

Hell as Fire and Darkness: Remembrance of Sinai as Covenant Rejection in Matthew's Gospel

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Introduction: Fire and Darkness as Motifs of Hell in Matthew's Gospel

In Matthew's Gospel, John the Baptist and Jesus repeatedly speak of hell as fire and darkness. Here are the relevant passages:

^{3:10} The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the **fire**. ¹¹ As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove his sandals; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and **fire**. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clear his threshing floor; and he will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with **unquenchable fire**.

^{5:22} Whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the **fiery hell**.

^{8:12} But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the **outer darkness**; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

^{13:40} So just as the tares are gathered up and **burned with fire**, so shall it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send forth his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, ⁴² and will throw them into the **furnace of fire**; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

^{13:49} So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, ⁵⁰ and will throw them into the **furnace of fire**; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

^{18:8} If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the **eternal fire**. ⁹ If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the **fiery hell**.

^{22:13} Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the **outer darkness**; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' ¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen.'

^{24:50} The master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know, ⁵¹ and will **cut him in pieces** and assign him a place with the hypocrites; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

^{25:30} Throw out the worthless slave into the **outer darkness**; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

^{25:41} Then he will also say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, accursed ones, into the **eternal fire** which has been prepared for the devil and his angels...' ⁴⁶ These will go away into **eternal punishment**, but the righteous into eternal life.'

To a reader unfamiliar with biblical idioms, the impression one gets of Jesus is that he will one day use a lot of coercive force, keeping people against their will in a raging fire. He will shut the door on people, leaving them in darkness and regret. He may even take up a sword and torture them by cutting them into pieces. Who would want to be cast into fire, or thrown into outer darkness, or cut in pieces? Is that what hell really is? What does that mean for the character of Jesus? So an in-depth study is required. I will put forward my argument here:

1. In Deuteronomy 4 – 5, Moses retold the Mount Sinai story to the second generation of Israelites, and it is the only place in the biblical story when 'fire' and 'darkness' are mentioned with such density. The

theological significance of Sinai to Moses, and then to Jesus, was that it was the encounter par excellence of Israel's covenant refusal. Israel experienced God as only fire and darkness because they refused God's first invitation, His covenant invitation to enter His presence on the mountain and speak with Him face to face. The fact that Moses had the faith and courage to enter more deeply into communion with God tells us that a different choice was possible, but refused by Israel as a whole.

2. Fire in the Pentateuch is a symbol and expression of refinement and cleansing. When Jesus needed language that would appropriately connect with failure to enter into deeper communion with God, and resistance to God's covenant offer, he drew upon the older Sinai description of 'fire' and 'darkness.' 'Fire' and 'darkness' is precisely how people experience God when they refuse to enter into Him, when they refuse the covenant purification offered. Fire, even in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, is not strictly retributive.
3. Matthew appears to have particularly valued the times Jesus evoked the fire and darkness motifs present from the Sinai encounter, for no other Gospel writer includes these many sayings of Jesus. However, what Mark, Luke, and John do include indicate their agreement with Matthew.
4. Matthew was integrating his material around the Pentateuch and other prominent themes from the Pentateuch: a five-fold structure; blessings and curses; the tabernacle-temple presence of God; mountains; the giving of the law; etc. This reinforces my claim that Matthew's fire and darkness sayings need to be understood in relation to covenant refusal from Sinai.
5. Since we now know there was not a 'burning trash dump' in the Valley of Hinnom outside of Jerusalem, we must seek a literary explanation for Jesus' language. There are ample indications that Jesus himself had Deuteronomy 4 – 5 in mind when thinking how to describe the consequences of unbelief and the portrait of hell. Understanding fire and darkness as an echo of Sinai affirms the earliest Christian intuitions about the fires of hell expressing God's attempt to purify and refine people of the corruption of sin, not a retributive punishment. It is not only possible but appropriate to speak of hell as the love of God.

Sinai as Israel's Resistance to God's Covenant Invitation

Does the Pentateuch itself describe the Sinai incident as covenant refusal? Yes. In the curious burning bush episode (Ex.3:2), the fiery presence of God did not consume – that is, destroy – the bush. The burning bush seems to represent the outcome God desired from His coming encounter with Israel at Mount Sinai. After delivering Israel from Egypt and leading them to the same mountain, God descended upon it in fire and smoke (Ex.19:16 – 18). He called all Israel, not just Moses, to come up onto the mountain when the trumpet sounded to meet with Him face to face (Ex.19:13; Dt.5:5). The symbolism was reassurance to Moses that God's refining presence would not burn away Israel completely. Furthermore, if the bush – later described by Luke as a *thorn* bush (Acts 7:30) – was meant to remind Moses, Israel, and later readers of the creation suffering from the curse of humanity's sin by virtue of its *thorns* (Gen.3:17 – 19), then the connection between the fiery presence in the bush and the fiery presence among the Israelites becomes even stronger. God would have begun dwelling among His people Israel, among His fallen creation, as He had dwelled within the thorn bush.

But Israel declined to come up onto Mount Sinai, instead staying at a distance (Ex.19:19 – 20). In his book, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, John Sailhamer argues convincingly that the Tabernacle, priesthood, and various laws were the result of Israel's sinful failure to meet God face to face on Mount Sinai in Exodus 19. The former is found when Israel camped at the base of the mountain, Moses ascended the mountain to meet with God, and God announced His intention to form a covenant with Israel: 'Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Ex.19:5 – 6). After heartily resolving to do whatever God said to do, Israel received the word from God that they were to meet him 'on the mountain' on the third day. 'When the ram's horn sounds a long blast, they shall come up *on* the mountain' (Ex.19:13). Moses' recollection of the Sinai encounter to the second generation of Israelites come out of Egypt reflects this understanding: 'The LORD spoke to you face to face at the mountain from the midst of the fire, while I was standing between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD; for you were afraid because of the fire and *did not go up the mountain*' (Dt.5:4 – 5). Sailhamer acknowledges that English translations of that verse do not always reflect this thought of coming up 'on the mountain.' But the same view is offered by Exodus 3:12, 'you shall worship God *on* this mountain.' Thus does the New Jewish Publication Society translate the verse. Sailhamer gives a thorough

explanation and discussion of this.¹ As Sailhamer observes, from Exodus 19, God first referred to Israel as a kingdom *of* priests, and then shifts His language in the course of the narrative to referring to Israel as a kingdom *with* priests.

Sailhamer's thesis is that the Pentateuch is really narrating Israel's covenant refusal, and Moses' subsequent mediation. That thesis is substantiated by the story of the Pentateuch itself. With whom does God make the covenant? Moses. As a result of Israel's initial refusal of the covenant invitation, God chose Moses to mediate the covenant and represent the rest of Israel. This resulted in God giving laws in Exodus 20:1 – 27, and Israel trembling in fear again in Exodus 20:18 – 20. God responds by giving more laws in Exodus 20:21 – 23:19. The covenant appears to be stabilized momentarily when Moses, Aaron, and seventy elders ascend the mountain and eat with God in Exodus 23:20 – 24:11. God gives Moses the Tabernacle instructions in Exodus 24:12 – 31:11. But Israel breaks the covenant again, with Aaron's personal participation, in the golden calf incident in Exodus 32:1 – 8. God wanted to start a people with Moses, but Moses pleads with God not to do that (Ex.32:9 – 14). Then we reach the central point of the Pentateuch as a whole: Moses' personal mediation for Israel to restore the covenant, in Exodus 32:30 – 33:23. Henceforth, Moses includes his fellow Israelites with him, but God clearly makes His covenant with Moses. God promises His presence with Moses individually, but Moses asks God to be present with 'us,' that is, Israel as a whole (Ex.33:14 – 16). After Moses cuts the second set of stone tablets to replace the first set, and meets with God face to face, God says, 'In accordance with these words I have made a covenant with *you* and with Israel' (Ex.34:27). The story turns around this chiasmic center as follows:²

1. God's Spirit 'hovers' as God creates heaven and earth; God places humanity in a garden land, but they leave in exile and with a corruption in human nature (6:5 – 6; 8:21); origin of all nations: Gen.1:1 – 11:26
 2. Covenant inaugurated with Abraham – blessings and curses: Gen.11:27 – 12:8
 3. God's faithfulness to the chosen family: Gen.12:9 – 50:26
 4. Deliverance of Israelites (first generation) from Egypt, arrival at Sinai: Ex.1:1 – 18:27
 5. Covenant Inaugurated, Broken, Re-Asserted: Ex.19:1 – 24:11
 - a. God calls Israel to meet Him on the mountain on the third day: Ex.19:1 – 15
 - b. Israel's failure – to come up the mountain: Ex.19:16 – 23
 - c. God resumes with Moses and Aaron: Ex.19:24 – 25
 - d. God gives Israel the Ten Commandments: Ex.20:1 – 17
 - e. Israel's failure – Israel afraid of God's voice: Ex.20:18 – 20
 - f. God gives all Israel 49 laws (7x7): Ex.20:21 – 23:19
 - g. God and Israel agree to a covenant, and Moses, Aaron, and 70 elders see God, and eat and drink in His presence: Ex.23:20 – 24:11
 6. Tabernacle instructions given to house the **veiled** presence of God: Ex.24:12 – 31:11
 7. God commands Israel to observe the Sabbath and the covenant is documented on stone tablets: Ex.31:12 – 18
 8. Covenant broken; Israel worships Aaron's golden calves: Ex.32:1 – 29
 9. Moses mediates for Israel, restores the covenant: Ex.32:30 – 33:23
 - 8'. Covenant affirmed: Ex.34:1 – 17
 - 7'. God commands Israel to observe three annual feasts and the covenant is documented on stone tablets again; Moses **veils** his face as a sign of judgment, hiding God's glory from the nation: Ex.34:18 – 35
 - 6'. Tabernacle built to instructions; presence of God comes **veiled**: Ex.35:1 – 40:38
 - 5'. Covenant Mediation Inaugurated, Covenant Broken, Re-Asserted: Lev.1:1 – 27:34
 - a. God calls Israel to approach Him, gives priests a Code for sacrifices: Lev.1:1 – 9:24
 - b. Priests' failure – two of Aaron's sons offer strange fire, are consumed: Lev.10:1 – 7
 - c. God resumes with Aaron's two others sons: Lev.10:8 – 20
 - d. God gives Israel's priests a Priestly Code for the community: Lev.11:1 – 16:34
 - e. Israel's failure – God addresses worship of goat idols: Lev.17:1 – 9 (cf. Acts 7:42 – 43)
 - f. God gives all Israel a Holiness Code: Lev.17:10 – 25:55
 - g. God and Israel agree to a covenant: Lev.26:1 – 27:34
 - 4'. Departure from Sinai, deliverance of Israelites (second generation) from sins (of the first generation): Num.1:1 – 36:13
 - 3'. God's faithfulness forms the basis for Moses' exhortation: Dt.1:1 – 26:19
 2. Covenant offered to Israel – blessings and curses: Dt.27:1 – 29:29
- 1'. God must circumcise human hearts after Israel's exile (30:6); 'heaven' and 'earth' (32:1) witness destiny of Israel and nations; God's Spirit 'hovers' (32:11) over Israel as they enter garden land: Dt.30:1 – 34:12

¹ John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), p.51 – 59

² For this literary analysis, I am indebted to Sailhamer and a Jewish scholar whose work I have, sadly, misplaced.

Although Sailhamer does not perceive the chiasm and makes his points independently of it, this literary analysis reinforces his thesis: The Tabernacle (and later, the Temple) was not God's Plan A. It was Plan B. God wanted 'a Temple people', a people with whom He talked face to face. He did not want 'a people with a Temple.' God veiled His glory via the Tabernacle as a concession for abiding among the people, and a judgment on them for their refusal to approach him face to face the first time, on the mountain. The imagery here is apparently drawn from Eden. Eden may have been a kind of mountain, since four rivers flowed out from it; rivers in nature naturally converge, not diverge. Thus, Eden must have been a supernatural source of these rivers, and/or be higher in elevation. Also, Adam and Eve walked with God and spoke with Him face to face. Thus, God's initial invitation to Israel was to resume the life, in some sense, that Adam and Eve once had.

However, Israel's failure to meet God face to face meant that access to Eden was drawn tightly against them, as it was against Adam and Eve after the fall. The angelic cherubim guardians reappear, this time not to guard the way to the tree of life but engraved on the lid of the 'mercy seat' of the ark of the covenant to guard the threshold of heaven and earth. And instead of all Israel being able to commune with God directly, face to face, as a series of priestly mediators are instated between the people and God. Only the high priest would be able to walk behind the veil of the most holy place to stand in God's presence, where God stood at the boundary between heaven and earth. The high priest would tremble in fear, with smoke and incense obscuring his upward vision so that he could not look directly at God. Thus, the Tabernacle represents the conditions of the *fall* of humanity, on the outside of the Garden of Eden, not Eden itself. This was as close as anyone could get to God after the fall, and Israel is 'near' but, like everyone else, on the outside of the threshold.

The tabernacle sanctuary most immediately represents and re-enacts Mount Sinai, including Israel's choice to remain outside of God's presence while only one mediator approached God more closely. God permitted different degrees of access to Himself at Mount Sinai. Those different levels became mirrored in the sanctuary. The people of Israel had to stay at the perimeter of the mountain when they failed to ascend to God's presence at the top of the mountain (Ex.19:12). But Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and seventy elders went up the mountain and saw God, and ate in His presence, ratifying the covenant for the first time (Ex.24:1 – 11). Afterwards, Moses alone personally went up and entered the very midst of the cloud of God's glory (Ex.24:12 – 18). Similarly, the Israelites, at the base of the mountain, could later go into the courtyard of the sanctuary, where the altar and laver would be placed. Only the priests, like the elders on the mountain, could proceed into the holy place of the tabernacle, to be illuminated by the candlelight of God's presence and eat the bread of His presence like the seventy elders ate with God. Yet even the priests had to remain outside the veil to the holy place. Only the high priest, like Moses on the very top of the mountain, could go beyond the veil and see the glory of God. As stated in Ex.25:40, God revealed a pattern for Moses on Mount Sinai, but not in the sense of showing him some mystical, Platonic blueprint. I find it sufficient to assume that Moses simply looked down from the height of the mountain.

The sharing of priestly mediation with Aaron and sons as Levitical priests brings stability to the Sinai covenant, *for a time*. After all, the priests, too, share in the same corruption of human nature that infects everyone else. Aaron himself sins by producing the golden calf (Ex.32:1 – 29). After Moses mediates for all Israel, including Aaron as priest, God adds more laws and the covenant is stabilized another time, then we have another incident of priests disobeying: Two of Aaron's sons offer strange fire and God consumes them (Lev.10:1 – 7). God then resumes with two other sons of Aaron (Lev.10:8 – 20) and installs them as priests, mediating the covenant. God then gives the priests a code to handle the coexistence of Israel with God in the sanctuary (Lev.11 – 17), which will become very important to examine with respect to penal substitution's claim to the Day of Atonement in Lev.16. The action of the high priest in the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement (Lev.16) served as the annual act of covenant mediation, as the high priest reenacted the lone mediation of Moses on top of the mountain. This portable tabernacle pattern was taken by David and Solomon and reproduced on Mount Zion in the form of the fixed stone temple. Hence, there is a direct relationship between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. This relationship will invite Jesus' vocal critique of the Jerusalem temple and provide much material for the Gospel writers' anti-temple stance.

The Purpose of Divine 'Fire' in the Pentateuch

This brings us to the use of 'fire' and 'darkness' as an indication of Israel's covenant refusal. I believe the best explanation of Jesus' usage of 'fire' and 'outer darkness' as motifs of hell (Mt.5:22; 8:12; 13:40 – 42, 49 – 50; 22:13; 25:30) is that he was drawing from Israel's failure at Sinai. Israel failed to respond to God's invitation to come higher up and further in, seeing only 'fire' (Dt.4:11, 12, 15, 24, 33, 36; 5:4, 5, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26) and

‘darkness’ of smoke (Dt.4:11; 5:23). To my knowledge, this is the only place in Scripture where ‘fire’ and ‘darkness’ are used in reference to the same event. Arguably, Jesus understood Israel’s decision to see God as only fire and darkness, and to remain outside God, as covenant refusal, a refusal to enter more deeply *into God*.

Fire in the Pentateuch represents the refining and consuming power of God personally speaking His commands to a human audience. It demonstrates that God, when He personally spoke His commands to people, was cleansing their sin out of them, burning up the impurity, at least to some degree. Deuteronomy contains at least three places where this idea is put into poetic, parallel form: two in the narrative prologue of Moses (Dt.1 – 11), and the third in the midst of the instruction for how to receive the prophet who will take up Moses’ prophetic office (Dt.18:15 – 22):

^{4:36} Out of the heavens He let you *hear His voice to discipline you*;
and on earth He let you *see His great fire* (Dt.4:36)

^{5:25} Now then why should we die?
For this *great fire* will consume us;
If we hear the *voice of the LORD our God* any longer,
then we will die.

^{18:16} This is according to all that you asked of the LORD your God
In Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying,
‘Let me not *hear again the voice* of the LORD my God,
let me not *see this great fire* anymore, or I will die.’ (Dt.18:16)

In each of these poetic parallels, hearing the voice of God is compared to seeing the fire of God. Both caused the Israelites to fear for their lives. This condensed account of Deuteronomy 4 – 5 shows this connection repeatedly:

^{4:11} You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain *burned with fire* to the very heart of the heavens: darkness, cloud and thick gloom. ¹² Then the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the *fire*; you heard the sound of words, but you saw no form--only a voice. ¹³ So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone... ¹⁵ you did not see any form on the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the *fire*... ²⁴ For the LORD your God is a consuming *fire*, a jealous God... ³³ Has any people heard the voice of God speaking from the midst of the *fire*, as you have heard it, and survived?... ³⁶ Out of the heavens He let you hear His voice to discipline you; and on earth He let you see His great fire, and you heard His words from the midst of the fire... ^{5:4} The LORD spoke to you face to face at the mountain from the midst of the fire, ⁵ while I was standing between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD; for you were afraid because of the *fire* and did not go up the mountain... ²² These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain from the midst of the *fire*, of the cloud and of the thick gloom, with a great voice, and He added no more. He wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me. ²³ And when you heard the voice from the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was *burning with fire*, you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes and your elders. ²⁴ You said, ‘Behold, the LORD our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from the midst of the *fire*; we have seen today that God speaks with man, yet he lives. ²⁵ Now then why should we die? For this *great fire* will consume us; if we hear the voice of the LORD our God any longer, then we will die. ²⁶ For who is there of all flesh who has heard the voice of the living God speaking from the midst of the *fire*, as we have, and lived? ²⁷ Go near and hear all that the LORD our God says; then speak to us all that the LORD our God speaks to you, and we will hear and do it.’ (Dt.4:11 – 5:27)

The Israelites at Sinai/Horeb were ostensibly correct in fearing they would die if God directly addressed them from heaven, just as they might have been consumed by the great fire of God on earth. Hence, God accepted Israel’s request to let Moses remain as the mediator of God’s commands and God’s presence. Apparently, the phrase, ‘The LORD spoke to you [Israel] *face to face* at the mountain from the midst of the fire’ (5:4), is not meant to be interpreted as being without Moses’ mediation, i.e. ‘while I was standing between the LORD and you’ (5:5). For the phrase ‘face to face’ is highly unusual. In the Pentateuch, the phrase was used only sparingly, and only in relation to God. Jacob wrestled with God and saw God ‘face to face’ (Gen.32:30), resulting in God crippling Jacob’s sin; God made Jacob unable to run away from his problems henceforth. Moses and Joshua saw God ‘face to face’ when God

met them in the tent of meeting (Ex.33:11). Moses seemed to have a further, uniquely intimate encounter with God at the top of Mount Sinai (Ex.34:5 – 8) and at various times afterwards so that his face shone (Ex.34:32 – 35). The Pentateuch says of him, ‘Since that time no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face’ (Dt.34:10). Thus, God spoke ‘face to face’ to Israel in and through Moses the mediator, but not in the sense that God spoke ‘face to face’ to Israel without him. The face of God shone through the shining face of Moses.

Moses’ role of covenant mediator is vital to understanding the Pentateuch, Jesus’ subsequent reading of the Pentateuch, and the Gospel writers’ engagement with it. Given the prior decision of Israel to reject the covenant offered to them at Sinai, and also the idolatry that involved even Aaron (Ex.32:1 – 8), Moses offered himself on behalf of the Israelites as God’s covenant partner and the mediator between God and Israel. God would have started over with Moses, but Moses pleaded with God to not cast off the people. He would both receive words from God and repeat them for Israel.

^{5:28} The LORD heard the voice of your words when you spoke to me, and the LORD said to me, ‘I have heard the voice of the words of this people which they have spoken to you. They have done well in all that they have spoken. ²⁹ Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me and keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them and with their sons forever! ³⁰ Go, say to them, ‘Return to your tents.’ ³¹ But as for you, stand here by Me, that I may speak to you all the commandments and the statutes and the judgments which you shall teach them, that they may observe them in the land which I give them to possess.’ (Dt.5:28 – 31)

Something not mentioned in the Exodus narrative itself is Moses’ recollection of traversing the mountain while it was burning with divine fire. Notably, because of the divine encounter on the top of Sinai (Ex.34), Moses was apparently able to enter into the fire of God and walk through it:

^{9:15} So I turned and came down from the mountain while the mountain was burning with fire, and the two tablets of the covenant were in my two hands. (Dt.9:15)

What was this fire? Why was Moses able to walk through it? Was this divine ‘fire’ something other than a typical earthly fire, combusting the mountain and whatever shrubbery was on it? Or did God give Moses special protection from ordinary fire? Or, perhaps more interestingly, perhaps Moses entering into the fire on the mountain symbolized the reverse? The fiery and consuming and covenantal word of God was able to enter into Moses. The prophet Isaiah experienced something of that nature when an angel touched a burning coal to his unclean lips. Moses was able to bear in himself the covenant partnership for which God had called. God’s fiery word dwelled within Moses as it had done in the fire of the burning bush. What Moses told Israel to put on their hearts, bind as signs on their hands and foreheads, and write on their doorposts and gates (Dt.6:4 – 9) were reminders: They were to let God’s commands enter into every internal space of their heart, mind (forehead), and strength (hand), if that is indeed an acceptable way to speak of such things. Something of this sort had happened to Moses.

Fire at Sinai/Horeb is therefore both God’s purification of humanity and human fear of being purified. Israel’s fear and resistance to go up Mount Sinai/Horeb to meet with God represented their unwillingness to be cleansed and truly receive the word of God. After Israel declined God’s invitation to come up on the mountain, God had lamented to Moses, knowing that the human hearts of the Israelites had not yet been changed, ‘Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me and keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them and with their sons forever!’ (Dt.5:29) Purification by fire and circumcision of heart (Dt.30:6) therefore converge as mutually interpreting symbols pointing to the same reality: the removal of the corruption of sin from human nature by the word of God, and specifically the Word of God made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. Since fire symbolized God’s love also (Song 8:5), the prophets likened the hoped-for messianic work of God as a purifying fire burning away Israel’s impurities (e.g. Isa.29:6; 30:27 – 30; Mal.3:2 – 3).

I must mention a caveat. Fire and brimstone raining down on Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen.19) indeed is an earlier incident of fire, but I believe that episode must be grouped in with the flood of Noah (Gen.6 – 9), the taking of the Egyptian firstborn (Ex.12), and the conquest of the Canaanites (Josh.6ff.). Incidents when God took human life in the Old Testament must be coordinated with Jesus’ appearance to the dead (1 Pet.3:18 – 20; 4:6). God’s rationale for taking human life seems to be His need to protect His chosen people lest the line of faith be killed and the Son of God be prevented from taking flesh from within the Jewish covenant family. But as Jesus’ self-presentation to those

who died before him suggests, God did not simply consign those people to hell. Rather, God gave them a chance to see and hear Jesus and presumably consider that he offers them the solution to the problem of their corrupted human nature. Given that much, Sodom and Gomorrah demonstrate an open hostility to the same angelic visitors that came to Abraham and Sarah (Gen.18), as well as to Lot who showed them hospitality. For the chosen family to continue receiving human outsiders and even heavenly visitors (hospitality was a pre-eminent godly value) means that the hostility of Sodom and Gomorrah had to be removed, lest Israel's existence be jeopardized in the land. As such, the rain of fire seems more like volcanic material and not the same fire of the burning bush or Sinai. Nevertheless, that fire also seems to serve the purpose of purifying the land from the corruption of those particular Canaanite tribes, and in their case, leading them straight to the purification of their human nature offered by Jesus.

I also find it likely that this covenant refusal at Sinai is also an origination point of the literary motif that the word of God, and later, the word from Jesus' mouth, is a sharp, two-edged sword (e.g. Heb.4:12; Rev.1:16; 2:12, 16; 19:15, 21; although see also Gen.3:24). Jesus said later in parables that the destiny of a rebellious person is to be hewn down with a sword: 'The master...will cut him in pieces' (Mt.24:50 – 51; Lk.12:46; 19:27). Jesus was referring to hell because of the similarity between these statements with others involving 'fire' and 'outer darkness.' The word of God is also a fire which seeks to destroy what can be burned away, and seeks to refine what can be purified. Thus, God's word is also a sword which threatens human sinful existence as it currently is, since it is seeking to put something to death. I am sure that is the only adequate explanation of Jesus' 'cut him in pieces' sayings. What the biblical writers mean exactly will need to be examined more carefully in their context on the lips of Jesus. To those 'fire' and 'darkness' sayings I now turn.

Jesus' Fire and Darkness Sayings in the Gospels

As can be seen from this table, Matthew far outstrips the other Gospel writers in his preservation of Jesus' 'fire' and 'outer darkness' sayings as motifs of hell. More rarely, Jesus spoke of hell using the metaphor of a sword cutting a person in pieces.

Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
3:10 The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire . ¹¹ As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove his sandals; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire . ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clear his threshing floor; and he will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire .	1:7 And he was preaching, and saying, 'After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'	3:9 Indeed the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire .'... ¹⁶ John answered and said to them all, 'As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of his sandals; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire . ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to thoroughly clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his barn; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire .'	NA
5:22 Whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell .	NA	NA	NA
8:10 Now when Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who were following, 'Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. ¹¹ I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven; ¹² but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness ; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.	NA	7:9 Now when Jesus heard this, he marveled at him, and turned and said to the crowd that was following him, 'I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith.'	NA
13:40 So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire , so shall it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send forth his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, ⁴² and will throw them into the furnace of fire ; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.	NA	NA	NA
13:49 So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, ⁵⁰ and will throw them into the furnace of fire ; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.	NA	NA	NA

<p>^{18:2} And he called a child to himself and set him before them...⁶ but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. ⁷ Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes! ⁸ If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire. ⁹ If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell. ¹⁰ See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of my Father who is in heaven.</p>	<p>^{9:36} Taking a child, he set him before them, and taking him in his arms... ⁴² Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire, ⁴⁴ [where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'] ⁴⁵ If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than, having your two feet, to be cast into hell, ⁴⁶ [where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'] ⁴⁷ If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell, ⁴⁸ where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.' ⁴⁹ For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰ Salt is good; but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.'</p>	<p>^{17:1} He said to his disciples, 'It is inevitable that stumbling blocks come, but woe to him through whom they come! ² It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea, than that he would cause one of these little ones to stumble.</p>	<p>NA</p>
<p>^{22:13} Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' ¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen.'</p>	<p>NA</p>	<p>NA</p>	<p>NA</p>
<p>^{24:50} The master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know, ⁵¹ and will cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.</p>	<p>NA</p>	<p>^{12:46} The master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and assign him a place with the unbelievers.</p>	<p>NA</p>
<p>^{25:30} Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.</p>	<p>NA</p>	<p>^{19:27} But these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them in my presence.</p>	<p>NA</p>
<p>^{25:41} Then he will also say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels...' ⁴⁶ These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'</p>	<p>NA</p>	<p>NA</p>	<p>NA</p>

A few statements can be made about these differences between the Gospels, especially for the less experienced reader of Scripture. First, the Gospels are literary history. That means that each Gospel writer is making decisions about what material from Jesus to include or exclude in the telling of their story. This is not arbitrary. Nor are they inventing, embellishing, or exaggerating anything. They are simply making the same types of decisions that you and I make when telling our own stories to different audiences, or that a filmmaker does in cutting certain scenes from a documentary movie. Second, the Gospels might bear some similarity to Greco-Roman biography and history, but fundamentally, they are drawing from the conventions of Hebrew narrative because they see the story of Jesus as connected inseparably to the Hebrew Bible before him. One need only compare Kings and Chronicles to see how the same time period can be narrated differently with this literary historical story-telling: The book of Kings draws the reader's attention to the divided kingdom of both Northern Israel and Southern Judah, and the dynamic tension between kings and prophets, whereas the book of Chronicles draws our attention to the Davidic throne in Judah with special focus on the Jerusalem temple. Similarly, Matthew structures his Gospel around a massive literary allusion to the Pentateuch, as I will show below; Mark, Luke, and John all use literary allusions to Genesis 1 – 4 in various ways. This is, once again, because of their subject matter: Jesus claimed to undo the corruption in human nature and restore human nature to God's original creation vision, restore human relationships to God's original creation design, and renew human mission in the pattern of the original creational commission to spread life. There simply is no other way to communicate that without referring to Genesis 1 – 4 and the Pentateuch's exposition of Israel's role in God's commitment to His entire creation. With this understanding, we can explore the differences between the Gospels in more detail.

Mark strategically excludes the teaching of John the Baptist and Jesus as much as possible. Unlike the other Gospel writers, who more or less help us to identify ourselves with the disciples as they progressively learn from Jesus, Mark wants to *prevent* his readers from doing so. What his reasons are for doing this, I cannot explore here. But

certainly Mark omits John the Baptist's warnings about unfruitful trees being thrown into fire. Mark also omits the simple phrase 'and fire' when describing the baptism Jesus brings about by the Spirit (compare Mt.3:10 – 12 with Mk.1:8). He includes none of Jesus' heart-directed teaching found in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (Mt.5:1 – 7:29) or Luke's Sermon on the Plain (Lk.6:12 – 49). Thus Mark does not include Jesus warning against harboring anger eventually endangering one of the 'fiery hell.' Missing from Mark is the story of the Roman centurion and his servant where Jesus warns of the 'outer darkness.' Missing are many of Jesus' parables: the wheat and the tares; the dragnet; the wedding banquet; the master and servant; the ten virgins; and the sheep and the goats.

The one incident Mark does include is Jesus' caution about leading 'one of these little ones' astray. There, Jesus says that it is better to cut off one's own hand, foot, or eye than 'go into hell, into the unquenchable fire, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched' (Mk.9:42 – 50). Including this episode is consistent with Mark's theme of servanthood. In the second half of the Gospel, Mark recalls three episodes when the disciples egregiously misunderstood or ignored Jesus' predictions of his own death (Mk.8:31, 9:31, 10:33 – 34). Jesus made of his own death a stern paradigm for Christian service. Mark makes clear that the disciples do not understand what Jesus' mission is. Whenever Jesus talks about his own suffering and death, the disciples are struck with fear and confusion. Further, their motive becomes clear: they only wanted to be the greatest next to a nationalistic military Messiah. When Jesus makes clear he wants them to serve, their faulty motive becomes exposed. It is in this light that we can understand why Mark includes Jesus' caution about leading 'little ones' astray. 'Little ones' encompasses actual children, yes, but also new or younger Christian believers who are children in their faith. Matthew and Luke also include this teaching of Jesus – Matthew more so and Luke less. But given Mark's propensity to otherwise conceal the teaching of Jesus, and given that there is no attempt at explaining this 'worm' that does not die or the 'fire' that is not quenched, the saying is startling. To what exactly are these realities referring?

The unique Markan saying about salt contains the same idea as John the Baptist's earlier teaching about fire. 'For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.' (Mk.9:49 – 50) Fire and salt are ways that precious metal or food, respectively, might be transformed, refined, and improved. Jesus' saying that 'everyone will be salted with fire' connects the 'unquenchable fire' of hell and the Isaianic phrase 'undying worm' of the eternally dying (Mk.9:43 – 48, quoting Isa.66:24) to the transforming, refining work of God in the present. The work of God is one and the same, whether it is present or future: It is to affirm the original goodness of all created matter via resurrection, but in the case of human beings, to burn away that which should be and must be burned away, the corruption of sin. Interestingly, the parallel suggests that both divine fire and salt have a limit based on its purpose. The fire will not cause total destruction of the person any more than a bit of seasoning salt causes the destruction of the food. Fire may cause discomfort and suffering, surely, but not total destruction. Mark's witness to Jesus' use of the 'fire' motif is consistent with what I have pointed out about the Pentateuch. Fire is a sign and expression of God's covenant with His people. It is God's refining love and judgment, symbolizing the potential of both accepting God's purifying action in one's life and also fearfully rejecting it. In Jesus' usage, since Jesus embodies the covenant love of God towards humanity in his own person, he is calling his disciples to nurture in themselves and encourage in others his work of reversing 'hardness of heart' (Mk.3:5; 6:51; 7:18 – 23; 10:5), the condition to which all humanity, including Israel, became vulnerable after the fall (Mk.10:5 – 9).

Luke streamlines his narrative of the Gospel and Acts to explain what 'fire' signifies in a relational covenant with God. For Luke, fire refers to the purifying and refining action of Jesus' Holy Spirit. Luke includes John the Baptist's warnings about being thrown into 'fire,' along with Jesus' baptism by the Spirit 'and fire' (Lk.3:9, 16 – 17). The next major episode in his narrative involving Spirit and 'fire' is Pentecost (Acts 2:1 – 13), when 'tongues of fire' descend with the Spirit to hover over each disciple's head. The link between the Holy Spirit and this divine fire is very strong. The additional link to God's covenant is significant when we consider that the day of Pentecost was the traditional Jewish anniversary of the giving of the Law at Sinai. Hence, the Spirit descending on each person, causing a divine fire to hang above each disciple's head, makes the person a miniature Mount Sinai. Each person is clothed with power from God on high (Lk.24:49), purified and empowered for Jesus' mission. In between these two points, Jesus speaks of coming to 'cast a fire upon the earth' and wishing that it had already started (Lk.12:49), making a peculiar reference to the baptism of his crucifixion that he had yet to undergo. He could only have been referring to the giving of the Holy Spirit in refining, fiery power. But the Spirit could only come upon all humanity after Jesus had cleansed and purified his own humanity, i.e. after Jesus had undergone the baptism of his crucifixion.

Luke is careful to distinguish this divine fire and its purpose from other possible interpretations of fire, or perhaps other aspects of ordinary fire observable in the natural world. The only other two instances of fire in Luke's Gospel suggest that. First, Jesus rebukes his disciples for wanting to call down a strictly retributive, destructive 'fire' upon the inhospitable Samaritan village (Lk.9:54 – 55). Clearly, the divine 'fire' in Jesus' mind is not like that. Then, Jesus makes reference to the 'fire and brimstone' that rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah, tying it not to hell but to the coming Roman destruction of Jerusalem (Lk.17:29). What happened to people whose lives God took prior to Jesus coming is a subject that warrants a much further discussion. Suffice to say at this time that God did not actually cast them into hell, but held them somewhere until Jesus could appear to them and proclaim himself to them (1 Pet.3:18 – 20; 4:6).

Luke gives us one major insight into the afterlife, and probably hell, that no other Gospel writer does. That is found in Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus:

¹⁹ Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day. ²⁰ And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, ²¹ and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. ²² Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom. ²⁴ And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.' ²⁵ But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony.' ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.' ²⁷ And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father's house – ²⁸ for I have five brothers – in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' ²⁹ But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' ³⁰ But he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!' ³¹ But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.'" (Lk.16:19 – 31)

On closer examination, this passage confirms my position. First, this passage is not actually about hell, which only exists after the final resurrection of all people, for the defeat of Satan and all who align with him (Mt.25:41; Rev.20:11 – 15). Jesus might be using life and afterlife as a rhetorical device to describe the life-changing historical-covenantal shift he was bringing about for Israel. As related to flames and separation between Jews, Jesus was separating Jewish Christians who will believe in him, desacralize both Jerusalem and promised land, and leave Jerusalem before the Romans burn it down in 70 AD (a prominent theme in Luke; see e.g. Lk.13:34 – 35), from Jews who will fight a losing battle against Rome to liberate the holy city and Jewish wealth (wealth is also a prominent theme in Luke, especially in Lk.14 – 16), and perish in the fires. The question of whether Jesus or the Pharisees is the true heir of Abraham ('in Abraham's bosom') began with Jesus and persists until this day. Hence, I think Jesus was naming Lazarus (meaning 'the comforter') to be an analogy of himself, and the rich man to be an analogy of the Pharisees who had just mocked Jesus because they loved money (Lk.16:13) and sought Jerusalem's liberation (Lk.13:34 – 35). I prefer this interpretation because Sheol was a Jewish term (*Hades* in Greek) for the interim period between our death and our bodily resurrection, and while Jesus might be providing more information than the Old Testament did about Sheol, several Old Testament descriptions of Sheol seem incompatible with Jesus' parable, making me think that Jesus was only using life and afterlife as a rhetorical device. The Psalmist says that the dead do not praise God, especially in Sheol, because they are unconscious and unable to speak (Ps.6:5; 30:9; 31:17; 88:11), unlike Abraham and Lazarus in the parable. King Saul disturbed the ghost of Samuel by bringing him up from somewhere (1 Sam.28:13 – 15), which seemed to be a gloomy place of rest, but probably not the presence of God or of Abraham. Paul says that we sleep until Jesus awakens us in the final resurrection (1 Cor.11:30; 15:6, 18 – 20, 51; 1 Th.4:13 – 15; 5:10). On the other hand, there are suggestions that at least some people are consciously in God's presence. The manner in which Elijah was taken up to heaven (2 Ki.2:11 – 12), and Enoch's mysterious disappearance (Gen.5:24), suggests that they are consciously alive in God's presence somewhere. Moses and Elijah returned to speak with the transfigured Jesus (Mt.17:3 – 4; Mk.9:4 – 7; Lk.9:30 – 33), which suggests that God maintains their conscious embodied existence in a heavenly dimension, although Moses was said to have genuinely died (Dt.34), unlike Elijah, and his body procured by an angel (Jude 9). Jesus suggested

that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are alive in some sense by saying that God is the God of the living (Mt.22:32 – 33; Mk.12:26 – 27; Lk.20:37 – 38), although that might refer to God's determination to resurrect them. In addition, all these people might be rather unique as well. Finally, the souls of Christian martyrs cry out to God (Rev.6:9 – 10), but this may also be a figure of speech of the same sort as 'the blood of Abel' crying out to God (Gen.4:10), along with the 'blood of the prophets' (Mt.23:35), and the 'pay of the laborers' unjustly underpaid (Jas.5:4): God remembers every person unjustly treated or killed. In either case, while Jesus' parable is not a description of hell per se, certain relational dynamics which do carry over into an understanding of hell are present here in the parable.

Second, sadly, the rich man does not want to repent. He wants a bit of relief, but does not submit to real transformation. Notice, in particular, that he still wants Lazarus to be his servant, when he requests of Abraham twice to 'send Lazarus' (Lk.16:24, 27)! This reflects the fundamental lack of change in the rich man. Elitism, which Jesus critiques throughout Luke 14:1 – 16:31, goes unchecked in him. Jesus teaches his audience to regard the kingdom banquet not as a congratulatory party for themselves but as a wedding celebration for him where he is the focal point (14:7 – 11); he teaches them to welcome the poor, lame, sick, blind in full table fellowship and friendship (14:12 – 14), he teaches them to sacrifice wealth to throw these types of 'parties' and to bless others (14:15 – 33), he refers to wealth used in celebration of the lost repenting in the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin, and lost sons (15:1 – 32), and he says that Israel will face a transition in relation to 'unrighteous mammon' (16:1 – 13). He says, speaking of marriage as an ethical example, that he is returning people to the original creation order (16:14 – 18). Now he tells this parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19 – 31). These parables about the use of wealth with others cannot be separated. The 'chasm' between him and Abraham is not explained, but one possible implication in the literary context of Lk.14 – 16 is that the chasm is as much caused by a problem internal to the rich man, as much as it is imposed by God upon the fabric of reality. The rich man has been so corrupted by the influence of wealth that he continues to see Lazarus as a servant. We make choices in this life that affect the state of our hearts, the condition of our human nature, and what we most deeply desire for all eternity.

Third, the flame therefore seems to serve as an image or the expression of the refining love of God, who, in the teaching of Jesus and the fellowship of the Spirit, is constantly insisting that the rich man embrace Lazarus as an equal, not as a servant. The rich man, however, refuses to do that. In fact, the rich man does not ask to join Abraham where Lazarus is, but rather to be comforted wherever he is (16:24). Whatever is happening in this interim state of 'Hades,' Jesus seems to use this parable as a warning to those living to listen to 'Moses and the Prophets' as giving insight into the true nature of God's covenant, and to be attentive to rumors of someone coming back from the dead. In sum, Luke demonstrates in his unique material and in his shared material that he shares with Moses, Matthew, and Mark an understanding of divine 'fire.' For Luke, the holy fire of Jesus' Holy Spirit is a refining fire. This concurs with Moses' and Matthew's understanding of divine fire as symbolic of God's covenant, as we might experience both receiving it and rejecting it. Jesus is burning away in himself all that must be burned away, to purify his humanity so that he can share his new humanity, brought to full union with God, so that he might share the Spirit of his new humanity with anyone who asks.

Luke's literary use of darkness versus light stands together with his use of blindness versus sight in seeing Jesus' true identity as Messiah, and reading the Hebrew Scriptures aright (e.g. Lk.2:25 – 32; 3:6; 4:14 – 30; 10:17 – 24; 18:31 – 43; 22:43 – 49; 24:13 – 35, 44 – 48). It is fascinating in its own right, but does not contribute new information – that I can discern, at least – to Jesus' teaching on hell through the motif of 'fire.'³

John, however, does make literary use of light versus darkness along with sight versus blindness, weaving those themes through consistently and abundantly into Jesus' teaching on sin and hell. His only possible reference to hell as 'fire' is the destiny of branches that do not remain in Jesus the vine: 'If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned' (Jn.15:6). If this were all that we had from John's Gospel about the destiny of those who reject Jesus, we could be forgiven for being annihilationists (those who believe that hell is where people eventually become no more and so cannot suffer). But we have already surmised from the burning bush of Moses and from John the Baptist's warnings in Matthew and Luke that this is not quite all that must be said about branches in divine fire. Nor is that all John the Gospel writer gives us.

³ We might also profitably study Luke's understanding of the Sinaitic Law, especially Acts 15:10, but time and space do not permit it here.

John celebrates Jesus as God's 'new humanity' and uses Passover-Exodus motifs to describe Jesus' act of deliverance of his human nature from sin and death on behalf of all. Moses presented Israel with the law after delivering them from Egypt, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (1:17) after he delivered his human nature from the corruption of sin that is present within us all, so he can breathe into us his very Spirit (20:22) to heal and purify our human nature and unite us with himself, and through himself reconcile us to the Father. He shared in our diseased human nature (1:14; 2:25; 3:6 – 15), so that we might share in his healed human nature. Correspondingly, John sees in Jesus the 'tabernacle' of God who took human flesh (1:14; 2:13 – 25; 4:20 – 24; 7:1 – 10:24; 14:8 – 21), and does away with the institutionalized barriers within the tabernacle-temple to intimacy with God. God has no longer contained Himself to 'Plan B.' God never wanted to live in a tent or a stone building, but in the hearts of His people; that was 'Plan A' from the beginning. Jesus' resulting argument with the temple is an interest that John shares deeply with Matthew.

In John, Jesus uses another Passover-Exodus motif: the name of God told to Moses in the burning bush, the 'I am.' Jesus said, 'I am' ten times in John's Gospel (6:35; 8:12; 58; 10:7, 11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1; 18:5, 8 using seven of those occasions to describe himself further, echoing the seven days of creation from Genesis 1), signifying a new Passover-Exodus deliverance because he was echoing the ten words of God upon Egypt. In that sense, Jesus was identifying himself literarily with God speaking from the burning bush of Moses. *In Jesus burns the same fire of God that shone in the burning bush and on Sinai.* As I explore below, Jesus has the 'divine fire' as such within himself, consuming away the sinfulness of 'the flesh,' but in John's language, he is the source of true *light*: 'In him is *light*' (1:4). Hence, John deploys light and darkness motifs, along with sight and blindness motifs, to help us see Jesus for who he really is despite his unremarkably human appearance (e.g. 1:4 – 8, 32 – 34; etc.). Of course, to see truly and receive his light is to know Jesus as Son of the Father, and to participate in him by the Spirit. But we must know Jesus as God's normative humanity, and Jesus as having the normative human experience, undoing the corruption and perversion of sinful 'flesh' (1:14; 3:6). That means something startling: All truly human experience, emotion, knowing, relations, morality, and ontology are fundamentally defined by Jesus Christ alone. Arguments about 'human nature' that take our fallen human nature as a foundation (e.g. 'Is faithful monogamy really natural?' Or, 'Wasn't I just born this way?') are built on the wrong foundation. Arguments about 'human experience' that take anyone else's experience of humanness as a starting point (e.g. 'No one can argue with my experience') are using the wrong starting point. Only Jesus has a normative human nature and a normative human experience. To be blind and remain in darkness is to deny the burning, shining presence of true divinity in Jesus and thereby to cut one's self off from not only the Father, but from one's true human self, and from others as well.

Thus, John presents sin as self-negation or a lack of self-knowledge (4:1 – 30; 8:31 – 37), especially in the cross and resurrection narrative of John 18 – 20. There, in a garden like the original garden where Adam did not maintain his God-given identity, Jesus declares his identity to the soldiers coming to arrest him; he utters the great 'I am,' and the soldiers fall to the ground. However, everyone else, while trying to deny Jesus, wind up denying themselves. Simon Peter, hiding his relationship to Jesus, says, 'I am not' (18:17, 25, and implicitly in v.27). Pontius Pilate, whose job it was to adjudicate Roman law based on truth, asks dismissively, 'What is truth?' (18:38) The Jewish leaders, who said year after year on their Passover holiday of independence that they had no king but God, utter the blasphemy, 'We have no king but Caesar' (19:16). Sin is a negation of one's truest self, the self that God intended. Ultimately, denying Jesus means that one must deny that every human person including you must be personally healed by, reconciled to, and united spiritually with this one true God. Hence, for John, to not believe in the Son is to already stand condemned in darkness (3:17 – 21; 5:21 – 29) trying to carve out some other human identity than the one true human identity provided by God in Jesus.

John teaches us that before we ask what hell is, we must ask what sin is, and what it does to us. That is a methodological fact. If sin is a corruption in human nature, leading ultimately to self-negation when we refuse to acknowledge that Jesus has purified and healed and completed human nature by joining it to his divine nature, then hell can rightly be said to be a state of being in which the love of God has become torment. Hell is the wrath of God towards the corruption of sin, yes, because God in Christ continues to call out to the unrepentant person, demanding unconditional surrender. But hell is not a prison of retributive justice where pain is simply inflicted infinitely because we have offended an infinite being. Rather, hell is more accurately the love of God for the person, eternally, as God eternally wants God's very best for the person, which fundamentally is loving union within God's very Triune being (Jn.14:8 – 21). In fact, the self-presentation of God as a consuming fire in the book of Revelation (Rev.14:10; 20:9 – 15) and in Hebrews with its explicit reference to God's fire and darkness at Mount Sinai, along with the commands Israel 'could not bear' (Heb.12:18 – 29), demonstrates that the pain suffered by people in hell

comes from God calling for their surrender, purification, and covenantal union with Him. Indeed, ‘our God is a consuming fire’ (Heb.12:29, quoting Dt.4:24; 5:25; 9:3). To them, God has become like an unwanted lover who is absolutely demanding and repulsive, a stalker who refuses to give up and go away, a counselor who insists on treating an addiction that they believe is as vital as breathing, a surgeon who wants to remove the heart and spinal cord, a doctor who insists on treating a disease in their bodies they do not believe exists, a lord who loudly offers forgiveness to them for treason against his authority which they refuse to accept, and so on. The fire of hell is the refining love of God whom they have conditioned themselves to refuse but cannot, in the end, escape. If there are modern biblical scholars who posit that the Gospel writers had their own ‘theologies’ different from one another, then I suggest that John would stand with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Hebrews that the fire and darkness motifs from Sinai drawn forward by Jesus are perfectly appropriate to use to describe hell as the refining love of God.

Matthew’s Unique Engagement with the Pentateuch

I intend to explain why Matthew preserves so many of Jesus’ statements about ‘fire’ and ‘darkness.’ Matthew does so because he is portraying Jesus as being the true Israel – doing for Israel what Israel could not do for itself. Hence, Matthew is most interested in using motifs of mountains, the Temple, and the Pentateuch because those are literary anchor points upon which Matthew builds his case for Jesus. Matthew also envisions hell as the ongoing presence and love of God.

We see this in Matthew’s literary organization. Matthew divides his Gospel up into five main blocks of Jesus’ teaching, with narrative material that fills each section out.

- When Jesus had finished these words... (Mt.7:28)
- When Jesus had finished giving instructions... (Mt.11:1)
- When Jesus had finished these parables... (Mt.13:53)
- When Jesus had finished these words... (Mt.19:1)
- When Jesus had finished all these words... (Mt.26:1)

The literary allusion to Israel’s Pentateuch is reasonably straightforward. It is not that each section of Jesus’ teaching matches one of the five books of Moses; the literary parallel does not quite work that way. But there is a sense that Jesus’ person and teaching constitutes a new covenantal foundation for a renewed Israel. For Matthew to organize it this way simply draws attention to Jesus’ claim.

Furthermore, there are other narrative similarities between Matthew’s Gospel and the Pentateuch surrounding the story of Israel. Like Israel in the Pentateuch, Jesus is the true descendant of Abraham (1:1), is hunted as a baby boy by a foreign ruler (2:1 – 18), goes to Egypt with his family (2:13 – 14), emerges out of Egypt (2:15 – 21), gets baptized in the Jordan River like Israel was ‘baptized’ in the Red Sea (3:13 – 17; cf. 1 Cor.10:1 – 13) and goes through the wilderness for forty days (echoing Israel’s forty years) while quoting three times from Deuteronomy (4:1 – 11). Jesus then gathers a new people (4:12 – 25), both gives and receives God’s law while on a mountain (5:1 – 7:29), speaks ten commanding words of deliverance (8:1 – 9:35), pronounces blessings (5:1 – 12) and curses (23:1 – 39), is blessed and shows his humanity as cursed by hanging on a tree (Dt.21:22 – 23), and finally, in his resurrection, goes with his people into a new inheritance from a mountaintop. All this reminds any sensitive reader of Israel’s story in the Pentateuch. In fact, Matthew brings his Gospel to a close with a scene very much like the ending of the Pentateuch. Jesus is on a high mountaintop in Mt.28:18 – 20, like Moses was on a high mountaintop in Dt.34. Jesus is overlooking a vast inheritance, just like Moses was overlooking the inheritance back then. But this time, Jesus is not dying alone on the mountain; his death and resurrection had already occurred; and now Jesus is going out to conquer, not land but people’s hearts, as his inheritance. So he says to his disciples, ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.’ A fitting conclusion for a well designed teaching manual: a commission to use it and reproduce it. Jesus’ mission thematically builds upon Israel’s spreading throughout the garden land, which itself builds upon Adam and Eve’s spreading the garden throughout the land. No surprise: He is God’s new humanity, or rather renewed humanity, for all humanity, bringing human beings back into the original creation order.

Jesus was also providing the solution to the diagnosis that the Pentateuch gave about the human problem. What was the big difference between human beings before the fall and after it? A pollution and corruption of human nature now exists in human beings which God never intended (Gen.6:5 – 6; 8:21) which must now be cut (circumcised) away by God (Dt.30:6). One major implication of this diagnosis is to assert that human evil is not merely the result

of circumstances external to us, like bad laws, bad schools, and broken families; as important as those issues are, our problem is also deeply internal. Jesus claims to be reversing this problem which had set into humanity after the fall, including Israel, in order to renew the creation order. Hence, Matthew introduces Jesus to his readers right away as the one who will 'save his people from their sins' (1:21), not merely the consequences of their sins, but the sinfulness itself.

The motif of heart level transformation occurs in the first major teaching section of Matthew, called the Sermon on the Mount (5:1 – 7:29). The theme of Jesus transforming the human heart is the main focus of this section.

- Blessed are the pure **in heart**... (Mt.5:8)
- But I say to you that everyone who is angry [in his **heart**] with his brother... (Mt.5:21 – 26)
- He who looks on a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her **in his heart**. (Mt.5:28)
- But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer...love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you [**heart** attitude of self-defense vs. self-giving]. (Mt.5:38 – 48)
- Your Father who is in heaven sees your **secret** motives. (Mt.6:4, 6, 18)
- Where your treasure is, there will your **heart** be also. (Mt.6:21)
- Beware of the false prophets, who...**inwardly** are ravenous wolves. (Mt.7:15)

This means the Sermon on the Mount can only be the 'new covenant' prophesied by Jeremiah, written on the human heart (Jer.31:31 – 34 reversing Jer.17:1 – 10). Jesus seems to have intentionally given it on a mountain (Mt.5:1), as God gave the Ten Commandments before on Mount Sinai. In fact, in the very next section, Matthew 8 – 9, Jesus does ten miracles by his word: a new ten commandments, reflecting back on the new, transformative 'law of the heart' that this is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, and the surpassing of the Sinaitic Law.

Jesus sees the creation order being restored through his teaching and person. This would have been clear to a Jewish audience because Jesus says about false prophets that their 'fruit' is, ironically, only thorns and thistles (Mt.7:16), which are not really fruit at all in the literal sense, but are 'fruit' in the sense that they are the 'results' of still being 'inwardly ravenous wolves' who have not yielded to Jesus' heart-transforming word. Thorns and thistles were emblematic of the fall into sin in Genesis 3. Jesus' use of those terms signifies that those who do not wrestle on the level of the heart to receive Jesus' word are still in the realm of sin and resisting Jesus' work of renewing the creation order. By contrast, a true follower of Jesus bears fruit that is nourishing (Mt.7:17ff.), emblematic of the life-bearing life forms God created in Genesis 1 and 2. Moreover, Jesus echoes the creation order by his dense usage of the terms 'good' and 'evil' in 7:11 and 7:17 – 19. Everything about how Jesus envisions the human heart being responsive and obedient to God is how the human heart was supposed to be in the creation. Jesus' vision of human life lived in trust of the Father was informed by the creation order: relationally (5:21 – 48), spiritually (6:1 – 18), and materially (6:25 – 34). Jesus is helping us understand what he means by 'pure in heart' (5:8) and how he will be restoring our hearts to that state. By delivering this 'new law for the heart,' Jesus is renewing the creation order in the heart of his followers. This is why Jesus says of marriage, 'He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'' (Mt.19:5 – 6). Jesus called for more vigilance against divorce than even Moses did (Dt.24:1 – 4) because Moses could not undo 'hardness of heart' (Mt.19:8), but Jesus can and does. Jesus speaks of the need for heart level transformation not only regarding marriage but also regarding everything: 'Out of the heart come evil thoughts, adulteries...' (Mt.15:18 – 20) This is what it means for God to overcome 'hardness of heart' in and through Jesus.

There is, of course, a sense that Jesus is being portrayed by Matthew as a 'new Moses' figure. Could it not be said that Moses was pursued by a mad ruler, grew up in Egypt for a time, spoke words of God, prayed for forty days, ascended a mountain, and so on? True, but we must also inquire into the relationship between Moses and Israel, which is why I agree with N.T. Wright that Jesus is not just a 'new Moses' but a 'new Israel.'⁴ Moses was described by the Pentateuch itself as representing Israel as a community to God. God made a covenant with Moses, and because Moses bore Israel with him, God extended His covenant towards Israel. But Israel's failure at Sinai and reliance upon Moses also meant that the institutionalized distances from God reproduced within the tabernacle and

⁴ N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990); see also *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1997)

temple, reflecting Moses' lonely mediation at the top of Mount Sinai, had to govern Israel's life and worship for a long time. So if Jesus is the eternal mediator of a new covenant (Mt.26:28), a covenant in which God and humanity are united in the person of Jesus and then offered to the rest of us in personal relationship, then those institutionalized distances from God must now come to an end.

This may be why Matthew more than any other Gospel writer puts before us anything Jesus did on mountains. Mountains were naturally significant to Israel as the place where God met with His people. Eden was a mountain, as strongly suggested by the divergence of one source of water into four rivers (Gen.2:10 – 14) and later affirmed by Ezekiel as a 'holy mountain' (Ezk.28:13 – 14). God attempted to draw Israel into the initial experience of Adam and Eve by calling them up onto Mount Sinai (Ex.19), but they refused. Consequently, the pattern of varying nearness to God experienced at Sinai was reproduced in the tabernacle, which served as the pattern for the Jerusalem temple on Mount Zion. Hence, Sinai and Zion were modeled after Eden but were also partial betrayals of the Edenic ideal where everyone could approach God on a mountain. This biblical background helps us understand why Jesus would make use of mountains so often. On the mountain where he gave the Sermon on the Mount (5:1 – 7:29), Jesus reenacted Mount Sinai except he was both God giving the new law of the heart, and also the true Israel ascending the mountain, showing that he had been already receiving it into his heart. Note that Luke chose to include a different episode of Jesus' preaching, the Sermon on the Plain (Lk.6:12 – 49).

In the fourth section of Matthew's narrative (14:1 – 19:2), Jesus used mountains to show that 'something greater than the temple is here' (12:6). This was a direct challenge to Mount Zion. Jesus twice evoked the twelve loaves of the bread of the presence in the temple's holy place (Lev.24:5). In the first episode, with a Jewish crowd, he replayed a scene he already referenced from the life of David (12:1 – 4) – who was, like Jesus, anointed king yet on the run, hunted by the authorities – when David stopped at the tabernacle and entered it, taking five of the twelve loaves of bread (1 Sam.22:1 – 5). Similarly, Jesus took five loaves of bread. But when Jesus broke them, he fed five thousand men, not including women and children, and made twelve basketfuls of bread leftover, showing that he is the heir of David who is greater than David himself (14:13 – 21; 22:41 – 46). On the second occasion of bread multiplication (15:29 – 39), which, significantly, occurred on 'the mountain' (15:29, the same mountain of 28:16 – 20?) with a Gentile crowd (he had just ministered 'bread crumbs' to the Canaanite woman in 15:21 – 28 and was back by the Sea of Galilee, which was already called Galilee of the Gentiles in 4:15), Jesus took seven loaves, the remainder if we are thinking about the temple and David. Jesus broke them, fed four thousand men, and filled seven 'large baskets' full of bread, suggesting through the symbolism that his Davidic kingship will extend to feed the whole world of the Gentiles. Jesus shows at these two locations that he is the new presence of God, embodied in a human person and not trapped in a stationary building (11:25 – 12:21). In Jewish messianic expectation, people hoped for a new and greater David who would, in their estimation, liberate Jerusalem from the Romans so he could cleanse the temple and reinstate proper worship. Jesus, however, was showing that he was not only the new and greater David, but that he was the new and greater temple in whom the Father was made known by the Son (11:25 – 27). This is an implicit challenge to the entire temple system, which Jesus had already critiqued (15:1 – 20). The Sinai covenant, with its focal point at the temple on Mount Zion, had always been a 'Plan B.' It had been historically important, but would no longer be the place where God is present to His people.

The next mountain in Matthew's narrative is the mountaintop experience of Jesus' transfiguration. The disciples, and perhaps Simon Peter especially, were apparently in need of clarity and encouragement after Jesus predicted his crucifixion (16:21 – 28). So Jesus led his inner circle of three disciples up to a 'high mountain' (perhaps the 'high mountain' of his temptation in 4:8?) where he was transfigured with the glory of God (17:1 – 8), affirming Jesus' purifying of his humanity and prefiguring his resurrection. The scene reenacts the voice of God affirming the identity of the Son that we have already heard at Jesus' baptism (3:13 – 17). Retrospectively, Jesus' baptism, a symbol of his dying and rising, is therefore confirmed as pointing forward to Jesus' actual death and resurrection, the process by which Jesus will defeat the corruption of sin at last. The two incidents are further linked by the subsequent confrontations with demonic power (4:1 – 11; 17:14 – 21) and another prediction of Jesus' death and resurrection (17:22 – 23). The item relevant here is Jesus' teaching the disciples, 'If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you' (17:20). Although this saying is popularly interpreted to mean, 'You can move any obstacles by faith,' that is plainly wrong. Jesus clearly refers to 'this mountain,' which can only refer to the mountain on which he was transfigured. Jesus seems to indicate that the 'mountaintop' experience of God glorifying Jesus that the disciples had just had can actually be reproduced anywhere they go. God's original intention at Mount Sinai of meeting with His people face to face – that experience can be moved 'from here to there' because the risen Jesus

will be with his disciples by his Spirit. Mount Zion was no longer important, because Jesus was bringing about a better Mount Sinai, and a renewal of Mount Eden.

The next mountain experience in Matthew's narrative affirms this. When Jesus approached Mount Zion and entered Jerusalem for the final time, he rebuked the temple leadership for their corruption (21:10 – 16). Jesus then withers the fig tree as a symbol of his discovery that there is no spiritual life in the temple (21:17 – 20). He then tells his disciples, 'Even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it will happen' (21:21). The mountain Jesus was referring to in that case was clearly Mount Zion, on which the temple stood. From the imagery of creation (Gen.1:1 – 2:3), 'the sea' was the opposite place as 'the land' on which God's true humanity dwelled. The prophet Daniel used 'the sea' as a metaphor to mean 'the Gentiles' in contrast to Israel (Dan.7:2 – 3), and Jesus had the book of Daniel on his mind as he approached his death and resurrection (Mt.24:15; 26:64; plus the countless times Jesus took to himself Daniel's 'Son of Man' title for the Messiah). Daniel wasn't the only one to connect 'the sea' with 'the Gentiles'; Isaiah had called the Sea of Galilee 'Galilee of the Gentiles' (Isa.9:1 – 2; quoted in Mt.4:15 – 16). Jesus himself taught from Isaiah during his ministry, and in fulfillment of Isaiah, his ministry in Galilee involved Gentiles (Mt.8:8 – 13; 8:28 – 34; 12:17 – 21; 12:38 – 42; 15:21 – 28; 15:29 – 39) because Gentiles lived there along with Jews. Finally, Jesus stood on a mountain overlooking the Sea of Galilee when he gave his disciples his 'great commission' (Mt.28:16 – 20). His location underscored his point about moving the 'mountaintop presence of God' from Zion to among the 'sea' of the Gentiles (Mt.21:21). The disciples could cast the presence of God ('this mountain') to be among the Gentiles because Jesus was rendering Mount Zion obsolete.

Jesus, by being the true temple of God, is the new Israel, the true Israel who declares his greatest epiphanies on mountains. As the Messiah who summed up Israel in himself in an even more profound way than Moses did, Jesus carried Israel's story to a new and fresh conclusion, the conclusion Israel could not reach, and Moses himself could not reach. Jesus becomes the new humanity that God was trying to make of Israel, who failed because of the internal corruption of sin. Israel had failed, and went into exile in Babylon, which is highlighted so prominently and poignantly at the start of Matthew's Gospel (1:1 – 17). But Jesus has come to 'save his people from their sins' (1:21), the relational alienation and resistance to God that landed them in exile. And since Israel was God's way of undoing Adam's sin, Jesus brought God's work to a resounding climax. By being the dwelling place of God, Jesus is the one who restores humanity to the plan God intended from the beginning.

I have shown many of the ties between Matthew and the Pentateuch in order to make my case that Jesus' fire and darkness sayings find their natural home in relation to the Sinai encounter, specifically Deuteronomy 4 – 5. The use of fire as a physical expression and symbol of God's refining and purifying love throughout the biblical story has its origins at the burning bush and Mount Sinai. God's earlier appearance in the burning bush to Moses (Ex.3:2) anticipated God's intended purpose in forming a covenant with Israel and dwelling in the midst of His people, burning away their impurities by His word. For this God is 'a consuming fire, a jealous God' (Dt.4:24; 5:25; 9:3; Ps.29:7; 50:3). Having examined the literary and theological connection between Matthew and the Pentateuch, I go on to explore Jesus' fire and darkness sayings in that context.

Jesus' Fire and Darkness Sayings in Matthew

The commentators I have consulted see Jesus' 'fire' sayings and the 'darkness' sayings as being derived from views of *gehenna* that were developed through Jewish Old Testament history. 'The fiery hell' (Mt.5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; cf. Mk.9:43 – 48; Lk.12:5; Jas.3:6) is literally *gehenna* and is said to refer to the Valley of Hinnom, which had a terrible reputation. The wicked king Ahaz, in the Valley of Hinnom, had introduced the fire worship of Moloch, to whom children were sacrificed through a *topheth* idol. Ahaz 'burned incense in the valley of Ben-hinnom and burned his sons in fire, according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD had driven out before the sons of Israel' (2 Chr.28:3). Jeremiah attests that child sacrifice occurred in the Valley (Jer.7:31 – 32). As a result of Ahaz's action, Isaiah sees the *topheth* and the Valley of Hinnom being ironically ready for Ahaz: 'For Topheth has long been ready; indeed, it has been prepared for the king. He has made it deep and large, a pyre of fire with plenty of wood; the breath of the LORD, like a torrent of brimstone, sets it afire' (Isa.30:33). Josiah brought that practice to an end by destroying the *topheth* idol. 'He also defiled Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, that no man might make his son or his daughter pass through the fire for Molech' (2 Ki.23:10). Hence, Jewish tradition associates the Valley of Hinnom with a place of future judgment by God. Isaiah foresees God coming to Jerusalem to bless and bring peace to His people within the city, but to judge those outside Jerusalem with fire (Isa.66:15 – 16). The Valley of Hinnom might be in view when Isaiah speaks of a place where those outside of

Jerusalem will be in a fire that cannot be quenched, in a manner of death like a mass grave where the grave worm does not die (Isa.66:24) because they will remain there eternally (see also Enoch 26:1 – 4; 54:4 – 12; 66:4 – 12).

Many biblical commentators since Rabbi David Kimchi, commenting on Psalm 27 in 1200 AD, have taken the Valley of Hinnom to be a burning trash dump outside of Jerusalem, maintained since the reform of Josiah for centuries. More recent archaeological study, however, has shown that the Valley was neither a trash dump nor a fiery incinerator of dead bodies. ‘Kimhi’s otherwise plausible suggestion, however, finds no support in literary sources or archaeological data from the intertestamental or rabbinic periods. There is no evidence that the valley was, in fact, a garbage dump, and thus his explanation is insufficient.’⁵ The best scholarship indicates that *gehenna* was traditionally associated with a future judgment of God in the Valley of Hinnom because of its connection with past idolatry, and that Jesus’ use of the term follows standard Jewish language. ‘Darkness’ was said by Jewish rabbis to be the covering of Gehenna.⁶ ‘The inheritance of sinners is darkness’ (Psalms of Solomon 15:11).

More explanation needs to be given to explain *in what sense* and *with what theological understanding* Jesus used the term *gehenna*. It is my belief that biblical exegetes cannot trace Jesus’ understanding of *gehenna* or the Valley of Hinnom back to the historical dispute between Ahaz and Isaiah, and stop there, because Isaiah himself portrays it in the language of biblical antecedents older than him. The oldest antecedent is Eden, outside of which burned the flaming sword of the cherubim. The next antecedent is Sinai, upon which burned God’s purifying fire. Zion, as the next and final mountain of God’s presence, also fits into this pattern. God’s presence purifies those inside Him, but leaves a fiery judgment for those outside Him. It can only be so, since the fire symbolizes and expresses the purification God still insists upon, even towards those who continue to resist Him. What happened at Sinai will be repeated at Zion:

³ It will come about that he who is left in Zion
and remains in Jerusalem
will be called holy—
everyone who is recorded for life in Jerusalem.

⁴ When the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion
and purged the bloodshed of Jerusalem from her midst,
by the spirit of judgment
and the spirit of **burning**,

⁵ then the LORD will create over the whole area of Mount Zion
and over her assemblies a cloud by day, even smoke,
and the brightness of a **flaming fire** by night;
for over all the glory will be a canopy. (Isa.4:3 – 5; cf. 5:24 – 25)

Isaiah uses fire as an expression of God’s judgment on others (e.g. 5:24 – 25). But he also experiences the fiery judgment of God on himself. In his encounter with God in the temple vision, the angel touches his unclean lips with a burning coal (6:6). This attests to the use of a single motif – fire – with dual effects depending on one’s posture: purification for those who yield their uncleanness and sinfulness to God, the pain of eternal purge for those who do not.

Supporting my thesis is the immediate context of Isaiah’s mention of the *topheth* erected by Ahaz, but waiting to consume Ahaz himself (Isa.30:19 – 33). Isaiah describes the exile of Israel in terms that echo the bread and water of the first wilderness wandering, but in bitter, ironic fashion, says, ‘the Lord has given you bread of privation and water of oppression’ (30:20a). Although He did this during the exile, God will renew His covenant presence in terms that echo the intimacy that Moses enjoyed with God face to face: ‘He, your Teacher will no longer hide Himself, but your eyes will behold your Teacher’ (30:20b). God will strengthen Israel so that they will not succumb to the idolatry that they have demonstrated since the golden calf incident: ‘Your ears will hear a word behind you, ‘This is the way, walk in it,’ whenever you turn to the right or to the left. And you will defile your graven images overlaid with silver, and your molten images plated with gold. You will scatter them as an impure thing, and say to them, ‘Be gone!’’ (30:21 – 22) Then, God will renew for Israel the bounty of the garden land, the original promise

⁵ Lloyd R. Bailey, ‘Gehenna: The Topography of Hell,’ *Biblical Archaeologist* 49/3 [1986], 188-89; see also Todd Bolen, *The Fires of Gehenna: Views of Scholars*, Apr 29, 2011; <http://blog.bibleplaces.com/2011/04/fires-of-gehenna-views-of-scholars.html>, last accessed Dec 30, 2013

⁶ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (The Westminster Press: Philadelphia, PA, 1975), p.304

God made to them from Sinai: ‘Then He will give you rain for the seed which you will sow in the ground, and bread from the yield of the ground, and it will be rich and plenteous; on that day your livestock will graze in a roomy pasture. Also the oxen and the donkeys which work the ground will eat salted fodder, which has been winnowed with shovel and fork. On every lofty mountain and on every high hill there will be streams running with water on the day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall.’ (30:23 – 25) Using poetic imagery drawn from the Genesis creation to describe the return from exile as a new creation, the blessings following Israel’s exile will be even greater than the original blessings given to Adam and Eve: ‘The light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be seven times brighter, like the light of seven days, on the day the LORD binds up the fracture of His people and heals the bruise He has inflicted’ (30:26). But for those who resist God, ‘Burning is His anger and dense is His smoke; His lips are filled with indignation and His tongue is like a consuming fire’ (30:27), which is consistent with the word of God being that which pierces and consumes. While God’s people sing in gladness (30:29), ‘the LORD will cause His voice of authority to be heard...in the flame of a consuming fire...For Topheth has long been ready; indeed, it has been prepared for the king. He has made it deep and large, a pyre of fire with plenty of wood; the breath of the LORD, like a torrent of brimstone, sets it afire.’ (30:30 – 33) Put simply, those already purified by God’s judgment will enjoy Him in Jerusalem, Mount Zion, but those who do not surrender will still feel the fire of His purifying judgment outside of Zion, in the Valley of Hinnom.

Also supporting my thesis is the final vision of Isaiah, which ends with the vision of a fiery graveyard of sorts, where living corpses feed the worm that does not die, outside of a renewed Jerusalem in which God’s people enjoy life and peace. Those inside Jerusalem, i.e. within God’s presence, can be joyful (66:10), be nourished and comforted like a young, nursing child (66:11 – 13), and be strengthened (66:14a – c). But towards those who choose to remain outside of God’s presence, ‘He will be indignant towards His enemies’ (66:14d). God will ‘come in fire...His rebuke with flames of fire, for the Lord will execute judgment by fire and by His sword on all flesh’ (66:15 – 16). The motifs of fire are telling, reminding us of the covenant offered and refused at Sinai. Then comes a devastating warning against impurity (66:17) and an invitation to all nations to come to ‘My holy mountain Jerusalem’ (66:18 – 20), from which God ‘will also take some of them for priests and for Levites’ (66:21), which is a remarkable statement for Gentiles. This will constitute a ‘new heavens and new earth’ centered in this renewal of God’s presence at Jerusalem (66:22 – 23). Outside of that will lie the eternally dying bodies of those ‘who have transgressed against Me, for their worm will not die and their fire will not be quenched; and they will be an abhorrence to all mankind’ (66:24). Since Jesus quotes this vision in Mark’s Gospel (Mk.9:43 – 48), it indicates that Jesus was aware of the whole of Isaiah’s prophecy. He oriented it around himself – since he embodies God’s presence within himself and is himself the covenant, he becomes, in some sense, Jerusalem. Those outside of him, i.e. not joined to him by his Spirit, are those who will be eternally burning in a death more terrible than the physical death we understand.

What makes Jesus’ connection to Isaiah – and through Isaiah, to Sinai – especially compelling is to notice the many times Jesus referred directly or indirectly to Isaiah:

Matthew’s Gospel: Quotes and Allusions to	Isaiah’s Prophecy
The angel Gabriel explains Jesus’ conception to Joseph. This is Isaiah’s virgin birth prophecy, 1:21 – 23	Isaiah prophesied of the Messiah being born of a virgin (almah), 7:14
John the Baptist begins his ministry and is ‘the voice of one crying in the wilderness’, 3:1 – 3	This is the beginning of Isaiah’s vision of the ‘return from exile’ and the ‘redemption of Jerusalem’ starting from Isa.40.
Jesus passes through water and then the ‘fire’ of temptation, 3:13 – 4:11	God promised to be with ‘Israel’ through water and fire, 43:2
Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee, guided by Isaiah’s prophecy of light shining in darkness in Galilee, 4:12 – 25	Isaiah’s saw the Messiah ministering in Galilee first, bringing light into darkness, 8:22 – 9:1
Jesus pronounces beatitudes, 5:1 – 12	Isaiah prophesied a Messianic reversal using the same language in 57:12 – 21 and distinguishes between the faithful remnant and the remainder of Israel in the same terms, Isa.65:13 – 15
Jesus heals the Roman centurion’s slave and praises the centurion for his faith. 8:5 – 13	Isaiah foresaw a time when foreigners would be fully welcomed into the covenant people’s worship, contrary to the Mosaic Law. Contrast Isa.56:1 – 8 with Dt.23:1 – 6
Jesus heals, using physical healing as representations of his spiritual healing, 8:16 – 17	Quoting from Isaiah’s Servant Song from Isa.53:4
Jesus brings his disciples across a stormy sea and casts demons into it, 8:23 – 34	Suggesting the New Exodus of Isaiah 40 – 43
Jesus casts out demons from Gentiles, 8:28 – 34	Suggesting the conquering Messiah passage of Isaiah 61:1 – 2
Jesus forgives sins, 9:1 – 13 etc.	Echoes Isaiah’s Servant Song from Isa.53
Jesus calls a remnant in Israel, making an analogy to new wine,	Remnant preserved, analogy to new wine. Isa.65:8 – 9

9:9 – 13	
Jesus looks ahead to when he, as the bridegroom, 'is taken away from them,' 9:14 – 17	This is probably a quotation from Isa.53:8, 'By oppression and judgment he was taken away'
Jesus clarifies his identity to John the Baptist. 11:4 – 5	By quoting Isaiah 35:5; 42:1 – 9; 61:1 – 2
Jesus will bring justice to the Gentiles, 12:18 - 21	By quoting Isaiah's Servant Song, 42:1 – 9
Jesus teaches the parable of the soils, 13:1 – 20	Using 'restoration from exile' motifs from Isa.55 (seed, rain, thorns, word)
Jesus says that Isaiah gives the precedent for parables, 13:14 – 15	'Seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand' Isa.6:10
Jesus shepherds and feeds people in the wilderness, 14:14 – 22	Feeding in a wilderness was described in Isa.55:1 – 3 and 65:10 – 12
Jesus is frustrated with the Pharisees for their hypocrisy and invalidation of God's commands, 15:7 – 9	Quotes Isa.29:13; frustration over Israel's holier than thou attitude prophesied in Isa.65:2 – 5
Jesus challenges Israel's historic relation to material wealth, 19:13 – 31	Isaiah foresaw a time of expanding Israel's traditional land boundaries in Isa.54:2
Jesus challenges Israel's leadership using a parable of the vineyard and the equal wage, 20:1 – 16	Isaiah challenged Israel's leadership using a parable of the vineyard in Isa.5:1 – 8
Jesus turns tables in the Temple and says its role as a house of prayer is being betrayed, 21:12 – 13	Isaiah and Jeremiah called the Temple a 'house of prayer' (Isa.56:7, Jer.7:11) and spoke of its betrayal
Jesus challenges Israel's leadership using a parable of the vineyard and the wicked tenants, 21:33 – 46	Isaiah challenged Israel's leadership using a parable of the vineyard in Isa.5:1 – 8
Jesus spoke of laying a new cornerstone for a new Temple, 21:42	Isaiah spoke of the Messiah being a new cornerstone for a new Temple, 8:14 – 15 and again in 28:16 – 17. Psalm 118:22 – 23 shares this idea with Isaiah, and Jesus quotes from this Psalm.
Jesus denounces the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy, 23:1 – 38	Frustration over Israel's holier than thou attitude prophesied in Isa.65:2 – 5
Jesus prophecies Jerusalem's destruction. 24:1 – 51	Isaiah prophesied Jerusalem's destruction in Isa.1; 29:1 – 4; 65:1ff.
Jesus speaks of the sun and moon being darkened, the stars and heavens being shaken, 24:29	Quoting from Isaiah 13:10 and 34:4
Jesus' death and resurrection inaugurates a covenant where 'forgiveness of sins' is offered to 'many', 26:28	Isaiah prophesied about the Servant's teaching going out to the Gentile coastlands in Isa.42:6 and 49:6
Jesus says that his death is to fulfill all the Scriptures of the prophets, 26:56	In Matthew's Gospel, Isaiah has certainly been chief among the prophets and the most often quoted
Jesus' crucifixion is paralleled to the Suffering Servant, restoring humans to paradise, 26:57ff.	Isaiah's Suffering Servant restores Israel (and the nations) from exile in Isa.53 (see below)
Jesus is raised from the dead into resurrection life, 28:1 – 10	Isaiah had foreseen the Servant passing through death and the grave but enjoying prolonged days, 53:7 – 12
Jesus' great commission to his disciples on a mountain in Galilee, 28:16 – 20	Draws from Isaiah's vision of kingly rule emanating out from a renewed 'Mt. Zion' of God's presence, 2:1 – 4, and also a vision of enlarging the tent of dwelling because reconciliation to others is offered, 54:2

In addition, I believe it is highly likely that Jesus read Isaiah in such a way that he believed he was to fulfill the role of 'Jerusalem' and the 'mountain' of God's presence when the official Jewish leadership resisted him. If that is the case, then it is fair to say that the vision of 'Jerusalem' hoped for by Isaiah must follow a Christ-centered interpretation. Those who are 'in Jerusalem' who have been purified are simply those 'in Christ.' Those 'outside Jerusalem' still in the divine fire are those 'outside Christ.' No wonder Jesus would use Isaiah's language of fire, worm, and darkness. We are on very solid footing to see a thematic and theological connection between texts: the use of fire in Deuteronomy 4 – 5, Isaiah's use of fire, Jesus' use of fire in Matthew. We can also see the complementary, positive motif of 'light' in Jesus' sayings which sometimes implicitly involves 'fire' or divine fire (Mt.4:16; 5:14 – 16; 6:22 – 23; 17:2; 28:3), especially when he refers to his disciples as 'the light of the world,' 'a city on a hill' (a new temple presence of God; a new Jerusalem), and a 'lamp' lit by a flame (5:14 – 16; 25:1 – 12). Those connected to Jesus spiritually share his identity and vocation.

I will make some brief comments on particular passages in Matthew related to hell and God's judgment.

²¹ You have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not commit murder' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.'²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the **fiery hell**. (Mt.5:21 – 22)

As Jesus describes the fresh, new humanity he calls his followers to be, the first major heart issue he talks about is anger. As we bear witness to the world around us, how we deal with the emotion of anger is very, very important. It will have direct implications on our relationships. As Jesus deals with the heart issue of harbored anger, he

describes what it does and how it grows. His first warning is to ‘everyone who is angry.’ The second is to whoever calls his brother ‘you good-for-nothing,’ which is a character insult. The third is to whoever calls a brother ‘you fool,’ which is a term for casting someone outside the covenant community. The fool says there is no God, says the Psalmist. The growth of anger comes with harboring it. How often have we rehearsed lines and nurtured anger in our hearts, wishing that we could have an opportune moment to sink venomous words into the person who has hurt us? Then, how easy is it to not focus on an issue, but to assassinate their character to their face, or let out a snide remark to build a coalition? And how easy is it to forget that they are part of God’s covenant family? It is all too easy to let anger fester.

So Jesus describes an escalating series of consequences. Although they are metaphors, and although they are set in the context of the first century Jewish world, they are nevertheless striking. The first consequence is to be ‘guilty before the court,’ the local court that you would appear in if you had murdered someone. From the times of Moses to Jesus, the default Jewish process for dealing with murder was to gather witness (Num.35:30, Dt.17:6 and 19:15) and town elders and form a type of local ‘court.’ Jesus is saying that harboring anger against someone is the same as murdering her or him. The second consequence is to be ‘guilty before the supreme court’ of the nation, the Sanhedrin, that decided the most serious national issues. The public nature of your insult (calling your brother a good for nothing) calls for you to be publicly denounced by the highest and broadest court (before the Sanhedrin). The third consequence is to be ‘guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.’ That refers to the ultimate hell, of course. The punishment there matches the crime, too. If you, out of anger, cast your brother outside the covenant community by saying, ‘You fool,’ you will be useless. Just as salt that has lost its flavor is only good to be thrown out and trampled upon, so a Christian who has succumbed to bitterness is absolutely useless. His or her witness to the world has died.

The practical significance of this passage is as follows: The person who lets anger and bitterness escalate to this level is choosing to be public about it, and to shape their heart in a certain sinful way. They are making themselves publicly known as being defiant of Jesus’ commands and the love of God. The theological significance of this passage is encapsulated in this question: What is God’s posture towards such a person? Ultimately, if they are consumed by bitterness, it is their choice to make their hearts like this, and they will be refusing Jesus’ transforming love which confronts and even demands that the deepest hatred be yielded to him. But it is not that God then ‘hates’ the hater. God does not have two faces: one merciful and one wrathful. Rather, God has one face: He is love. He loves the hater nevertheless. Jesus’ insistent call to surrender both the bitterness and the corruption of sin fueling it causes the person to experience God as a tormenting fire.

¹⁵ Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? ¹⁷ So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the **fire**. ²⁰ So then, you will know them by their fruits. ²¹ Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven will enter. ²² Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name cast out demons, and in your name perform many miracles?’ ²³ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; **depart from me**, you who practice lawlessness. (Mt.7:15 – 23)

Imposters want acknowledgement and reward from Jesus, but not transformation at the core of their being. This is a bit like wanting alcohol from Jesus, but not Jesus himself, who has rid his human nature of the disease of alcoholism. Imposters are able to prophesy and teach in Jesus’ name. They are able to cast out demons and perform miracles of healing in Jesus’ name. Judas Iscariot was able to do these things, too. From an external point of view, their ministries could be quite ‘successful.’ They might be impressive and influential, at least for a season. Yet deep within these people is a hungry, evil place that they have not allowed Jesus to touch. They crave forms of approval, legitimacy, respect, comfort, and security, which is what Jesus is addressing in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt.5:1 – 7:28). And rather than bring all that ravenousness to Jesus, they let those desires motivate them to a type of greatness. When they meet Jesus, they will attempt to justify themselves. That much is apparent from 7:22: ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy...cast out demons...perform many miracles?’ They might also try to compare themselves to others, saying, ‘We did greater things than other people did for you. Why don’t you acknowledge us?’ Jesus will say that he never ‘knew’ them. It’s not that Jesus did not know about them. He didn’t experientially know them. That is, he didn’t participate in them, because they never welcomed him into the very deepest places of

their being. Now their own ravenous desires for approval, acclaim, and power show in the face of Jesus himself. They never yielded to his law; they 'who practice lawlessness.' Their own untamed nature is now incompatible with Jesus. They want his praise and some other reward, but refuse him.

In this case, the language of Jesus sending them away ('depart from me') does suggest that Jesus is dismissing them to some other place, physically. However, this does not nullify the idea that there is an equal and opposite repulsion on the part of the imposters away from Jesus once Jesus insists on their full surrender to him; and Jesus could be speaking in this passage about dismissal for the sake of brevity. The way things are phrased as 'separation' or 'dismissal' in Matthew 7:15 – 23 and 25:11 – 12, Revelation 20:11 – 15, and 2 Thessalonians 1:8 makes me think that there must be some kind of physical separation from Jesus. Simultaneously, the language of 'separation' or 'dismissal' or 'distance' in Scripture needs to be coordinated with the assertion that Jesus will be 'all in all' or will 'fill all' in some way (e.g. Eph.1:21 – 23). If that is the case, then where do they have to go? Perhaps one way to reconcile those two assertions is that people who are in the state of hell are continually receding, as C.S. Lewis suggests in *The Great Divorce*. They attempt to move further and further away from Jesus, while being constantly reminded of him, while it is God Himself who holds the person in existence. Recall that in Revelation 14:9 – 11, the 'torment' is in the 'presence' of the Lamb, or at least it begins there. It may be that Jesus dismisses them to some other place, like the 'lake of fire' of Revelation 20, or that they are repulsed by Jesus' presence, or both. But Jesus still upholds their very being, which is both an act of love on his part, and makes a claim that he issues to them and within them. For their humanity is physically rooted in and connected to Jesus' own humanity. Thus, because Jesus still upholds their being, insists on their inner transformation, and exerts a call within them, it is still accurate to speak of hell being the love of God, even while we speak of it as the wrath of God against the corruption of sin they defend.

²⁵ It is enough for the disciple that he become like his teacher, and the slave like his master. If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign the members of his household! ²⁶ Therefore do not fear them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. ²⁷ What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim upon the housetops. ²⁸ Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in **hell**. ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰ But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹ So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows. ³² Therefore everyone who confesses me before men, I will also confess him before my Father who is in heaven. ³³ But whoever denies me before men, I will also deny him before my Father who is in heaven. (Mt.10:25 – 33)

In relation to the subject of hell, the question at issue is Jesus' confession and denial of people who confess or deny him. The fundamental issue here is similar to the imposters of Mt.7:15 – 23; they do not see Jesus as the personal source of a new, transformed and healed humanity that is fully reconciled to God through the Spirit. The Jews who reject Jesus do so because they accuse him of being Beelzebul, head of the house of the demons (10:25). They will accuse Jesus' disciples of this as well (10:26). Ironically, the devil is the one who is able to destroy – in a manner of speaking – both soul and body in hell, and does so (10:28). That 'destruction' is an ongoing, eternal one. Beelzebul seeks the destruction of humanity through the lie ('they exchanged the truth of God for a lie'; Rom.1:25) that warps their desires and their perception of the true God. In this case, it will be the lie about who Jesus truly is, and the transforming love that he offers to human beings. From this life into the next, they will persist in their view, attributing to Jesus the power and identity of Beelzebul, the devil. Meanwhile, it will be Beelzebul himself who, through this lie, destroys the human soul and body in hell, not the Father, and N.T. Wright and others maintain that view. By contrast, the Father is the one who cares for every hair on our heads, and for every sparrow (10:29 – 31). It is of course true that Jesus will deny such people. That is, he will deny their claims to self-justification, deny their claims to not need him, deny their denial of him, and deny this lie.

¹⁰ Now when Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who were following, 'Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. ¹¹ I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven; ¹² but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the **outer darkness**; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' (Mt.8:10 – 12)

³⁶ Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him and said, 'Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field.'³⁷ And he said, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man,³⁸ and the field is the world; and as for the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil one;³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels.⁴⁰ So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with **fire**, so shall it be at the end of the age.⁴¹ The Son of Man will send forth his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness,⁴² and will throw them into the **furnace of fire**; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Mt.13:36 – 42)

⁴⁷ Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind;⁴⁸ and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away.⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous,⁵⁰ and will throw them into the **furnace of fire**; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Mt.13:47 – 50)

I believe that hell is real, is eternal, is a physical place (since resurrected humans will be physical), and is somehow characterized by 'fire' and the 'darkness' probably connected to self-blinding. Whether or not the fire and darkness are literal-terrestrial or only representative of an experience, I remain genuinely unsure. As I've made the case above, the only place where fire and darkness are mentioned so densely together is at Mount Sinai (Ex.19:16 – 18; Dt.4:11 – 12; 5:23 – 25), when Israel was invited to come up to the top of Mount Sinai and meet with God face to face when the trumpet sounded, but instead stayed at a distance. There at Sinai, I am not sure if the 'fire' was a divine fire or a terrestrial one; I suspect that 'fire' was just the closest word that can approximate what God's presence did to the mountain, and the burning bush and the burning mountain, respectively, probably returned to 'normal' once God's presence departed. More important is the theological significance of fire in relation to the character of God. Fire represents the judgment of God, the purifying judgment of God which burns against the corruption in our human nature. His wrath is that of a surgeon against the cancer in people who refuse to see it as cancer, not the wrath of a judge against our personhood who imprisons us against our will. Hence, His wrath and judgment are always serving His love.

¹ Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying, ² 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. ³ And he sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come. ⁴ Again he sent out other slaves saying, 'Tell those who have been invited, 'Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast.' ⁵ But they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, ⁶ and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them. ⁷ But the king was enraged, and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire. ⁸ Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy.' ⁹ Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast.' ¹⁰ Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered together all they found, both evil and good; and the wedding hall was filled with dinner guests. ¹¹ But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw a man there who was not dressed in wedding clothes, ¹² and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?' And the man was speechless. ¹³ Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the **outer darkness**; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' ¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen.' (Mt.22:1 – 14)

I will make some extended comments about this parable, because there are some quite complicated issues involved in interpreting it. At first reading, on the surface, Jesus' parable sounds alarming and disconcerting. Granted that killing servants is unacceptable, but is God a king who deals out destruction to an entire city in such a disproportionate manner? If this was meant to signify Jerusalem, is God executing retributive vengeance? And what is the significance of not being properly dressed for the wedding? Is the king's response typical or unusual for the culture of the time? In what sense is hell like being involuntarily thrown out of a party? And after all is said and done, did God orchestrate the resistance of the people? Is that what 'many are called, but few are chosen' means?

In historical reality, Jesus wanted to stop the Jerusalem leadership from continuing the supposed 'liberation of Jerusalem' from the Romans, and to stop their jihad-like posture against the Romans (2 Macc.7). The Jewish leaders at the time of Jesus were nationalistic, ethnocentric militants. They wanted the land that historically

belonged to them. They did not want the Gentiles to be included in the people of God, or perhaps were willing to do so if the Gentiles were second-class citizens. They expected a military Messiah to arise and defeat the Roman Empire, and eventually overthrow them. 'Jews are good, Romans are evil.' Theologically, the Jewish leaders believed they were already the elect, the chosen people. So we have to allow Jesus to be a prophetic social critic, against the war, who uses language in a very sharp way. Here is evidence that the situation in Judea at the time of Jesus was something like the multi-party civil war in Syria in 2013:

Historical context: Jewish military uprisings, 163 BCE – 135 CE

- 163 BCE: Judas Maccabeus recaptures Jerusalem and cleanses the Temple, providing the model for a resistance tradition.
- 40 BCE: Hezekiah leads revolts and skirmishes. He was put down by Herod the Great. Samaia the Pharisee objects to this.
- 4 BCE: Young men, as Herod lay dying in 4 BCE, pull down Roman eagles from Jerusalem, who were then killed on Herod's orders. They were supported by the teachers Judas ben Sariphaeus and Matthias ben Margalothus (Josephus, *War* 1.648-55; *Antiquities* 17.149-66).
- 3 BCE: 'A countless multitude' from all over Palestine, especially Judea itself (Josephus). Another violent revolt occurred the following Passover, which was renewed at Pentecost (*War* 2.1-13; 39-50; *Ant.* 17.206-18; 250-64). They laid siege to the Romans and besieged the commander himself in the palace. At this, anarchy broke out in Palestine (*War* 2.55; *Ant.* 17.269, referring to 'continuous and countless new tumults'), including a revolt by Herod's veterans and one by Judas, son of Hezekiah.
- 6 CE: Judas/Theudas the Galilean (*War* 2.118, *Acts* 5:37), probably the same person as Judas the son of Hezekiah (see N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, p.180). Judas, together with Zadok, a Pharisee, headed a large number of Zealots. Judas proclaimed the Jewish state as a republic recognizing God alone as king and ruler and His laws as supreme. The revolt continued to spread, and in some places serious conflicts ensued. Josephus calls this the most serious incident between Pompey's conquest of Palestine (63 BCE) and the fall of Jerusalem (70 AD). Two thousand Jews were crucified. Judas was called Messiah.
- 'The Samaritan' led a group of armed followers and ended up in guerilla warfare. The unnamed 'prophets' described by Josephus (*War* 2.258-60/*Antiquities* 20.167b-8) are subsumed under the general brigandage noted in *Antiquities* 20.167a. 'Prophets' and their followers entertained dreams of violent revolution.
- 'The Egyptian', according to *War* 2.262, intended to force entry to Jerusalem, overpower the Roman garrison, and set himself up as a tyrant.
- The unnamed prophet of *Antiquities* 20.188 appeared in the context of widespread brigandry.
- Jonathan the Weaver (*War* 7.437-50) had, according to Josephus, *Life* 424ff., aroused an uprising in Galilee.
- ~28 CE: The Galileans Pilate crushed at Jerusalem, mingling their blood with their sacrifices (Lk.13:1)
- 30 CE: Barabbas and the revolt in which he took part (Lk.23:19; in John 18:40, Barabbas is described as a *lestes*, 'brigand'). Presumably the two *lestai* crucified alongside Jesus count as well.
- 40's CE: The sons of Judas the Galilean, Jacob/James and Simon (*Ant.* 20.102), continued their father's insurrection. They were crucified in the late 40s by Roman governor Tiberius Julius Alexander.
- The 'common people' who were punished along with Eleazor ben Deinaeus; in *War* 2.253, Josephus says the number of them was 'incalculable'.
- Jesus ben Ananias enters Jerusalem on the Feast of Sukkot and decries the Temple; the governor interrogates him but later releases him.
- Brigands reported by Josephus in *War* 2.264f.; these may be the same ones who are mentioned in 2.271, but in the earlier passage it appears that the revolutionary fervor was far more widespread than a small group.
- 55 CE?: A so-called 'Egyptian prophet' (an allusion to Moses?) and 30,000 unarmed Jews do an Exodus reenactment and are massacred by the procurator Antonius Felix (*War* 2.13.5, *Ant.*20.8.6)
- 66 CE: Multiple Jewish revolts occur, which are together called the First Jewish-Roman War. A faction led by John of Gischala and his followers revolt in Galilee and then take Jerusalem (refs. in Wright, *NTPG*, p.177 n. 54). The Sicarii, the 'dagger men,' led by Menahem, another son or grandson of Judas the Galilean (*War* 4.198, *Ant.* 20.186f., etc.), forced their way into the Temple and then burned the houses of Ananias, Agrippa, and Bernice, and the Record Office with the records of debt. Menahem broke into the

armory at Masada, distributed arms, and returned to Jerusalem as 'king' over the revolutionary forces. Menahem was called Messiah.

- 70 CE: The Romans, led by future Emperor Titus Flavius, conquer Jerusalem and burn the city and Temple to the ground. Josephus claimed that 1,100,000 people were killed, mostly Jews; 97,000 were captured or enslaved (*War* 6.9.3). This ends the First Jewish-Roman War.
- 73 CE: The Romans recapture the fortress Masada from the Jewish Sicarii. The defenders, 960 Jews, commit mass suicide before the Roman victory.
- 115 – 117 CE: Diaspora Jews in Cyrene, Cyprus, Mesopotamia, and Egypt lead widespread revolts around the Mediterranean region against Romans. These are together called the Kitos War, the 'rebellion of the exile,' or sometimes the Second Jewish-Roman War.
- 132 – 135 CE: Simon Bar-Kochba leads a Jewish uprising at Masada. Bar-Kochba was called Messiah and supported by Pharisee Rabbi Akiva. The Romans crush the uprising at great cost. Roman historian Cassius Dio writes that 580,000 Jews were killed, 50 fortified towns were razed, and 985 villages were destroyed. This was called the Third Jewish-Roman War, if one counts the Kitos War as the Second.

If one were trying to stop religious leaders from a jihad campaign, what language would that person use? Probably language that would jar the leadership and completely challenge their worldview. From this historical overview, it is much easier to see why some parts of Jesus' language in Mt.22:1 – 14 are *figures of speech* designed to provoke the Jewish leaders to see that God is not on their side, as they think. But whether this parable, in all details, reflects God's doing, remains to be seen.

Note: Protestants tend to read the New Testament in the following way:

Jesus vs. Pharisees =

Paul vs. Judaizers = 'Salvation by grace through faith' vs. 'salvation by works and self-righteousness'

Luther vs. Catholics =

Hence, we miss the centrality of Jewish racism, ethnocentrism, and militant nationalism. As E.P. Sanders and N.T. Wright have argued, I don't think that it is accurate to interpret 1st century Jews by 16th century European Catholics. Notice that some Jews rejected Jesus because he loved Samaritans and Gentiles (e.g. Luke 4:14 – 30), not for any other theological reason. Jews did ask the question, 'Are you keeping the Mosaic Law and Temple sacrifices?' But this was part of a larger *Jewish* question, 'Are you *Jewish* enough?' Most Jewish leaders effectively had a theology of *Jewish purity* and *Jewish solidarity against outsiders*. The 1st century Jewish question was broader than the 16th century Catholic question, 'Are you doing enough good works *as an individual*?'⁷

Jesus was creating a community where Jews and Gentiles would be reconciled to God and each other through him. Thus, he repeatedly warned the Jewish leaders to follow him and stop their armed resistance to Rome, lest the Romans destroy Jerusalem. Here is evidence:

- ^{Luke 13:1} Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. ² And Jesus said to them, 'Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate? ³ I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. ⁴ Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? ⁵ I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.'
- ^{Luke 13:34} O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it! ³⁵ Behold, your house is left to you desolate; and I say to you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!''
- ^{Luke 19:41} When he approached Jerusalem, he saw the city and wept over it, ⁴² saying, 'If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side, ⁴⁴ and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and

⁷ For more information, see N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fortress Press, 1992) and the extensive literature he references on what first century Judaism was like.

they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation.’ (cf. Mt.23:37 – 39)

- Luke 21:5 And while some were talking about the temple, that it was adorned with beautiful stones and votive gifts, he said, ⁶ ‘As for these things which you are looking at, the days will come in which there will not be left one stone upon another which will not be torn down.’ ⁷ They questioned him, saying, ‘Teacher, when therefore will these things happen? And what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?’ ⁸ And he said, ‘See to it that you are not misled; for many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he,’ and, ‘The time is near.’ Do not go after them. ⁹ When you hear of wars and disturbances, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end does not follow immediately.’
- Luke 23:28 But Jesus turning to them said, ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed... ³¹ For if they do these things when the tree is green [i.e. fruitful and peacemaking], what will happen when it is dry [sinful and violent]?’

Now, understanding the historical context, we can better interpret Matthew 22:1 – 14.

<i>Parable</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
^{22:1} Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying, ² ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son.	King = God; son = Jesus; wedding feast = celebration of union between God and humanity in Jesus
³ And he sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come. ⁴ Again he sent out other slaves saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited, ‘Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast.’’ ⁵ But they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, ⁶ and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them.	Slaves = disciples of Jesus; ‘those who had been invited, were unwilling to come’ = Jewish leaders his own farm = land business = money seized his slaves, etc. = killed Christians
⁷ But the king was enraged, and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire.	His armies = Romans City on fire = Jerusalem destroyed in 70 AD. Note that Jesus <i>consistently warned</i> the Jewish leaders and people against pursuing their militant course of trying to liberate Jerusalem (e.g. Luke 13:1 – 5, 34 – 35; 19:41 – 45; 21:5 – 28). The ‘city on fire’ was really their fault. The Romans are not literally ‘God’s armies.’ This is a figure of speech, designed to get the Jewish leaders to question their assumptions that God was on their side through and through.
⁸ Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. ⁹ Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast.’ ¹⁰ Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered together all they found, both evil and good; and the wedding hall was filled with dinner guests.	Main highways, as many as you find there = Gentiles Both evil and good = everyone!
¹¹ But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw a man there who was not dressed in wedding clothes, ¹² and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?’ And the man was speechless.	Wedding clothes = clothes <i>provided by the groom</i> for the occasion (culturally understood) Not in wedding clothes = not celebrating the union, rejecting the wedding Speechless = he has no excuse for <i>his prejudice and utter refusal to receive clothes given to honor the groom and bride</i> ; there is no rational defense for this choice
¹³ Then the king said to the servants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’	Outer darkness = a motif of hell
¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen .’	Many are the called = all are invited Few are ‘the chosen’ = few agree with the premise of the kingdom for all humanity; Jesus was debating with them who can legitimately bear the title ‘the chosen people.’

In Matthew 22:14, ‘chosen’ (*eklektōi*) is a predicate adjective used with *eisin* (to be). So the more accurate grammatical reading is, ‘For many are the called, but few are *the chosen*.’ It is not a verb. Hence, strictly speaking, it is not accurate to read this as, ‘For God invites many but chooses few.’ The word occurs in the New Testament only two other times – Colossians 3:12 and Revelation 17:14 – and in those contexts seems to have the same meaning.

In this context, Jesus is challenging the Pharisees and Jerusalem leadership about their assumption that they are ‘the chosen people.’ In the biblical story, ‘chosen people’ was always a *title*. It referred to Israel as a communal entity covenanted with God, but individual Jews could choose to be in or out of the covenant people, as could Gentiles. God chose Abraham and Sarah to be partners with Him in undoing the sin of Adam and Eve. Over time, the nature of God’s choice became clearer. God chose Isaac, not Ishmael. Then God chose Jacob, not Esau. Then God chose Judah, not Joseph or the other brothers. Then God chose David, not his brothers and not King Saul. Eventually God’s choice of covenant partners narrowed until it was one person: Jesus. Notice how Jesus took the title ‘chosen one.’ The title ‘beloved Son’ is equivalent to ‘chosen one’ because ‘son of God’ was originally Israel’s title as the chosen people (e.g. Ex.4:22; Rom.9:6); notice also how the quotation from Isaiah 42 in Matthew 12 equates both titles, and how Luke also equates them:

- ¹⁶ After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on him, ¹⁷ and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, ‘This is My **beloved** Son, in whom I am well-pleased.’ (Mt.3:16 – 17)
- ¹⁵ But Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. Many followed him, and he healed them all, ¹⁶ and warned them not to tell who he was. ¹⁷ This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: ¹⁸ ‘Behold, My Servant whom I have **chosen**; My **beloved** in whom My soul is well-pleased; I will put My Spirit upon him, and he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles. ¹⁹ He will not quarrel, nor cry out; nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. ²⁰ A battered reed he will not break off, and a smoldering wick he will not put out, until he leads justice to victory. ²¹ And in his name the Gentiles will *hope*.’ (Mt.12:15 – 21)
- ⁵ A voice out of the cloud said, ‘This is My **beloved** Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to him!’ (Mt.17:5)
- ³⁵ A voice came out of the cloud, saying, ‘This is My Son, My **Chosen** One; listen to him!’ (Lk.9:35)

Therefore, Jesus took the title ‘chosen one’ away from Israel as a whole, and carried it himself as the ‘Chosen One.’ Jesus redefined ‘chosen people’ around himself, since he was ‘the Chosen One.’ Theologian Karl Barth said that Jesus was chosen so that all humanity could be invited into him, whether they lived before, during, or after him. Positively, to be part of ‘the chosen people’ now means ‘those who are Jesus’ people, commissioned by Jesus to carry out his mission in the world.’ That task is to announce God’s salvation and invite people to Jesus. Negatively, to reject Jesus’ invitation to become one of the ‘chosen people’ means that one is motivated by individual pride or some kind of collectivism or both!

Summary Points for Matthew 22:1 – 14

1. If you were trying to stop religious leaders from a jihad, what language would you use? Language that would completely challenge their worldview.
2. What actual war were they starting? The Jewish-Roman War of 66 – 70 CE. Jesus was trying to get the Jewish leaders to stop leading the city to war with Rome. Read the passages above from Luke to see that.
3. Do you know what it means to show up to a wedding without the right clothes? Social insult, not approving the wedding, i.e. the union of God and humanity through Jesus. They wanted to defend the Temple in Jerusalem instead of seeing Jesus as the new Temple of God.
4. Why would they not be in favor of the wedding? Their racism against the Gentiles.

That was a rather long discussion of a short parable, but I thought it was worth it given its complexity. We must understand Jesus’ socio-political context, as well as certain devices of language, in order to properly interpret the parable. Once we do, it still fits comfortably in Jesus’ literary use of ‘fire’ as a motif, and the underlying relational dynamics between people and God which I am suggesting.

⁴⁴ For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think he will. ⁴⁵ Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶ Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. ⁴⁷ Truly I say to you that he will put him in charge of all his possessions. ⁴⁸ But if that evil slave says in his heart, ‘My master is not coming for a long time,’ ⁴⁹ and begins to beat his fellow slaves and eat and drink with drunkards; ⁵⁰ the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know, ⁵¹ and will cut him in pieces and assign him **a place with the hypocrites**; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Mt.24:44 – 51)

²⁴ And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. ²⁵ And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.' ²⁶ But his master answered and said to him, 'You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I scattered no seed. ²⁷ Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest. ²⁸ Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents.' ²⁹ For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. ³⁰ Throw out the worthless slave into the **outer darkness**; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Mt.25:24 – 30)

In both parables, the servant has a skewed perception of the master as 'using' his servants. The truth that the master wants to partner with his servants is twisted by this servant into a self-centered hostility that interprets the master wrongly. This is exactly what I think is going on in hell: people interpret God's eagerness to have human partners as a desire to simply 'use' them and take advantage of them.

¹ Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were prudent. ³ For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, ⁴ but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps. ⁵ Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and began to sleep. ⁶ But at midnight there was a shout, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' ⁷ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish said to the prudent, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' ⁹ But the prudent answered, 'No, there will not be enough for us and you too; go instead to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' ¹⁰ And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the **door was shut**. ¹¹ Later the other virgins also came, saying, 'Lord, lord, open up for us.' ¹² But he answered, 'Truly I say to you, I do not know you.' ¹³ Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour. (Mt.25:1 – 13)

The parable of the wise and foolish virgins also contains both positive and negative uses of 'fire' and 'light.' The ten virgins were asked to lead a procession at the wedding. The 'lamp' was not a modern day lantern. The Greek word *lampas* is translated 'torch' elsewhere (Jn.18:3; Acts 20:8; Rev.4:5; 8:10). But more likely, it was a large, flat bowl, with a rag or rope-like 'wick.' It required a lot of oil. If the ten virgins were asked to lead a procession at a wedding, there needed to be ample light for the whole time. It would be disastrous for the oil to run out. That explains why the five virgins didn't share their oil. They could not without risking the role they were playing and the whole event itself. Thus, the five wise virgins took oil in flasks with their lamps (v.4). The foolish ones took 'no oil with them' (v.3). So when the foolish virgins said, 'Our lamps are going out,' they were *lying*. Their lamps weren't even lit to begin with. Why would the foolish virgins *not* have taken oil with them? They would have had to carry them in flasks. It was bulky, and maybe unwieldy. Without flasks, they were more 'free.' One point of the parable is surely: Without Jesus, you feel more 'free' – you may even have 'community' in your foolishness – but you are really damaging yourself and the role God calls you to play in His great celebration by being 'empty' and unprepared.

This parable raises the question of who excludes whom. The parable of the wise and foolish virgins also echoes the parable of the wise and foolish builders (Mt.7:24 – 27) and the warning about false prophets (Mt.7:15 – 23), which, if I am correct in perceiving Matthew's Gospel as a large chiasm,⁸ rests on the opposite side of that passage; they mutually interpret each other. This is the only other time the situation arises when some people say, 'Lord, Lord,' and Jesus responds, 'I do not know you.' The false prophets will pretend they 'know' Jesus as well. They will pretend they took his heart-transforming word into themselves, and built their lives upon it, like a builder on rock. But they never did. That means that they are not even repentant. They try to lie further to cover up their own failure, arguing that their 'ministry' ('we cast out demons in your name') deserves reward. In effect, the false prophets do not want Jesus and the heart-level transformation that he has just announced; they only want some kind of external reward from Jesus while still being inwardly ravenous. Who first excludes whom? The answer is plain: the false prophets first exclude Jesus from their own lives, and demand of Jesus a reward. Because they did not

⁸ Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Chiastic Structure of the Gospel of Matthew*; <http://nagasawafamily.org/matthew-chiasm.pdf>

participate in Jesus' heart-level transformation, and still refuse to, Jesus will say that he did not participate in their activity: He does not 'know' them in a covenantal sense. And he will deny their request.

The five foolish virgins' lying in v.8 is significant in understanding who first excludes whom. They pretended they once had oil. But they never did. The five dishonest virgins thought they could demand or borrow oil from the five wise virgins who went through the personal inconvenience of carrying sufficient oil for the event. Then they thought they could buy oil at a time when it was impossible, as the parable suggests that they were not successful at midnight. Then they still appeared at the wedding and wanted to be in the processional, without their lamps lit, jeopardizing the very nature of the event. Fundamentally, by making this request, the five foolish virgins wanted the wedding banquet to be redesigned and centered around *them*. The bridegroom therefore denies their claim.

The main lesson of the parable is not predicting the timing (i.e. the day and the hour), but preparing while waiting. The wise virgins were prepared. They bought oil and carried their flasks around, even though it was personally inconvenient and they did not know when the bridegroom was coming. Some interpreters suggest that Jesus and his disciples thought that Jesus' second coming would be right away, but this parable suggests that Jesus and Matthew did not assume that. Rather, a lot of time could pass, enough for the virgins to 'sleep.' Biblical scholar Karl Paul Donfried suggests that 'sleep' signifies death, and 'rose' signifies resurrection.⁹ The foolish thought that preparedness was irrelevant. They did not want to be prepared during the interval of waiting. And because of the parallel with the false prophets of Mt.7:21 – 23, I would venture to say that they did not receive the Spirit of Jesus, the life of Jesus, and the word of Jesus into themselves. That is what the oil represents. They needed to allow themselves to be changed by Jesus from within. Carrying oil around is hard work, just as it is *hard, spiritual work to be prepared for Jesus' return*. So the question of who first excludes whom is settled: the five foolish virgins try to exclude the intended nature of the wedding feast itself, and along with it, the five wise virgins and the bridegroom himself, to falsify the appearance that they had been prepared. And the question of what they failed to do is settled: they did not internalize the word of Jesus because they thought it too inconvenient. This comports with my larger argument about the relational dynamics of hell.

³¹ But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him; and he will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; ³³ and he will put the sheep on his right, and the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited me in; ³⁶ naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came to me. ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you, or thirsty, and give you something to drink?' ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger, and invite you in, or naked, and clothe you?' ³⁹ When did we see you sick, or in prison, and come to you?' ⁴⁰ The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of mine, even the least of them, you did it to me.' ⁴¹ Then he will also say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, accursed ones, into the **eternal fire** which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me nothing to drink; ⁴³ I was a stranger, and you did not invite me in; naked, and you did not clothe me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit me.' ⁴⁴ Then they themselves also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of you?' ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' ⁴⁶ These will go away into **eternal punishment**, but the righteous into eternal life.' (Mt.25:31 – 46)

Since Jesus is saying that the world will be judged according to how they receive his disciples. 'These brothers (*adelphois*) of mine' always refer to the disciples (compare Mt.12:49 – 50; 23:8; 28:8), who will be poor, not indiscriminately to any poor person, unfortunately for those who would like to press this parable into the service of Christian social justice. The Gentiles will have shown their love for Jesus based on their friendship with his true disciples, even if they were imprisoned. The 'goats' are surprised at how Jesus has appeared to them already through his disciples, but Jesus does not describe their reaction to this. Note that Irenaeus, the first writing

⁹ Karl Paul Donfried, 'The Allegory of the Ten Virgins [Matt 25:1 – 13] as a Summary of Matthean Theology,' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 [1974], 415 – 28

theologian outside the New Testament, who lived 130 – 200AD, said that ‘eternal fire was not originally prepared for man, but for him who beguiled man, and caused him to offend – for him, I say, who is chief of the apostasy, and for those angels who became apostates along with him; which [fire], indeed, they too shall justly feel, who, like him, persevere in works of wickedness, without repentance, and without retracing their steps.’¹⁰

Conclusion

I believe we are on very solid ground to make a literary and theological connection from the Pentateuch through Isaiah to Jesus and the New Testament writers. Specifically, the motif of God’s presence on a ‘mountain’ threads its way through those biblical writings like a massive theater backdrop sits on a stage for a play. Eden was a mountain (Ezk.28:13 – 14), where God’s presence once was, where a fiery sword now bars the way (Gen.3:24). Sinai was another mountain where God became present in a unique way, inviting Israel to pass through the fire to meet with him face to face (Ex.3:12; 19:13; Dt.5:4 – 5). Since Israel quailed in fear, Moses went up for them ‘while the mountain was burning with fire’ (Ex:24:12 – 18; Dt.9:15). Moses received the physical pattern of the tabernacle so Israel could remember how he went through the fire and received the covenant on their behalf at the top of Mount Sinai. In the tabernacle, the high priest would offer sacrifices through fire and smoke to uniquely enter God’s presence again (Lev.16). Through the temple on Mount Zion, Israel erected that pattern in stone and gold, where for centuries they approached God through sacrifice and fire and smoke, renewed the covenant, and remembered Moses entering the divine fire atop Mount Sinai for them (2 Chr.5 – 6). Isaiah, however, envisioned that God’s renewal of the covenant and of Mount Zion would burst those temple boundaries and give Israel and the nations another chance at meeting with God face to face, albeit still through the purification of divine fire (Isa.4:3 – 5; 5:24 – 25; 30:19 – 33; 66:10 – 24). Fire was an appropriate motif for Isaiah to use, since in his vision, God purified Isaiah’s lips through contact with a fiery coal (Isa.6:6). So when John the Baptist and Jesus spoke of that renewal (Mt.3:10 – 12; Lk.3:7 – 10), they used fire in its double sense: joyful and painful purification for those who receive it, fearful torment for those who do not. Although I will not examine Paul and Peter here, both of them referred to the return of Jesus as having the effect of a purifying fire that reveals the true quality of each person (1 Cor.3:12 – 15; 2 Pet.3:10 – 16).

Therefore, Jesus’ ‘fire’ and ‘darkness’ sayings are nothing to be embarrassed about. They do not reflect a dualism of attributes within God, as if He hates those who resist Him. Rather, they reflect His passionate determination to love us and love everything out of us that is unholy and unloving. Accompanying this theme must be a corresponding understanding of human nature: God made us partners with Him in the formation of our own human nature; we are not just human beings, but human becomings; and our choices shape our natures and our desires. Fire reflects God’s purifying and refining work. Whether we welcome Him or fear Him depends on us. Either way, we can say with T.S. Eliot, in his poem *Four Quartets*:

The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare
The one discharge from sin and error.
The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre-
To be redeemed from fire by fire.
Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.

¹⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 3, chapter 23, paragraph 3