Shedding light on the outer darkness: A fresh look at the language of hell

"Then the king said to the servants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’ " (Matt. 22:13).¹

The topic of hell has held a strange fascination for Christians through the centuries. And while one hears less about it today, all ecclesial bodies attempt to give some answer to the tantalizing question of what will happen to the wicked on the day of judgment. The majority view has been that hell consists of everlasting, excruciating torment.² Contrary to this, a small but vocal minority has held that such a teaching is incompatible with the loving and just character of God.³ Instead, they hold that judgment will result in the destruction of sin and sinners and prepare the way for the new heaven and new earth, where there will be no more pain, suffering, or death of any kind.

The outer darkness

We will first look at the outer darkness. In Matthew 22:13, the phrase concludes the parable of the wedding garment. A king prepares a banquet for his son’s wedding. When the invitees fail to appear, the king sends his servants to the "highways" to gather people from all walks of life. Once the hall is filled, the king enters to inspect the guests and finds one not properly attired with a wedding garment. The king questions him and the man can offer no explanation. Offended, the king orders the man to be tied and thrown to the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In Matthew 25:30, the phrase concludes the parable of the talents. A rich man goes on a long journey and entrusts three of his servants with five, two, and one talents respectively, admonishing them to use them wisely until he returns. The first two work diligently and double their talents. But the third hides his talent and remains inactive. Upon his return, the rich man calls the three to account. The first two give their report, are congratulated, and told to "enter into the joy" of the master (vv. 21, 23). The third offers excuses and attempts to blame the master for his inaction. However, he traps himself by his words and is finally declared unworthy. The master then orders him thrown to the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In Matthew 8:12, the phrase appears in the context of the healing of a centurion’s servant. Jesus...
commends the faith of the centurion and asserts that many Gentiles will come into the kingdom and dine with the patriarchs, while those who were originally called, which have not responded, will be thrown to the outer darkness.

In Matthew 24:51, the outer darkness is not specifically mentioned but implied through the use of the Greek locative adverb ἐκεῖ (“there”). Matthew 24:51 concludes the parable of the evil servant. A master goes away and appoints a servant to oversee his household. A wise servant will look well after the master’s household. If he does evil, the master will return at a moment the servant does not expect. The master will then “‘cut him in two’” (v. 51) and throw him where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Lastly, Luke 13:28 is part of the parable of the narrow gate through which all true disciples should seek to enter the kingdom and feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Those who choose not to enter will be left outside where ἐκεῖ (“there”) is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

So what is this mysterious outer darkness? A place of torment? A description of hell?

All five texts discussed above appear in the context of a banquet, and this is important to note. In Matthew 8:11, 12 and Luke 13:28, the banquet consists of the heavenly feast where Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are present. That a feast is in view is evidenced by the word ἀνακλίθεσονται (lit. “recline”—banqueting meals in the ancient world were taken while reclining) in Matthew 8:11 and Luke 13:29, and by the mention of the οἰκοδεσπότης in Luke 13:25, the master of the house who closes the door so that no more guests may enter. In Matthew 22:13, a banquet is clearly stated because the whole parable of the wedding garment takes place in the context of a wedding feast. In Matthew 25:30, in the parable of the talents, a banquet is not mentioned specifically but is assumed. The rich man returns from his lengthy travels, calls his servants to account, and invites the faithful two to “enter into the joy” of the master, clearly a celebration for his return. And in Matthew 24:46–51, in the parable of the evil servant, again we have a master returning from a long trip, whereby a joyous celebration for his return would be the norm.

Banquets in ancient times, just like today, usually took place in the evening. At a time when there were few lights to lighten a dark night, there was an obvious contrast between a lighted banqueting hall and the darkness outside. The term outer darkness, therefore, is descriptive; in other words, “the darkness that is outside (the banqueting hall).” This outer darkness does not describe hell but the conditions outside the banqueting hall and is not language of torment but language of exclusion.

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Weeping and gnashing of teeth

Those who find themselves outside the banquet hall will experience weeping and gnashing of teeth. Is this a description of torment? Or is something else in view?

The Greek for “weeping,” klaudhomos, can refer to a range of emotions like joy (LXX Gen. 45:2; 46:29), eager anticipation (LXX Jer. 31:9), but mostly sorrow (LXX Judg. 21:2; 2 Sam. 13:36; Ezra 3:13; Isa. 65:19). Nowhere is it used in relation to torments of any kind. The Greek for “gnashing of teeth,” brugmos ton odonton, consistently denotes anger (Acts 7:54; LXX Job 16:9; Pss. 35:16; 37:12; 112:10; Prov. 19:12), never the pain of torment.

That the people excluded from a banquet could experience both of these emotions is understandable. Sorrow is a natural reaction when a person realizes that something good has been lost. Anger is also understandable. The context of the five passages discussed above evidences a pattern, namely, disaffection with the master. In the parable of the talents, the servant who refused to make use of his talent was already negatively predisposed towards his master. When questioned why he did not use his talent, he replied, “‘I knew you to be a hard man’ ” (Matt. 25:24). Not surprisingly, such negative feelings turn to anger when he sees the two worthy servants welcomed into the banquet while he is thrown out.

In the heavenly banquet with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the ones who are welcomed are the Gentiles from the far corners of the earth (Matt. 8:11; Luke 13:29). The ones excluded are Jews who have failed to believe in Jesus. They were the natural heirs of the kingdom, the “‘sons of the kingdom’ ” (Matt. 8:12); but much to their chagrin, they find themselves excluded. Indeed, in Luke 13:24, they seek to enter the banquet, consciously, maybe forcefully. Clearly, they are not happy with the master’s decision to exclude them.

In Matthew 22:13 (the parable of the wedding garment), the anger of the man excluded is again easy to understand. Some scholars suggest it was customary for a wedding host to overseer that guests had adequate attire.10 That the man chooses not to avail himself of such service indicates that he considers his own clothes of better quality. When the king confronts him and orders him to be thrown outside, the man naturally feels angry that the king has failed to appreciate the quality and beauty of his garments.

And in Matthew 24:45–51, the parable of the evil servant, the servant is clearly unhappy because the master has arrived unannounced and caught him mistreating his fellow servants and wasting possessions. Indeed, the rationale behind the servant’s prodigal lifestyle was that the “‘master is delaying his coming’ ” (v. 48). The sudden arrival of the master, therefore, causes intense anxiety and anger in the evil servant.

In all of the above instances, the anger is directed at the master, a symbol of God. Those who are left outside feel they should be inside and therefore are not happy with the verdict. They are angry.

The picture appears coherent enough: a heavenly banquet, unworthy individuals left outside experiencing weeping (sorrow) and gnashing of teeth (anger) because of their exclusion. Nothing is said about hell or torments.

Two final texts

There are two final texts that mention weeping and gnashing of teeth but no suggestion of a banquet or an outer darkness. The first is Matthew 13:42 at the conclusion of the parable of the wheat and the tares. A field is planted with good seed, but, during the night, an enemy plants tares. The owner allows the two to grow side by side, but at the harvest he commands his servants to gather the wheat into storerooms and burn the tares. Jesus explains that this parable is about the kingdom of God, whereby the good seed represents the saints to be gathered into the kingdom, while the tares represent the wicked. They, together with everything that offends (v. 41), will be cast into the furnace of fire where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (v. 42).

The other is Matthew 13:50, at the conclusion of the parable of the net. Just like fishermen separate the good fish from the bad, likewise on the day of judgment the angels will remove the wicked from the midst of the saints and cast them into the furnace of fire where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Could these two references be descriptions of the torments of hell? Four facts suggest no. First, the phrase “‘cast them into the furnace of fire’ ” (Matt. 13:50) is a quotation from Daniel 3:6 and the story of the three Hebrew young men. The purpose of the furnace there was not to torment, but rather, to destroy. Second, in the parables of the net and the wheat and tares, the wicked are compared to bad fish and tares, which are burned not out of vengeance or for torment, but because they are no good. Third, in the parable of the wheat and tares, “‘all things that offend’ ” (v. 41), animate and inanimate, are thrown into the fire. Will the fire torment these forever? No, it will destroy them. Fourth, as a general rule of exegesis, words and motifs should be understood in line with their primary meaning unless strong evidence suggests otherwise. As such, since weeping and gnashing of teeth nowhere else refer to torment, they should likewise not be understood as referring to torment here.

Exegetical interrelation suggests that the weeping and gnashing of teeth in Matthew 13:42 and 50 should be understood in the same way as in Matthew 8:12, 22:13, 24:51, 25:30, and Luke 13:28 as referring respectively to the feelings of sadness and anger that the wicked experience when they discover they are excluded from the kingdom.

Synthesis

The picture is very consistent. The term outer darkness always appears in the context of a banquet,
mostly in parables, and describes the literal evening darkness outside the banquet hall. Those who are not in the banquet hall are outside in the dark night. The word weeping defines the feelings of sorrow and loss experienced by those who are excluded from the banquet. The gnashing of teeth represents their anger. They believe they should be in but find themselves outside.

The day of judgment will not be pleasant. For God, it will be a day when He will do a “strange” work not even required to work. All he had to do was put the talent in the bank to gain interest. The reason he is left outside does not represent a lack of ability but pure disinterest; he simply could not bother to do good. And the listeners of Jesus, who should be in the banquet with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob but find themselves excluded, really were the ones who should have been there. They received the invitation first and are called “sons of the kingdom.” All they had to do was exemplify phrase is, above all, a summons to heed the call of salvation—today.

The greatest tragedy in the history of this world is that people who should be in the kingdom will find themselves outside.

(Isa. 28:21, KJV) in the destruction of sin and sinners. For sinners, it will be a fearsome day, for it is indeed a “fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31). But whatever temporary physical suffering that day brings, in using the language of the outer darkness and the weeping and gnashing of teeth, Jesus opts to focus on other realities—not on the physical pain, but the immensity and sadness of the loss. The different banquets in question are all symbolic of the kingdom of God. To be left in the darkness outside means to be left outside the kingdom.

There is a sense of tragedy in all of these stories. All who find themselves excluded could and should have been in the kingdom. The man without the wedding garment was already there, all he had to do was dress appropriately. The servant with the single talent was

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1 All Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.

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