

THE AFTER-LIFE IN ST MATTHEW AND AN ASPECT OF MATTHEAN ETHIC

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I

This study is only a part of a wider investigation into “New Testament teaching on the future life”, which presently occupies the author’s research thought.

Some images in Jewish apocalyptic, characterise notions about the after-life, which we find in Matthew’s gospel. These images are to be examined, from their contexts, to detect the influence of Palestinian background on the Matthean records, as well as inter-cultural influences between Israel, and her Eastern neighbours, on the formulation of notions, which lie behind the tradition of St Matthew. Thorough exegetical examination of key texts of Matthew may reveal later developments in church tradition, as well as notions, which go back to Jesus.

We shall examine passages, which deal with qualifications for entry into life, or otherwise. The goal of ethics extends beyond interpersonal relationships, and establishment of good society. It assumes an eternal dimension. The pattern of life lived now must be oriented to a recognition of judgment and reward, that is associated with the after-life.

II

There is the picture of a downward movement for the dead. *κατάβασις* (*katabasis*) – a going down, a descent, and, figuratively, a degradation, as opposed to a heightening or exaltation (*ὑψος* (*hupsos*)) – describes the direction of the dead to the abode of the dead (*ᾗδης* (*hadēs*)).¹

As Jesus pronounces woes upon unrepentant cities, He says of Capernaum: “And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to hades.” The underlying idea that heaven is above the hades down below is found in many religions. In Is 14, the King of Babylon, whose aspirations are as lofty as those of the Day Star, son of the dawn, is

humiliated by being consigned to the place of the dead. “Your pomp is brought down to Sheol . . . maggots are the bed beneath you, and worms are your covering” (v. 11). Instead of ascending above the heights of the clouds, and making himself like the Most High, the Lord declares: “You are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the pit” (vv. 14-15). In the Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh, and the Osiris myths,²

Sheol is the kingdom of the god of evil and death. Before the Christian era, under the influence of the prophets and the apocalyptists, the dualism in the concept of two opposing gods (the god of death and hades, and God of life) no longer existed. God’s sovereignty extends to hades.³ Jesus could say to Peter that the gates of hades will not prevail against his church (Matt 16:18). Sheol, or hades, becomes simply the place of the dead. Those who belong to Jesus die (1 Pet 3:19-20; 4:6), but they will not be shut up there for ever (cf. Acts 2:31). Capernaum did not accept Jesus, despite all the teachings and miracles of Jesus, there. The judgmental sentence on her is consignment to hades.

A possible interpretation of the statement about the gate of hades, with reference to the church, could be that death, which stands for the destroyer, cannot wipe out Christianity. Exegetes, like McNeile, accept the later formulation of this peculiar Matthean addition to Mark’s presentation of Peter’s confession.⁴ The community of St Matthew, in this story, underlies his idea of the indestructibility and eternity of the church. Paul links the idea with the resurrection of Jesus. As death no longer has dominion over Christ, likewise it has not over those who are in Christ (Rom 6:5-11). In Matthew, the going down to Sheol of the dead in Christ does not mean eternal confinement to the dominion of death. The gates of Sheol cannot prevail over the church.

Matthew gives a further illustration of the conquest of death by the death of Jesus Christ, through his grotesque story of the resurrection of the saints (Matt 27:52-53). He is careful not to give the impression that the saints rose immediately their tombs were opened, along with the splitting of the rocks, and the rending of the temple curtain, when Jesus breathed His last. Awkwardly, Matthew had to suspend the mention of the resurrection of the saints, even though their tombs had been opened. The resurrection of Jesus must precede theirs. They showed themselves, after Jesus had become the first fruits of them that died, to resurrect.⁵

Some biblical scholars, like J. N. Geldenhuys, take this story literally, and infer that, after the resurrection of Jesus and the saints, when a Christian dies, he no longer goes down to hades.⁶ The only follower of Jesus, who probably died before Him, was Judas Iscariot (Matt 27:5; the Lucan version would suggest that Jesus died before Judas: Acts 1:18). A much later legend, which shows that the body of Jesus, let down into the grave, quickened the bodies of the dead, has been used by Matthew in his story of the death and resurrection of Jesus. If we agree with Geldenhuys, the saints referred to here would be non-Christians. As we have already mentioned, Jesus' going down to hades shows that no disciple or saint will be spared that universal human experience, except those whose bodies must be changed to spiritual bodies, because they are still alive at the parousia (1 Cor 15:51ff.). The corruption of hades is the experience which every mortal is subjected to at death. When the eschatological resurrection takes place, the corruptible and perishable will become incorruptible and imperishable (1 Cor 15:42f.).

What is very noticeable in Matthew, is that the evangelist does not dwell on what happens before the eschatological allotment. There is less on hades, and more on gehenna, the burning fire, the lot of those that grind their teeth in a place of darkness, and the contrasting depiction of those that enjoy a heavenly banquet with the patriarchs, the saints who shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. The direction given in Matthew is from the present to the ultimate destiny. That ultimate destiny is dependent on one's relationship with Him, who alone has conquered death – Jesus Christ.

III

Besides a few references to "fire" in the preaching of John the Baptist (Matt 3:10, 11, 12; cf. Matt 7:19, Jesus' version of John's ethical teaching), fire is connected with the furnace, and γέεννα (*gehenna*) of the eschatological judgment. Even in these few references, the implication is clear that the ultimate fire has its beginnings in the present, in which the distinction (διάκρισις (*diakrisis*)) is being made between those of the evil one and those of God. "You will know them by their fruits. . . . Those that do not bear good fruit are cut down and thrown into the fire." One's final destiny is already determined by one's way of life in Christ or against Christ. The determining factor for the ultimate judgment is clearly known. What happens after death is a consummation of one's lot, which is inaugurated in the present.

Those who are the children of the kingdom of God are characterised in Matt 5-7. Their way of life is set out in contrast to the way of life of those outside, whose principle of life is regulated by the laws and customs of the fathers:

You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not kill, and whoever kills, shall be liable to judgment . . . and whoever says, ‘You fool’, shall be liable to the hell (γέεννα (*gehenna*)) of fire. (Matt 5:21-22).

In Matthew, γέεννα (*gehenna*) is not confused with hades (ᾗδης (*shēōl*)), as is common in apocalyptic and apocryphal writings. In 2 Esdras 7:78, for example, there is the view that only the wicked man goes down to Sheol, where he is rewarded with punishment, while the righteous immediately returns to God at death. Here we notice a clear influence of Hellenistic ideas. It is agreeable to our natural sentiment about what we expect of ourselves, immediately one dies. The soul idea creeps in. The soul of the righteous is in the hand of God, and no harm shall touch him (Wisdom 5:15f).

This is further developed by Philo. In Philo, we have the chief exponent of Alexandrian Judaism. He neither believes in bodily resurrection (since what matters is the immortality of the soul), nor in a general judgment (since requital is individualistic, and immediately after death). The punishment for the wicked is everlasting. Our present life in the body is death, for the body is death, for the body is the “utterly-polluted prison” of the soul, “nay more, it is sepulchral; our σῶμα (*soma*) (body) is our μνημεῖον (*mnēmeion*) (grave).”⁷

In Matthew, γέεννα (*gehenna*) is connected with the eschatological judgment, and not the lot of a person immediately after death. The historical origin of γέεννα (*gehenna*) is common knowledge. The full writing is גֵּי בֶן-הִנּוֹם (gē ben-Hinnōm): the valley of the sons of Hinnom, a ravine south of Jerusalem (Josh 15:8; 18:16). During the reign of Ahaz, in his adoption of Baal worship, he offered his children in burnt sacrifice in that valley (2 Chr 28:3). During Josiah’s religious reform, he desecrated the shrine of Topheth in the valley of the sons of Hinnom, and turned that valley to a place for burning refuse instead of human sacrifice (2 Kings 23:10). Later Jewish popular belief turned this place of incessantly burning-fire into the imagery of the punishment of the wicked and ungodly at the last judgment.

In the New Testament, it has become definitively the internal fire, where Satan, his angels, minions, and hades (personifying death) will be burnt at the end (Rev 20:11-15; Matt 15:41). There are two important passages, which demonstrate the Matthean eschatological stress in the understanding of γέεννα (*gehenna*): Matt 13:36-43 (the allegorical interpretation of the parable of the tares among the wheat) and Matt 25:31-46 (the parable of the sheep and the goats).

IV

INTERPRETATION OF THE TARES (MATT 13:36-43)

Jeremias's thorough study of the parable has convincingly demonstrated that the allegorising interpretation is the work of Matthew himself. Here are outlines of some of the grounds for this conclusion.⁸ The passage contains linguistic peculiarities, which belong to later Christian usage: οἱ υἱοὶ τῆς βασιλείας (*hoi huioi tēs basileias*) (sons of the kingdom) (13:38) is an unusual designation of the true citizens of the kingdom of God. In Matt 8:12, where there is the only NT example, the term designates the Jews by the Christians in the adoption of the “remnant” idea in the NT traditions.⁹ The election narrows down from the OT, culminating in Christ, who becomes the means for election into the new Israel of God.¹⁰

Another peculiarity, is the expression: “the kingdom of the Son of Man”. It replaces the expression “the kingdom of God”, and designates the church. At the parousia (Matt 13:40), the kingdom of the Son of Man is replaced by the kingdom of God. Paul does not specifically say how many years Christ would rule before the hand-over to the Father “. . . after abolishing every kind of dominion, authority, and power. For He is destined to reign until God has put all enemies under His feet; and the last enemy to be abolished is death” (1 Cor 15:24-26). Chiliasm is a later Christian conception, fully blown in Revelation. It is absent in the earliest synoptic tradition. Thus, the notion of the displacement of the kingdom of the Son of Man by the kingdom of God belongs to the environment, which conceives of Christ's temporary rule and eventual hand-over to the Father.

Another later Christian expression in the passage, is the use of ὁ πονηρός (*ho ponēros*) as the name of the devil. διάβολος (*diabolos*) and Σατανᾶς (*Satanas*) are the earlier traditional names for the devil. In this parable, Matthew mixes both the old and new traditional expressions διάβολος

(*diabolos*) (Matt 12:39) and ὁ πονηρός (*ho ponēros*) (Matt 13:38). These are some of the indications that the interpretation of the “tares” is the work of Matthew.

Later Christian church’s language and adaptation apart, the central point of the parable, which is likely to originate from Jesus, is the likening of the end-time judgment of harvest. That, which is found also in earlier Jewish apocalyptic, has been fused with the Matthean preoccupation with church discipline. The wheat and tares are to be left to grow together. It is premature to separate them now, for in attempting to remove the tares, the wheat might be affected. As Bornkamm has aptly put it, the church is not only a collection of the elect and the righteous, but a *corpus mixtum*, which will not face separation until the final judgment.¹¹ McNeile argues that Matthew’s horizon is the entire cosmos, and not confined to the church. The field (ὁ ἀγρός (*ho agros*)) is the world (12:38), and the mixture of the evil and the good is in the world. Matthew is not advocating toleration and avoidance of precipitate disciplinary action in the church.¹² The argument of McNeile may stand if the kingdom of the Son of Man, from which his angels will gather all causes of sin and all evil doers, is conceived as the entire world (the field), and not the Christian church (Matt 12:40).

The fact that Matthew’s mind centres on the end-time is conceivable because the eschatological judgment is not going to happen in a distant time; it is at the close of “this” age, the present of Matthew. ἐν τῇ συντελίᾳ τοῦ αἰῶνος (*en tē suntelia tou aiōnos*) (at the close of the age) is supported by Codex Sinaiticus (A), Vaticanus (B), Bezae (D), and a good number of Church Fathers, and Eastern and Western translations and versions. On the other hand, ἐν τῇ συντελίᾳ τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου (*en tē suntelia tou aiōnos toutou*) (at the close of this age) is supported by a host of miniscules, which may be as old, or even older, than some of the uncials supporting the first reading. The variety of families of texts supporting the latter reading gives credence to its originality. The later date of the uncial manuscript supporting the latter reading (C K L P W X Δ, with Tatian’s Diatessaron, and Chrysostom) do not weaken the evidence in its favour. It is more conceivable that later Christian sensibility about the delay of the parousia would cause a change from “this age” to “the age”, thus removing the embarrassment, which the particularity of the time of the end causes, due to its non-fulfilment.¹³

Matthew, therefore, sees the period in which he was writing as existing under the shadows of the end of the age. In fact, Conzelmann's view that Luke sees his age as the period of proleptic fulfilment of the promise, in which the church has to live worthily of Christ's coming, can be said to have already been introduced in Matthew. An expectation of a long intervening period between Easter and the parousia is no longer a preoccupation of the church. Thus, Easter is an assurance that the parousia will happen, sooner or later, with less emphasis on the duration of the intermediate period. An intermediate state, in which the dead were conceived as living a lifeless existence has been transformed to an existence that is quickened by the descent of Jesus into hades. That special Matthean episode of the bodies of the saints' departure from their graves, and walking the streets of Jerusalem, is symbolic of the effect of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection on the dead (Matt 28:51-53). They are in a state of fellowship with Christ, for the church of Christ is too powerful for the gates of hades (Matt 16:19).¹⁴

Matt 13:42-43; 49-50, speaks of the end-time judgment, which is universal, and not a particular judgment of the individual at his or her death. The evil-doers are gathered and burnt. The fact that they gnash their teeth in the furnace of fire, that burns unquenchably, allows no room for the theory of annihilation. A consideration of the nature of God, which is love, runs counter to the prospect of endless suffering, and pain, or punishment, from such a loving God.

The notion of a new heaven and new earth (Rev 21), after all evildoers, death, and hades had been burnt in the lake of fire (Rev 20:11-15), underscores the idea of a new creation. As in the beginning, when God's almightiness was undisputed, so will it be in the end. The end of history of salvation is a restoration of the state of the beginning, in a greater splendour at the end.¹⁵ The present time looks forward to the glorious end, which has been inaugurated by the mission of Jesus.

Matthew, as well as the rest of the synoptic writers, do not depart from the horrid picture of hell-fire, which we find in the Old Testament and apocalyptic writings, following Iranian models. *πύρωσις* (*purōsis*) (destruction by fire) would, in itself, suggest annihilation (1 Enoch 18:16; 53ff), but the conflicting pictures, we get in this area of biblical thought, allows that the worms do not die. Worms live forever in a fiery furnace! Worms suggest that putrefaction takes place, and yet decay contradicts the state of a

thing under fire. It is a place of deep darkness, and yet darkness and fire cannot be conceived together.¹⁶ We must allow that the grimmest pictures of the punishment of the wicked and evildoers are painted, without a consideration of their inherent contradictions.

The opposite picture of joy, in a life eternal, for all gathered righteous is also portrayed. The gathering of good seeds into the barn in the parable, standing for the aggregation of all the elect, runs through the entire New Testament, and continues, even into the liturgy of the *Didache*:

As this broken bread was scattered upon the hills, and was gathered together, and make one, so let Thy church be gathered together into Thy kingdom, from the ends of the earth.¹⁷

The view that the Eucharist was a foretaste of the Messianic banquet was strong in the early church. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna (c150 AD), called it a meal of immortality. A heavenly table fellowship is conceived as one of the blessings of eternal life in the kingdom of God. "I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 7:11). It is not only that the Christians will have the bliss of fellowship in God's kingdom, they will sit with Jesus on judgment thrones, as judges at the end-time judgment (Matt. 19:29). The relationship between man and Jesus, represented by followership of Him will be the basis of the final judgment. The benefit of followership, or discipleship, with Jesus is so surpassing that anything else, no matter how greatly valued, should be dispensed with in order to inherit eternal life in the kingdom of God (Matt 5:29; 17:7-9).

V

Existence, with an eye on inheriting eternal life, has some ethical imperatives. The desire to receive Jesus Christ gives shape to the Christian pattern of life. Every reasoned action of man is motivated, and every situation in life demands a defence of the principle behind actions. We are all the time called upon to declare our principles, whenever we grapple with situations and issues arising out of our professional, business, and social actions, in fact, every range of human affairs. The primary purpose of all human affairs is the business of "living". Whether one accepts it or not, the fact remains, that our principles of living are oriented and motivated by our expectations in the after-life. There are some people, who regard themselves as mere animals, and so,

like every other living creature, death marks the end of their authentic existence (Eccl 6). To them, every idea about the after-life, is mere speculation. For such people, their ethical principles support their ultimate end.

Matthew's teaching on the pattern of life for the Christian is in view of the after-life.¹⁸ Because of the eternal value of becoming a child of the kingdom through the acceptance of Jesus Christ, one's paradigm for every action is Jesus Christ. Christ lived a life of full communion with God, so the eternal life, which we seek in Jesus, is a quality of life in full communion with God. It begins now (Jn 5:24), in this present existence.¹⁹ Anything that would distract one from this path of life must be abjured. Matthew's collection of Jesus' teaching put it this way.

If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members, than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away, it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell (Matt 5:29-30).

The thought of this passage is repeated in the twin parables of the treasure in the field (Matt 13:44) and the pearl (Matt 13:45f). The great joy of the kingdom demands that all else should be surrendered in its preference. The hope of a life in the kingdom of God makes its demands. It demands complete submission to the will of God. It demands bearing worthy fruit. The Christian must be seen doing the deeds that are Christlike, for it is in these actions that his submission to, and the discipleship of, Christ is given concrete expression.²⁰ This is why, in the final judgment, it is one's Christlike actions, or otherwise, that will be used to determine his acceptance or rejection of Christ (Matt 25:31ff), and the person's ultimate acceptance into the kingdom of God, or rejection and entry into eternal punishment.

NOTES

1. In the OT, the standard term of going down to sheol is יָרַד (*yērēd*) Gen 37:35; 42:38, 1 Kings 2:6, while, to ascend into heaven, like Enoch did after 365 years of life, is אָלַח (*ālāh*).
2. John A. Wilson, "Egyptian Life after Death", in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 2nd edn, James B. Pritchard, ed., Princeton NJ: Princeton University

- Press, 1955, pp. 32-36; S. N. Kramer, "The Sumerian Adaptation of the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh", in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 2nd edn, James B. Pritchard, ed., Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955, 1 pp. 50-52; "Inauna's Descent to the Nether World", in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 2nd edn, James B. Pritchard, ed., Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955, pp. 52-56; E. A. Speiser, "The Akkadian Version", in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 2nd edn, James B. Pritchard, ed., Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955, pp. 60-109.
3. God is conceived as being in sovereign control of the visible and invisible worlds, eg. Ps 139:8; Amos 9:2.
 4. A. H. McNeile, *The Gospel According to St Matthew*, London UK: Macmillan, 1965, pp. 242f.
 5. The bodies of the saints were corruptible bodies – not the spiritual body of Christ's resurrection. Christ alone is the first fruits of them that died. Others are to have the spiritual body only at the end, cf. Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, Philadelphia PA: Westminster Press, 1949, p. 237.
 6. J. N. Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, London UK: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1950, p. 246; cf. C. L. Mitton, "Life After Death in the New Testament", in *Expository Times* 76 (1964/1965), pp. 429ff.
 7. See R. H. Charles, *A Capital History of the Doctrine of the Future Life*, revd edn, London UK: A. & C. Black, 1913, pp. 247-300, for the varied views of existence after death in the apocalyptic literature in the intertestamental period.
 8. J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, revd edn, London UK: SCM Press, 1972, pp. 81-86. For a similar view of Matthean origination of the explanation of the parable, see McNeile, *The Gospel According to St Matthew*, pp. 202-203.
 9. E. W. Heaton, "Remnant Concept in the Old Testament", in *Journal of Theological Studies* (1952), pp. 27-39; J. Paterson, "Remnant", in *Dictionary of the Bible*, J. Hastings, ed., New York NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952, pp. 841-842
 10. Oscar Cullman, *Salvation in History*, London UK: SCM Press, 1967, pp. 154-162.
 11. Gunther Bornkamm, "End-Expectation and Church in Matthew", in Joachim Rohde, ed., *Rediscovering the Teaching of the Evangelists*, London UK: SCM Press, 1968, p. 47.
 12. McNeile, *The Gospel According to St Matthew*, p. 202-203.
 13. Manfred Punge, "Eschatology and Salvation History in Matthew", in Joachim Rohde, ed., *Rediscovering the Teaching of the Evangelists*, London UK: SCM Press, 1968, pp. 107-112.
 14. Patristic speculations abound as to whether the faithful departed ever go to hades, since the descent of Christ into hades. The Matthean passage does not say whether the (OT) saints went back hades after appearing to many in the streets of the city. But since the NT generally speaks of the resurrection as an event of the End, these saints would have returned to hades again until the final resurrection, at the parousia of Christ, cf. J. W. C. Wand, ed., *The General Epistle of St Peter and St Jude*, London UK: Methuen & Co., 1934, pp. 105-112.
 15. The superiority of the End over the Beginning forms part of the thesis of J. A. Ziesler, "Anthropology of Hope", in *Expository Times* 90 (4/1979), pp. 104-109. He opines that "Endzeit does not correspond to Urzeit."

16. Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, vol 1, London UK: SCM Press, 1964, p. 201; D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, London UK: SCM Press, 1964, pp. 379ff.
17. Cf. Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd edn, London UK: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 64.
18. It is the centrality of Christ in the remaking of man that creates Christian ethics, distinguishing it from general ethical principles, universally recognised in other faiths, cf. E. Carpenter, *Common Sense About Christian Ethics*, London UK: Victor Gollancz, 1961, pp. 11-16.
19. Leslie D. Weatherhead, *Life Begins at Death*, Redhill UK: Denholm House Press, 1969, p. 22.
20. Jack T. Sanders, *Ethics in the New Testament*, London UK: SCM Press, 1975, is of the view that the imminence of the parousia with the eschatological judgment gives character to Matthew's ethics; see pp. 40-46.