with them. Their rejection of Jesus really came as no surprise, and Jesus quoted them the words of Psalm 118:22 about the rejected stone, to indicate that what they were doing was no less than a fulfillment of Scripture (and thus would not thwart the eternal plans of God).²¹ Jesus followed this up by announcing, “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people (ἔθνη) producing the fruit of it” (Matt 21:43). At Mount Sinai, God had offered Israel the role of being his unique people: “you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” the latter term being translated by the LXX as ἔθνος (Exod 19:6). The religious leaders of the nation were the caretakers of God’s earthly kingdom. Yet—in light of their rejection of Messiah—that privilege was now being taken away from them. Carson writes, “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.”²² This new “people” would be given oversight of God’s kingdom work, namely,

²⁰ Jesus’ use of the verb προάγω (“go before”) in Matt 21:31 should not be taken to mean that the religious leaders will get into the kingdom but only after the tax collectors and prostitutes (as though this were only meant to humiliate them). France has a good discussion of this point. He writes, “But in 8:11-12 the fate of the ‘sons of the kingdom’ was not merely demotion but exclusion, and while *proagō* normally implies that the other person will follow (cf. 14:22; 26:32; 28:7), in the wider context of Matthean statements about the future for Israel’s leaders many interpreters conclude that it implies here ‘get there first’ and so ‘take the place of’” (R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007] 805). Thus this comment must be seen in the broader context of Jesus’ interaction with the leaders. Statements like “unless one is born again (or from above) he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3) and “unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins” (John 8:24) clarify that the religious leaders stood no chance of entering the kingdom as long as they persisted in their rejection of Jesus as Messiah.

²¹ For a helpful analysis of the second parable and a defense of the authenticity of Jesus’ quotation of Psalm 118, see Gregory R. Lanier, “The Rejected Stone in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants: Defending the Authenticity of Jesus’ Quotation of Ps 118:22,” *JETS* 56:4 (2013) 733-51.

²² D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 454. Similarly, France states, “The term *ethnos*, ‘nation,’ demands some such understanding, and takes us beyond a change of leadership to a reconstitution of the people of God whom the current leaders have represented. . . . This ‘nation’ is neither Israel nor the Gentiles, but a new entity, drawn from both, which is characterized not by ethnic origin but by faith in Jesus” (*The Gospel of Matthew*, 816-17).

the messianic community of believers. At this stage of development, it might appear that this was merely the Jewish apostles and others who had embraced Jesus as Messiah. In the progress of revelation, however, it would come to include Gentiles as well (perhaps the plural ἔθνη in Matt 21:43 hints at this). The community of faith would be God's "people" by virtue of the new covenant rather than the Mosaic covenant and would know no national boundaries (cf. 1 Pet 2:4-10). In essence, the Church would take over the responsibility of God's kingdom program, though Israel still factored into God's plans (as a remnant in the present era as part of the Church, and nationally in the eschatological future). They would produce "the fruit of it" by their faithfulness to proclaim the gospel to all peoples.

Following the second parable, there is a brief interlude (21:45-46) before the third and final parable. Although only two verses, the comments in these verses are significant to an understanding of what is taking place. 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, Matt 22:1 must be understood in light of the preceding verses. 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 Jesus uttered the third parable against them.

3. *The Third Parable (Matt 22:1-14)*. This parable not only has the religious leaders primarily in view, but it also is meant to teach a truth about them in relation to the kingdom. Jesus introduces the parable with the words, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for a son" (22:2). The issue of the kingdom has been brought out in each of the preceding parables (note 21:31 and 21:43). More specifically, each of the parables is meant to convey how God views the religious leaders in regard to the kingdom of heaven/God. This third parable with its plot centered around a wedding feast for a king's son most likely conveys truths related to the expected banquet that inaugurates Messiah's kingdom reign (for background imagery, see Isa 25:6-9). As the invitation to the wedding feast went out, many of the invited guests reacted negatively. Some were unwilling to come (22:3), while others reacted with hostility . . . mistreating the king's slaves and even killing them (22:6). In light of other passages (e.g. Matt 23:34-37), this probably has the Old Testament prophets in view. This prompted an angry reaction by the king, so that he sent armies that destroyed the murderers and set their city on fire (22:7). Although it is true that a parable is not an allegory and one should not look for a one-to-one correspondence of every detail in the parable, some parables can and do have multiple points to make.²³ Hence setting the city on fire probably has the AD 70 event of Jerusalem's destruction in view. France writes, "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)."²⁴

The final scene of the third parable is the king's entrance to the wedding hall to look over the dinner guests. This leads to the king taking notice of one who is improperly dressed. To say that the man must be "saved" or else he would not even have been present, is to push the details of the

²³ For further help with parables, see Roy B. Zuck, "Probing the Parables and Analyzing the Allegories," in *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 194-226 (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1991). Zuck remarks, "Usually a parable, like a sermon illustration, is teaching a single truth. . . . However, in support of the major point, some details in the parables are analogous to certain spiritual facts. Sometimes this is necessary for the major point of the parable to be fully drawn" (215). Cf. Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990).

²⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 825.

parable too far. His presence serves an important purpose in the parable of allowing for an ultimate confrontation with the Jewish religious leaders (when Jesus’ authority will be clearly demonstrated). 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 that a parable which began by addressing the religious leaders (so 22:1)—as did the parables before it—would suddenly shift to the topic of the judgment seat of Christ for Christians. What *overrides* such an interpretation (that he was “saved” and had eternal life) is the fact that this parable, as the others in the trilogy, is aimed at the Jewish leaders who rejected his claim as Messiah. Notice that the religious leaders do not depart until verse 15! Furthermore, the fact that the king calls him “friend” in verse 12 does not settle the issue. In speaking to Judas, Jesus also addressed him as “friend” (Matt 26:50), though in his high priestly prayer Jesus referred to Judas as the “son of perdition” (ὁ υἱὸς τῆς ἀπωλείας; John 17:12).

The man in view in Jesus’ parable was simply out of place—unqualified to participate—and the story places him in the wedding hall to highlight this fact. His fate is then stated in verse 13. He is to be bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness. Notice that the man is not merely consigned to a place of lesser light; he is also bound hand and foot, so as to be totally restricted (compare Lazarus, John 11:44).²⁵ The point of this, in light of the context, is that this is what each of the Jewish religious leaders could expect. They may think they are getting into the kingdom, but they will not be able to get in as they are and while continuing to reject him as Messiah. Not only will they be denied entry, but they will be sent to a place of utter punishment. The striking similarity of verse 13 to *1 Enoch* 10:4 suggests that this must have been a commonly understood way of speaking of eternal damnation (in *1 Enoch* it is the place of punishment for demonic beings).

Verse 13 does not describe the fate of someone who might have *believed* and been “saved” but then sadly chose to live in carnality rather than being faithful. To say that the weeping and gnashing of teeth is merely a way of describing the regret such a believer will feel over having wasted his life on earth simply does not do justice to the context at large or the terminology employed here. Furthermore, it does not square with the final statement of the parable: “many are called, but few are chosen” (vs 14). In the context of this parable, “called” (κλητοί) is being used in the sense of being invited to the wedding feast, not in the Pauline sense of being one of “the called” of God (Rom 1:6; 1 Cor 1:24). Notice the use of the verb καλέω in Matt 22:3. Many were “called,” i.e. invited, most of whom despised the opportunity and refused the invitation. The spiritual truth, however, is that God has his “chosen ones,” though they may be few in comparison. The “chosen” (Gk ἐκλεκτοί) is commonly used in the Gospels and in the epistles of God’s elect (e.g. Matt 24:31; Luke 18:7; Rom 8:33; Col 3:12). Even if we were to set aside momentarily the use of the term in the Pauline epistles, it would still carry a strong connotation even in Matthew’s Gospel. France notes,

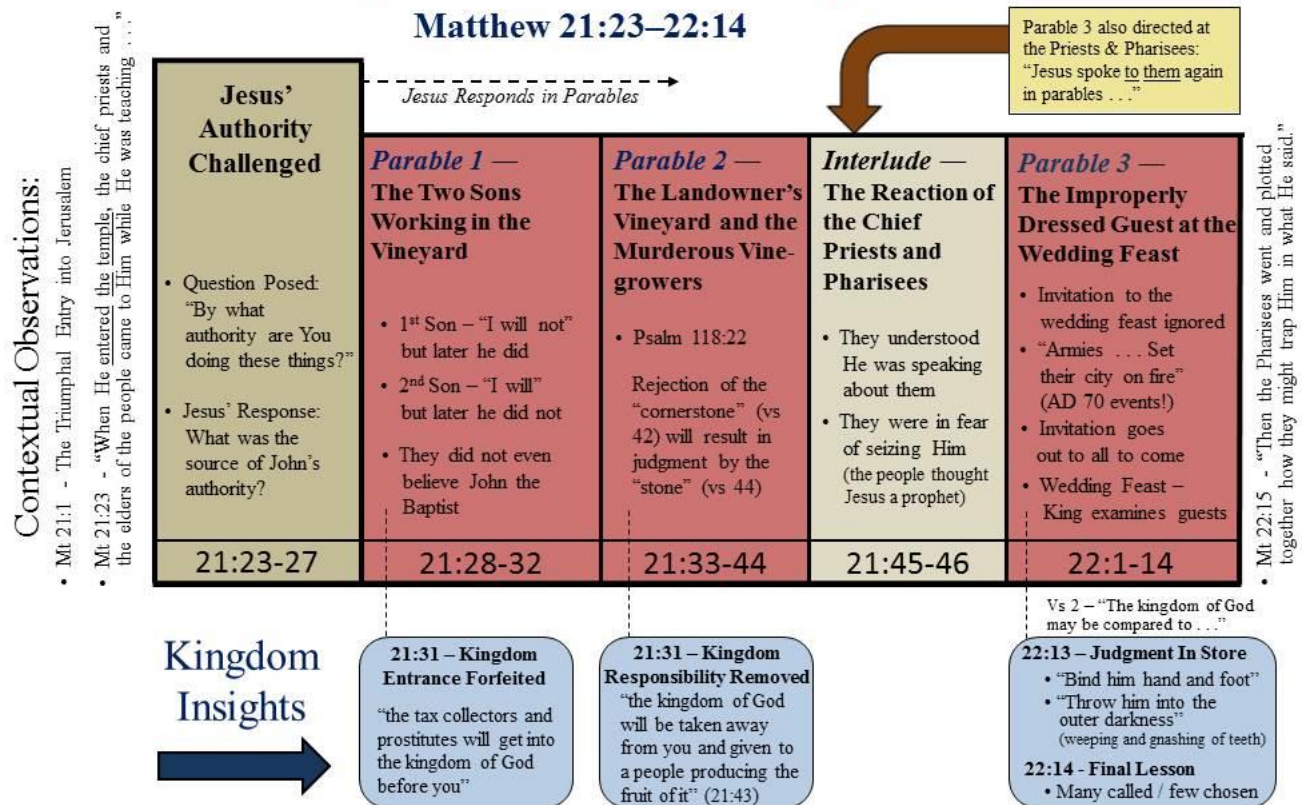
The term will recur in 24:22, 24 to designate God’s true people, threatened but protected through the time of trial, and in 24:31 for those summoned from all over the world to make up

²⁵ I presume that “binding hand and foot” is a metaphor, but to suggest that 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.

the new people of God after the failure of the old regime. It is a term with strongly ideological overtones deriving from the OT concept of Israel as God's chosen people.²⁶

Hence, there is no lexical support for the claim that these are faithful Christians *chosen* to participate in the marriage banquet in contrast to unfaithful Christians who have been excluded. The explanatory γάρ in verse 14 underscores the tight connection that this verse has to the preceding one. That is, verse 14 *explains why* the king refused the man entry and pronounced such a harsh sentence on him. The improperly dressed man who mistakenly thought he would get into the wedding feast failed to do so, because he was not one of God's "elect" (his covenant people). In contrast, God's "chosen ones" in this context are those who responded to Jesus in faith. God's purposes would not be thwarted by the rejection of the religious leaders, for his "elect" will ultimately emerge victorious. If the religious leaders continued in unbelief and rejection of him, the fate awaiting them would be the "outer darkness"! But Jesus' "elect" would make up the new *ethnos* promised in Matt 21:43 and would get into the kingdom of God. 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 entire account in Matt 21:23—22:14 can be summarized in the following chart:

Jesus' Response in the Temple When Challenged About His Authority



²⁶ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 827. Regarding ἐκλεκτός in the LXX as a term for God's covenant people, see Ps 105:6; 106:4-5; Isa 43:20; 65:9; and *Sirach* 46.1.

V. THE OUTER DARKNESS IN THE HEALING OF THE CENTURION'S SERVANT (Matt 8:5-13)

In the parable of the wedding banquet, the expressions "outer darkness" and "weeping and gnashing of teeth" were shown to refer to the fate of the Jewish religious leaders who rejected Jesus as Messiah and challenged his authority. The clarity of that conclusion should influence how these expressions are understood in the other passages in which Matthew used them, barring any strong evidence to the contrary. We now turn our attention to the healing report of the centurion's servant. Of particular concern is the Lord's response to the centurion's faith that he found so remarkable.

Obviously the centurion was a Gentile, being a Roman soldier. The Lord used the opportunity to compare this man's faith to the responses among the Jewish people: "I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel" (vs 10). Of course the truth was that many, especially among the Jewish religious leaders, failed to believe in Jesus, choosing to totally reject him. How ironic that this Gentile military officer would believe in Jesus when many among the "seed of Abraham"—especially the religious leaders—would not believe at all. As in the parable of the wedding banquet, Jesus chose to reflect on the implications that their unbelief would have for them in regard to the kingdom. Furthermore, the imagery of reclining at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom called to mind the kingdom banquet (Isa 25:6-9).²⁷ The many coming from east and west (Luke 13:29 adds north and south) no doubt depicts Gentiles that would be in attendance. Since this comment comes in response to the Gentile centurion, this conclusion is demanded (though it was natural to think of Jews in this way, and certainly many Jews would be part of this great gathering). Yet "the sons of the kingdom" were in for a surprise, for they were headed for a miserable fate rather than a banquet of celebration.

This expression "the sons of the kingdom" is only used one other time in the NT, namely, in Matt 13:38 in the parable of the wheat and tares.²⁸ In that context, the "sons of the kingdom" are the "good seed." They are the "righteous" who, in contrast to the tares, "will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Matt 13:43). Yet we must carefully notice the fate of the tares. At the end of the age, the tares are gathered up and burned with fire (13:40). Verse 42 goes on to say that the angels "will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (cf. Matt 13:49-50). In light of Matthew 13 then, those who are truly "sons of the kingdom" do not experience the furnace of fire where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth."²⁹

What then did Jesus mean in Matt 8:12 that "the sons of the kingdom" would be cast into the outer darkness where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth? The only way these passages can be harmonized is to conclude that in Matt 8:12, Jesus was speaking figuratively with irony and sarcasm. Bullinger explains irony (of which sarcasm is a sub-category) in this way: "when the speaker intends

²⁷ Carson ("Matthew," 202) 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 (cf. TDNT, 2:34-35). 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)."

²⁸ For a helpful discussion comparing the use of "sons of the kingdom" in Matt 8 with that in Matt 13, see Mike Stallard, "Hermeneutics and Matthew 13; Part II," *Conservative Theological Journal* 5:16 (Dec 2001) 323-59.

²⁹ For the relation of the "furnace of fire" to Gehenna, see Hans Scharen, "Part 1: Gehenna in the Synoptics," *BSac* 149:595 (Jul 1992) 323-37; and "Part 2: Gehenna in the Synoptics," *BSac* 149:596 (Oct 1992) 453-70.

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."³⁰ So, to add more force to the point he was trying to make, Jesus called them "sons of the kingdom," but he said this sarcastically. In reality, they were not "sons of the kingdom" at all. That Jesus might have spoken figuratively in this instance should not be surprising, for he often made figurative statements that were sure to get the attention of his hearers. Matt 9:13 provides another example: "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners." What he really meant by "righteous" were those that were righteous in their own eyes. So, there were those in Israel who thought of themselves as being "sons of the kingdom" (i.e. they expected to enter the kingdom), but who in reality only had Pharisaic righteousness . . . the result of their own insufficient attempt to keep the Law. As a result of their self-deception, what really awaited them was not kingdom entrance, but being cast into the outer darkness where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In summary, then, the parable of the wedding banquet in Matthew 22, when contextually considered, leads to the conclusion that the parable was aimed at the Jewish religious leaders who rejected Jesus as Messiah. They would be cast into an "outer darkness," which depicted their eventual fate of eternal damnation. We would expect the healing report in Matthew 8 (also involving the outer darkness and the weeping and gnashing of teeth) to have the same interpretation, barring any strong evidence to the contrary. When closely inspected, the expression "sons of the kingdom" in Matthew 8 can only be harmonized with the terminology of the kingdom parables of Matthew 13, if Jesus was using "sons of the kingdom" in a figurative way (sarcasm). Hence, the expressions found in Matthew 8 do carry the same meaning as those in Matthew 22.

VI. THE OUTER DARKNESS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE OLIVET DISCOURSE (Matt 24:45-51 and 25:14-30)

Finally, we need to consider two parables found in the Olivet Discourse of Matt 24–25. The first, Matt 24:45-51, mentions weeping and gnashing of teeth, while the second, Matt 25:14-30, has the outer darkness as well as weeping and gnashing of teeth. These are a bit more challenging than the case of Matthew 8, because both *seem to imply* a relationship between the superior figure and the one responsible to him.

1. *The Parable of the Good and Wicked Servants (Matt 24:45-51)*. In this parable we have a "master" (Gk κύριος) who goes away on a journey, while his slave (δοῦλος) is expected to take care of the household in his absence. Should the master return and find the slave doing his proper duty, then the master will entrust even more responsibility to him. If, on the other hand, the slave turns out to be an "evil slave" (ὁ κακὸς δοῦλος)—he assumes his master will not be coming for a long time, he treats the other household members cruelly, and he wastes his energy in drunkenness—then the master will return unexpectedly and punish that slave. According to Matt 24:51, the master will "cut

³⁰ E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (London: Messrs. Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1898; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968) 807. Bullinger also considers the expression "sons of the kingdom" in Matt 8:12 a metonymy of adjunct, where "the appearance of a thing, or an opinion about it, is put for the thing itself" (597).

him in pieces” (διχοτομήσει from διχοτομέω), and he will “assign him a place with the hypocrites” (τῶν ὑποκριτῶν) where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In an effort to correctly interpret the parable, we have to face the tension that the “evil slave” refers to the master as “my master” (μου ὁ κύριος) in verse 48. Because of this, some have concluded that the slave is really a “believer” (he actually is “saved”), though he has been very disobedient and must be sternly dealt with by the master upon his return. This interpretation, however, must be examined both in light of the exegetical details of the passage and in light of the larger context.

The general context of the parable is the Olivet Discourse and in particular the Lord’s teaching about his return in power and glory, and who will be “alert and ready” for that when it happens. The Olivet Discourse can be divided into two main sections: the predictions of the coming tribulation leading up to the Lord’s coming in glory (Matt 24:1-31), and the parables stressing the need to “be ready” at any time (Matt 24:32–25:46). Looking at the following chart, we can see that the parable of the good and wicked servants (24:45-51) follows on the heels of the parables commending readiness for Christ’s coming (24:37-44).

<h2 style="text-align: center; color: #800000;">The Olivet Discourse: Matthew 24—25</h2>											
PREDICTIONS <i>Coming Tribulation and The Sign of Christ’s Coming</i>						PARABLES <i>Be Ready! Accountability—Faithful Rewarded</i>					
Prediction of Jerusalem’s Destruction	Beginning Birth Pangs (Don’t be misled)	Expected Tribulation and Persecution	Warning of the Abomination of Desolation	Warning of False Messiahs and Prophets	The Coming of Christ in Power and Glory	Parable of the Fig Tree	Parables Commending Readiness for Christ’s Coming	Parable of the Good and Wicked Servants	Parable of the Ten Virgins	Parable of the Talents	Parable of the Sheep and Goats
24: 1-3	24: 4-8	24: 9-14	24: 15-22	24: 23-28	24: 29-31	24: 32-36	24: 37-44	24: 45-51	25: 1-13	25: 14-30	25: 31-46

When we probe into the section of the parables commending readiness (24:37-44), however, we discover that part of the concern is for those who are headed to destruction because they have not believed in Christ. For example, Matt 24:37-39 discusses the analogy of Noah’s day and those who were not prepared when the flood came. When it came suddenly and unexpectedly, they were taken all away (24:39). So, it should not surprise us that the following parables would be concerned for both the fate of the wicked (those who had not yet turned to Christ in faith) as well as for believers. A believer is alert and ready for Christ’s return by faithfully serving him right up to the moment of his coming, while an unbeliever obviously needs to turn to Christ before it is too late. Once the Lord returns, there will be no further opportunity. This does not prove that the “evil slave” in Matt 24:45-

51 is an unbeliever, but at the very least it should help us realize that having an unbeliever in the story is not out of place in the context of the Olivet Discourse.

Turning to the exegetical details of the parable, we observe that the master (upon his return) cuts the evil slave in pieces. The expression “cut in pieces” is actually one word in Greek (διχοτομέω), which is used only one other time in the NT, namely, in the parallel passage in Luke 12:46. In Exod 29:17 (LXX), διχοτομέω is used literally of cutting a ram into pieces as part of the ordination ceremony of Aaron and his sons as priests. In 3 *Baruch* 16.3, διχοτομέω is used of “punishing” in general: “Punish them [sinners among mankind] with the sword and death, and their children with demons.”³¹ 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 (1 Kgs 3:16-28). In order to determine the real mother, Solomon ordered the baby cut in two (διχοτομέω). Heinrich Schlier (*TDNT*) provides several examples from classical Greek of (1) literal cutting asunder, either of a human or animal, (2) a parting of the heavens, or (3) non-literally of a logical division (Plato, *Politicus*, 302e; Aristotle, *Problemata*, XVI, 4, p. 913b, 31; *De Partibus Animalium*, I, 4, p. 644b, 19 etc.).³² διχοτομέω can also mean to bi-sect a line, or to divide in two logically.³³ In post-Biblical Greek, the word could have the nuance of cutting one off from an experience or opportunity.³⁴ From the very limited data we have, then, relevant options for διχοτομέω in the context of Matt 24:51 would be a literal cutting in two of a person, or as a metaphorical expression of severe punishment.³⁵ 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 quite another (comp. John 5:24). From this survey, I conclude that the word is quite inappropriate for describing a believer in Jesus Christ, even one who might have been thoroughly disobedient and unfaithful.

The other action taken against the evil slave was to “assign him a place with the hypocrites,” a place where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth. In light of how “weeping and gnashing of teeth” is used in other places, our anticipation is that it has the same meaning in this passage, namely, as a fate awaiting unbelievers. The word “hypocrites” (Gk ὑποκριτής) is used seventeen times in the NT, all of which are in the Synoptic Gospels on the lips of Jesus. Except for Matt 7:5

³¹ France (*The Gospel of Matthew*, 945) thinks the reference in 3 *Baruch* “is probably due to the influence of this passage in Matthew.”

³² G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley, and G. Friedrich (Eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–) 2:225. S.v. “διχοτομέω” by Heinrich Schlier.

³³ H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. S. Jones, and R. McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) 439.

³⁴ See Moulton & Milligan for an example from a sepulchral inscription (iii/iv AD) where a father laments the premature death of a son who had been cut off from him (James H. Mouton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976] 165). In this case, the sentence is syntactically different: both an indirect and direct object follow the verb, neither of which are present in the case of Matt 24:51.

³⁵ A similar idea is expressed in the Aramaic text of Dan 3:29 (also 2:5) where Nebuchadnezzar threatened to have “torn limb from limb” anyone saying something offensive against the God of the Hebrews. The Aramaic text is ܕܗܘܢܐ ܕܡܝܢ ܗܘܢܐ, which literally means “he shall be made into limbs.” Such horrid executions were well-known in ancient times (cf. 1 Sam 15:33 where Samuel “hewed Agag to pieces before the LORD at Gilgal,” with the verb “hewed to pieces” being a translation of the *hapax* ܗܫܘܒܐ, which in turn was translated in the LXX by the verb σφάζω, “to slay, kill, slaughter,” especially by slitting the throat).

and Luke 6:42 (of judging others hypocritically), all the other occurrences are used by Jesus in rebuking the Jewish religious leaders. For example, in Matt 23:13 Jesus said, “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in” (i.e. they were hindering others from entering by their denial that Jesus was the Messiah—see Luke 11:52). Bock notes, “To be placed with the hypocrites is to receive their punishment.”³⁶ The use of ὑποκριτής in Matt 24:51 does not prove that the evil slave was an unbeliever, but we would have to admit (on the basis of word usage in the NT) that his assignment to be with the hypocrites is more indicative of his being an unbeliever than a believer. Furthermore, in the parallel account in Luke’s Gospel (see Luke 12:41-48), the evil slave is assigned a place—not with the “hypocrites”—but with “the unbelievers” (τῶν ἀπίστων, vs 46). Of the ten times that the plural form of ἄπιστος occurs in the NT, it always has non-Christians in view (e.g. 1 Cor 6:6; 2 Cor 4:4; 6:14), while the singular form rarely means anything else.³⁷

Finally, I would like to address the issue of the evil slave speaking of his master as “my master.” This should not be taken to mean he possessed eternal life. We have to remember that this is a parable, not an allegory. The parable has a main spiritual point to make and maybe a limited number of secondary points. Most of the details are there as props for the story.³⁸ In this case, the slave obviously belongs to a master, but that is all. Nothing more should be read into this. I base my argument on a parallel situation found in the parable of the two sons working in the vineyard (Matt 21:28-32). This parable is meant to contrast 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. So obviously 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 Matt 24:48.

If the words “my master” in Matt 24:48 do not validate that the evil slave is actually a true believer possessing eternal life (despite his utter disobedience), then what are we left with? We are left with (1) the general context of Matthew 24 in which unbelievers are mentioned 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 has never believed upon Christ. I would venture further to say that we probably need to understand this parable as primarily aimed at Israel in the end times. Looking back to Matt 24:15-22, the Lord specifically uttered words of warning for those in the land of Israel who would witness the abomination of desolation. They are warned to flee Jerusalem. We should also note the warning of false messianic

³⁶ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996) 1183.

³⁷ There is one place where ἄπιστος (sg) has the meaning of *being unbelieving*, and is used in regard to Thomas who had doubts about the resurrected Christ. Jesus told Thomas to touch his wounds, so that he would not be “unbelieving, but believing” (John 20:27). In this case, however, the adjective ἄπιστος follows the imperative verb γίνομαι (“do not be unbelieving!”), a syntactical situation quite different than when ἄπιστος has the meaning “unbeliever.” Even if one were to argue that the evil slave was assigned a place “with the unfaithful,” he would need to admit that this is not the natural nuance of the plural form of ἄπιστος in the NT. So the burden of proof is clearly on those who would understand ἄπιστοι as “unfaithful ones” rather than as “unbelievers.”

³⁸ 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.

claims that would be circulating (24:23-24), a warning more appropriate to those in Israel. Finally, the words about seeing "all these things" (24:33) and "this generation" (24:34) seem to suggest that our Lord's primary (but not exclusive) concern is with Israel at the time of his coming in glory.³⁹ If that is true, then the admonitions to "be ready" and "be on the alert" would not merely be for "the elect." One of the main purposes of the Great Tribulation is for the humbling of Israel (see esp. Jer 30:4-11 and "the time of Jacob's distress"). The evil slave of Matt 24:45-51 may even be a Jewish religious leader who is like the wicked shepherd of Zechariah 11, having no pity on the sheep but looking out only for his own prosperity.⁴⁰ Verses 48 and 49 of Matthew 24 do seem to depict the evil slave as being in some sort of leadership role, very much like the Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' day. To "beat his fellow slaves" (Matt 24:49) would depict his failure to properly shepherd them.

2. *The Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14-30)*. The parable of the talents involves a man going away on a journey (a similar theme found in other parables) and returning later. Before going, he entrusts his possessions to "his own slaves" (Matt 25:14), but they are each given 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 are true believers having eternal life. The question might be asked, why would the master (obviously representing Christ) entrust anything of his to unbelievers? Upon his return, the master meets with each slave to see how faithful they have been with his possessions, and then to appropriately reward them. The third slave gained nothing with the talent that was entrusted to him, but merely hid it in a hole in the ground. As a result, the master rebuked him, calling him a "wicked, lazy slave." Finally, in verse 30 the master gives the order, "Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Despite the tension in the story that the slave had been entrusted with his master's possessions, a stronger 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 unbelievers, with particular emphasis on the Jewish religious leaders that rejected Christ. Second, it was pointed out in the discussion of Matt 24:45-51 that relationships in the parable do not necessarily correspond to spiritual relationships in reality. One of the sons in the parable of the vineyard (Matt 21:28-32) represented the unbelieving religious leaders. Third, the wicked slave's view of the master in Matt 25:24 is telling. He knew him to be a hard man, reaping where he did not sow and gathering where he had not scattered seed. That is, the master (in the slave's view) got all the benefits without doing any of the work. In calling the master a "hard man" (σκληρὸς ἄνθρωπος), he 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.

³⁹ For an interesting study of "this generation" in Matt 24:34 as a reference, not to all who will be alive at Jesus' *parousía*, but of those who stand in opposition to him and who will consequently be the recipients of his judgment, see Neil D. Nelson, Jr., "This Generation' In Matt 24:34: A Literary Critical Perspective," *JETS* 38:3 (Sep 1995) 367-85; and "Three Critical Exegetical Issues in Matthew 24: A Dispensational Interpretation," *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 11:33 (Aug 2007) 48-67.

⁴⁰ Carson ("Matthew," 510) notes that the δοῦλος in this parable is the head over all the domestics, and though he admits that the application of the parable is not limited to leaders, he does suggest that leaders are primarily in view: "their responsibilities entail good personal relationships (v. 49), requiring exemplary conduct and precluding harshness and lording it over others."

VII. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has sought to understand the expression "outer darkness," as used in Matthew's Gospel, along with the auxiliary phrase "weeping and gnashing of teeth." The concept of darkness is well attested in both Biblical and extra-Biblical literature. In both cases, darkness is commonly used to refer to a place of punishment for the wicked. In 2 Pet 2:17, "the black darkness has been reserved" for false teachers. In extra-Biblical literature, "darkness" is commonly used as a place of punishment for the wicked (e.g. *Pss. Sol.* 14:9). Although we do find the expression "outer darkness" used (e.g. *Gk. Apoc. Ezra* 4:37), it is not clearly attested prior to the 1st century AD. "Weeping and gnashing of teeth" is a common expression conveying strong emotional feelings, mostly of anger (e.g. Ps 35:16), but also of extreme sorrow, grief and regret. The latter nuance is found in *Sib. Or.* 2:203 to describe the sorrow and grief of the wicked who have been cast into a fiery furnace of eternal punishment. Based on the occurrences of these and similar expressions, there is every reason to believe that Jesus would have been thinking of eternal punishment of the wicked when he used them, not as a destiny of unfaithful believers.

In approaching the several passages in Matthew in which these phrases are found, the assumption was made (as a hermeneutical principle) that preference ought to be given to clearer passages over less clear passages. This led to giving pride of place to Matt 22:1-14. It was seen that this, the parable of the wedding feast, and the two preceding parables were part of a longer pericope. All three were directed at the unbelieving Jewish religious leaders who rejected Jesus as Messiah and challenged his authority. In each parable, Jesus made a point about them in relationship to the kingdom that he was establishing. This third and final parable (Matt 22:1-14) made the point that not only would they not get in to the kingdom, but their destiny was to be bound hand and foot in order to be cast into a place of outer darkness where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Significantly, Jesus' choice of words was so strikingly similar to *1 Enoch* 10:4 (which described a place where the wicked angel Azaz'el was cast as he waited 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 as a place of eternal damnation.

In Matt 8:5-13, Jesus indicated that the "sons of the kingdom" would be cast into the outer darkness where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth. The only way to harmonize the expression "sons of the kingdom" in Matthew 8 with its only other occurrence in Matt 13:38, is for Jesus to have spoken figuratively using sarcasm. There would be those of Jewish stock who thought they should be at the messianic kingdom banquet, but because of their unbelief and rejection of Jesus would not be.

Finally, two parables from the Olivet Discourse involving "outer darkness" and "weeping and gnashing of teeth" were examined (Matt 24:45-51 and 25:14-30). The slave's reference to "my master" is really no proof that he was "saved," any more than the "son" in Matt 21:28-32 (who represented the unbelieving religious leaders) was saved. This was simply a "prop" in the parable to convey a story. The fact that Jesus *could have* the lost in view (those who continued to reject him even up to the point of his *parousía*) is shown by Jesus' analogy to the lost in the days of Noah's flood. The specifics of the passage in Matt 24:45-51 confirm that the wicked slave was indeed one who stood in rejection of Jesus and faced a place of eternal torment. He was to be "cut in pieces"

(διχοτομέω) which speaks of utterly severe punishment, and he would be sent to a place with the "hypocrites" (or "unbelievers" in Luke 12:46), terminology commonly used of the Jewish religious leaders who rejected Jesus. The slave in Matt 25:14-30 held a view of the master that reflected a misunderstanding of the master's true nature.

When all the 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 of the nation who rejected him as Messiah and would be excluded from the kingdom program that he was bringing in.