

‘Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth’—the Nature of the Suffering of the Wicked in Matthew

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Abstract

Matthew records six instances in which Jesus expressed the idiom ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth’ (8:12; 13:42; 13:50; 22:13; 24:45; 25:30). The phrase refers to the eschatological fate of the wicked. This article investigates whether those who weep and gnash their teeth suffer physically, or merely spiritually and emotionally. A word study of the ‘weeping’ and ‘gnashing’ revealed that both these terms contain within their connotation the aspect of weeping and gnashing of teeth that is a direct result of physical pain. The use of the ‘furnace of fire’ and ‘cut him in pieces’ similarly seems to associate the idiom with suffering as a direct result of physical pain.

1. Introduction

Upon reading Matthew’s gospel, one is struck by the author’s periodic use of the idiom ὁ κλαυθμὸς καὶ ὁ βρυγμὸς τῶν ὀδόντων (‘weeping and gnashing of teeth’). This phrase appears seven times in the synoptic gospels—six times in the gospel of Matthew (8:12; 13:42; 13:50; 22:13;

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

24:451; 25:30) and once in Luke's gospel (13:28). Commentators in general recognise the unique character of the phrase, rightly affirming that it is a reference to the eschatological fate of the wicked. This article is an inquiry into the meaning and implication of the phrase, with particular consideration of the existential state of the heritors of this judgment. The problem that this article hoped to answer is, 'are those who weep and gnash their teeth in a state of emotional torment, physical pain, or both?'

Because the phrase *en bloc* was not used in the ancient literature, it has become evident from the surveyed commentaries that scholars seem to have diverse opinions on its range of semantic meaning, belonging to two opposed camps in terms of the six Matthean texts.

Some associate gnashing of teeth with emotional pain and suffering only. Rengstorf (1985:111) represents the view of this camp by arguing that the phrase 'weeping and *gnashing* of teeth' does not refer to despairing rage or even physical reaction, but rather to the remorse of those who are outside the kingdom. Although Keener (1999:268) believes that gnashing of teeth *might* indicate anger or strong emotion associated with anger, he acknowledges that it is *primarily* representative of anguish. Hagner (1993:206) is of the same opinion, adding the adjective, *self-reproach*. McComiskey (1976:421) similarly sees the word as representing extreme remorse.

Others associate the phrase with physical pain, suffering, anger, and resentment towards God. Hendriksen (2004:398), for example, believes that the word *gnashing* (of teeth) denotes physical pain as well: 'The tears of which Jesus speaks here in Matt. 8:12 are those of inconsolable, never-ending wretchedness, and utter, everlasting hopelessness. The accompanying grinding or gnashing of teeth denotes excruciating pain and frenzied anger. This grinding of teeth, too, will never come to an

end or cease.’ Nolland (2005:358) concurs, but adds an additional facet to the meaning; it is an ‘aggressive expression of hostility and anger’. Dixon (2003:169) similarly perceives the gnashing of teeth as an imagery of angry, hysterical resentment towards God. In other words, this outlook views the expression ‘gnashing of teeth’ not only as a consequence of pain and unimaginable suffering, but also eternal resentment, bitterness, and anger toward the Judge, with the resultant act of shaking the fist and gnashing the teeth.

Before any exegetical analysis, the logical starting point is to conduct a synchronic and diachronic study of the individual terms within the phrase ἐκεῖ ἔσται ὁ κλαυθμὸς καὶ ὁ βρυγμὸς τῶν ὀδόντων. The study will commence with a systematic diachronic analysis of the terms (a) κλαυθμὸς and (b) βρυγμὸς, in order to investigate firstly the meaning (connotation and denotation) of each term as employed in both extra-biblical and biblical literature (LXX and NT), and secondly, to observe the semantic range of meaning of these words within the gospel of Matthew. These two steps, together with a systematic analysis of each of the passages, will produce some tentative conclusions regarding the connotation and denotation of the complete expression so often uttered by Jesus.

2. Κλαυθμός

Perhaps, it is important to acknowledge the nature of the task ahead. Understanding both the connotation and denotation of single word units is extremely significant to New Testament interpretation and exegesis. Because words function within a particular context, individual words rarely embody the basic unit of meaning that a phrase represents or suggests. In light of this, Tate (1997:14) cautions the exegete to be

aware of the danger of overemphasising the importance of the single word. But, at the same time, he acknowledges that although the text communicates its message through the relationships of its phrases, sentences, and larger lexical units, single words must receive careful attention. In other words, although solitary words should not occupy the hermeneut's primary point of focus, ignoring the meaning of single words is nonetheless unwise. Fee (1993:100), for example, explains that the aim of a word study in exegesis is to try to understand, as precisely as possible, what the author was trying to convey by his use of the particular word in a particular context (also, Mickelsen 1972; Fee 1993; Kaiser and Silva 1994). Tate (1997) further explains that a plausible explication of a larger passage may hinge upon the meaning of a word which appears vague to us. When such a word is correctly understood in the way it would have been understood by the original author or audience, the entire larger unit may assume a sharper focus (p. 17).

So, the purpose of the next two segments is to attempt to determine the semantic range of meaning of each of the smaller units of speech within the phrase under scrutiny.

Κλαυθμός is the word translated *weeping* in the Matthean texts under study. It is significant to note that κλαυθμός shares its semantic range with its cognate verb κλαίω, as a result of which it is sensible to treat them together in this section.

2.1. Extra-biblical Literature

Throughout the classical period, the meaning of the verb κλαίω (used by Philo, Josephus, Justin Martyr, and several pseudepigraphic authors) was to *cry aloud*, to *weep*, and to *bewail* (Haarbeck 1976:416). Κλαίω was associated with physical and/or mental pain that was outwardly visible (Verdbrugge 2000:687). Like κλαίω, the use of κλαυθμός dates

back to the time of Homer as a term for weeping; one of its uses was to describe lamentation for the dead (Rengstorf 1976:725). It is thus noticeable that not only does the word κλαυθμός connote a narrow semantic range, but also, there is nothing peculiar about the context(s) of use by ancient Greek authors. Whenever this word appeared, it served the purpose of describing the mournful outburst of an individual afflicted by physical or mental pain too intense to contain. Hence, weeping in this semantic context is ‘audible and involves more than tears ... it is outright bawling ... involving facial contortions, shortness of breath, feelings of angst’ (Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman 1998:939). It is an outward expression of grief (Bullinger 1999:862).

2.2. Old Testament (LXX)

In the Greek Old Testament, the word κλαίω occurs 165 times, mostly translating the Hebrew word בָּכָה (*bākā*), meaning *weep* (Bauer 2000:546) or ‘cry aloud’ (Haarbeck 1976:416). Κλαυθμός (noun), a cognate of the verb κλαίω, makes 40 appearances in the LXX, standing most frequently for the Hebrew word *bekī* (‘weeping’, the nominal form of *bākā*). Like *bākā*, בָּכָה (*bekī*) is a common Hebrew word for weeping (Haarbeck 1976:416). ‘It is thus combined with θρήνος, Ἱερ. 38:15φ. (cf. Jos. Ant., 20, 112), πένθος, Bar. 4:11, 23, κραυγή, Is. 65:19, κοπετός, ξύρησις and ζῶσις σάκκων, Is. 22:12’ (Rengstorf 1976, vol. 3:725). Additionally, κλαυθμός comes into view in an emphatic religious usage, discussed in a later paragraph. Together, the words κλαυθμός and κλαίω appear 205 times in the LXX, in six diverse contexts.

Firstly, people weeping due to intense personal loss, associated with mourning the death of a loved one. In Genesis 50:1, Joseph mourned the death of his father Jacob, by weeping over him (NKJV). Abraham

wept over the death of Sarah (Gen 23:2). The children of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days (Deut 34:8). David also wept after the Lord had taken his son because of his adulterous sin with Bathsheba (2 Sam 12).

Secondly, weeping is also associated with profound grief (Haarbeck 1976:416), shame, and remorse (Rengstorf 1976, vol. 3:723). This context is unmistakable in Lamentations, where 'it refers not merely to the events which occurred at the capture of the city, but to the sufferings of the citizens (the penalty of national sin) from the very beginning of the siege' (Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown 1997). 'For these things I weep', reads Lamentations 1:16, depicting the plight of Israel in the face of God's judgment and exile by her enemies. In 1 Samuel 1:7, this intense anguish, sorrow, and heartache is again portrayed through Sarah, a barren woman who wept year after year in the house of the Lord for the removal of this curse.

A third category of weeping links with expressing a dependence upon God by addressing one's cries and complaints to him in prayer (Haarbeck 1976:416). David expressed this emotionally as he demonstrated dependence upon God to relieve him of his suffering. In Psalm 6, he showed reliance on God, acknowledging that unless God delivered him from his enemies, he would die. 2 Maccabes 13:12 describes the outlook of the people in their prayer to God for assistance and help. Samson makes obvious his reliance in his last cry for help, that the Lord would strengthen him one last time (Jdg 16:28). Isaiah 30 depicts God as a God of justice, giving blessing to those who depend on Him. 'O people of Zion, who live in Jerusalem, you will weep no more. How gracious he will be when you cry for help' (Isa 30:19)! Hezekiah too wept bitterly; expressing reliance upon God's righteousness (Isa 38:3). In the above instances, κλαυθμός represents an inclination to

surrender to God's will in the assertion that God does only that which is best for the salvation of his people.

Fourthly, an even more emotionally charged (uncommon) sub-category, is weeping out of anger. In Judges 9, upon escaping the killing spree of his brother Ambimelech, Jotham went and stood on the top of Mount Gerizim, and lifted up his voice, and cried (v. 7, KJV).

Fifthly, a rather common and interesting facet of κλαυθμός and κλαίω is their connection with the cultic lamentation of the whole people before Yahweh, usually accompanied by a general fast (Haarbeck 1976:416). In Judges 20, particularly verse 3, the Israelites wept before the Lord in an attempt to enquire of the Lord whether or not to fight the Benjamites. Three verses later, the people of Israel again sat weeping before the Lord ... they fasted that day until evening and presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to the Lord (v. 26). Rengstorf (1976, vol. 3:723) makes reference to this same context saying that 'the crying of Ps 126:5 may be mentioned in this connection, if it is correct that we are to see in weeping at sowing a widespread cultic rite.' Furthermore, the singular context is detectable. Leland (1998:940) recognises the weeping and the tears of a prophet over the sins of the people (Lam 1:16) as well as the tears triggered by a sense of spiritual loss or hunger (Ps 42:3).

Lastly, weeping for joy. Weeping connotes a context of joy, as in the case of Jacob reuniting with Esau: But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept (Gen 33:4). This, of course, is altogether dissimilar in undertone to the previous four groups, in that its implication is one of happiness and not one of sorrow. It is here that the semantic diversity of κλαυθμός and κλαίω are especially evident. The significance of this

connotation is not of interest to this study, as no New Testament passage uses 'weeping' to denote joy or happiness.

It is important to note that the biblical use of κλαυθμὸς has a different connotation in its context from its secular counterpart. Rengstorf (1976, vol. 3:724) elucidates:

This is ... the point where the biblical use necessarily diverges from that of the world outside the Bible. For the idea of manifested remorse which is occasionally present in *klaiein* is quiet alien to the Greek world, just as the whole idea of guilt before God is alien ... *Klaio* seems to be used more for outward grief than for grief in general. It thus seems to refer to manifest grief of a physical; rather than a spiritual kind.

Rengstorf continues to explain that the full dissimilarity between the biblical and extra-biblical use is evident especially when considering the metaphorical use in each case. On the one side, it is a powerful description of the need to endure a painful situation which we may well have brought on ourselves; on the other, it denotes the acceptance and affirmation of dependence on God. The basis of the distinction is that non-biblical *klaiontes*, in and with their grief, stand in no relation to a God who according to an eternal plan directs the destinies of men to their salvation (p. 724).

With this distinction in mind, the focus may now shift to the New Testament.

2.3. New Testament

In the New Testament, κλαίω appears 40 times, meaning to weep, wail, or lament, implying not only the shedding of tears, but also, every external expression of grief and sorrow (Zodhiates 2000, s.v. κλαίω).

The word κλαίω, within the New Testament scriptures, is derived from the LXX and remains within the same semantic range. In fact, there is no new shade, tone, or semantic range of meaning. A brief analysis of the various nuances is, however, still necessary.

The appearances of the word κλαίω may be summarised as follows: the verb is used of strong sentiment and passion for mourning and wailing over a death (16 times), something that has been lost (6 times), or the ache of disconnection or separation (Acts 21:13) and for the expressive response to one's own lost state or the detachment of another (3 times).

Κλαίω appears as depicting or describing the enemies of Christ. This perspective has great theological significance, and deserves elaboration.

‘In the third Beatitude of Lk. hoi klaiontes nyn, “those that weep now” (6:21), are contrasted with those who are rich and full, who laugh now and of whom all men speak well (6:25 f.). The latter are self-righteous pharisaical persons, “who need no repentance” (15:7), who think highly of themselves, going through life full of self-assurance and with no sense of guilt. “Those that weep now”, on the other hand, live humbly in complete dependence upon God’ (Haarbeck 1976:416).

In both the Old and New Testament, laughter sometimes expresses an attitude which articulates human self-confidence in the face of God. When used in contrast to this kind of laughter, weeping expresses reliance, trust and confidence in God and his ways. Thus, in weeping, one acknowledges God, and his way is fundamentally accepted (Rengstorf 1976, vol. 3:723). Weeping occurs, moreover, as a result of realising one's weaknesses and sinfulness. For example, in Luke 7:38, the woman was crying profusely as she encountered Jesus. Luke tells

his readers that she wet Jesus' feet with her tears. Peter wept too when he realised that he had denied Jesus three times (Luke 22:62).

The term can also be used metaphorically of trepidation (John 16:20), remorse (5 times) or of generally unfulfilled and unhappy existence (6 times) (Balz and Schneider 1993:293). Rengstorf (1976, vol. 3:726) makes a further important observation. *Κλαίειν* is always accompanied by a softer word intended to communicate and express grief in the narrower sense. A few examples: *πενθεῖν* (Luke 6:25; Jas 4:9; Rev 18:11, 15, 19), *θρηνεῖν* (John 16:20), *ταλαιπωρεῖν* (Luke 4:9), *ὀλολύζειν* (Jas 5:1), *κόπτεσθαι* (Rev 18:9) and *λυπεῖσθαι* (John 16:20). In other words, 'only this combination yields the full severity of what is intimated in the sayings' (Rengstorf 1976, vol. 3:725).²

Κλαυθμός appears nine times in the Greek New Testament. Seven of the nine appearances occur in the phrase *weeping and gnashing of teeth*. In Matthew 2:18, *κλαυθμός* denoted the literal meaning of the word, namely, to bewail the death of a loved one or loved ones. In this context, 'it is associated with *odyrmos polys* ('loud lamentation') in the quotation from Jeremiah 31:15, which is seen as being fulfilled in the slaughter of the innocent at Bethlehem' (Haarbeck 1976:417).

In Acts 20:37, *κλαυθμός* describes the weeping of the elders due to Paul's departure. Here, the context is that of weeping out of sadness or out of an intense, deep grief. Although it is not in the same context as that of the Old Testament (grief associated with death), it would not be overstretching the imagination to understand and possibly assign similar connotations to *κλαυθμός*, as the elders obviously did not know if they would ever see Paul again.

² The only context that weeping never denotes in the New Testament is joy. Weeping due to joy is strictly an Old Testament connotation.

In summary, therefore, the word κλαυθμός demonstrates a fairly wide array of meanings, denoting crying for a variety of reasons; death, grief, anger, mournful dependence on God, lamentation, and even joy.

3. Βρυγμός

The words βρυγμός and βρύχω (also spelled βρύκω) are cognate words. They appear 15 times in the Old and New Testaments and are utilised by at least 8 pre-New Testament secular authors in classical literature. This also includes its various cognates and contexts.

At the commencement of word studies, finding the root meaning of a word is extremely important and lays the foundation for a successful result. However, Rengstorf (1976, vol. 1:641) cautions students: ‘the co-existence of several roots βρυχ- makes it extraordinarily difficult to review the development of the term.’ In other words, because of the several different spellings, it is difficult to discern whether one is dealing with the correct word. Suffice to commence this study understanding that the spelling of βρύχω often changes to βρύκω in the LXX and some classical passages.

3.1. *Extra-biblical Literature*

In Classical Greek literature, βρύχω seems to have a denotation similar to its occurrences in the Old and New Testament Greek, but interestingly, it communicates a relatively different connotation. Homer (Il., 13, 393; 16, 486) used the perfect tense βέβρυχα, portraying the breaking out of sufferers into open lamentation (Rengstorf 1976, vol. 1:641). In Ps.-Oppian Cyn. (2, 273), it describes the cry of pain of a stag mortally wounded by a snake-bite. Thus, there are ostensibly two mainstream usages of the word βρύχω throughout the ancient world.

The first was metaphorical, 'in the sense of gnawing or eating away as in the case of a disease (Sophocles)' (McComiskey 1976:421). This usage was common, as other medical writings have made use of βρυκῶ in the sense of 'chattering of teeth in chills and fevers' (Bauer 2000:184).³ The second was a descriptive noun, labelling the act of eating noisily or greedily (Verbrugge 2000:232). Therefore, within the corpus of classical Greek literature, the words βρύχω and βρυγμὸς appear in two different contexts, namely, (a) chattering of teeth as a direct result of a fever, and (b) chattering of teeth caused by noisy eating. The emotion associated with the word is, therefore, outwardly negative, connoting sentiments of sadness, misery, and even include *physical pain*.

3.2. Old Testament (LXX)

In the Greek Old Testament, there are five instances (Job 16:9; Pss 34:16; 36:12; 111:10; Lam 2:16)⁴ where the biblical writers utilise the word βρύκῶ (always translating the Hebrew word *hāraq*). The context of the phrase is always *to gnash with the teeth*.

Job in particular extends the imagery and likens *hāraq* to the gnashing of teeth of wild beasts before eating their prey, conveying a strong imagery of inescapable death caused by uncontrollable rage. Clines (1989:382) elaborates:

³ This is affirmed by Rengstorf (1976, vol. 1:641): "'to gnash" first appears in the expression βρύχειν (τοὺς ὀδόντας) with which Hippocrates (Mul., 1,2, 120 [VIII, 16, 262]; Epid., 5, 86 [V, 252, Littré]) characterizes especially the ague [fever].' In this sense, the dynamic equivalence of the word is 'chattering of teeth'. Rengstorf observes that it has sometimes occurred without τῶν ὀδόντων (of teeth).

⁴ These verse references are from the LXX. Their numbering is different to that of the English and Hebrew Bibles.

God's attack on him has been that of a wild beast. It is a conventionality of the psalmic lament to depict one's (human) opponents as animals, the point of comparison being their superhuman power and death-threatening assault. Not for the first time, Job borrows cultic language depicting enemies to apply to God. It is God's anger that motivates this assault upon him, tearing him as a lion or wolf tears its prey, making his attack incessant, grinding his teeth, a sure threat to the prey of its imminent devouring (the gnashing of teeth in rage, not elsewhere attributed to animals).

This illustration of gnashing of teeth is particularly important because it is unique and shows an uncommon usage, expanding its semantic range.

Lamentations 2:16 depicts Israel's enemies laughing antagonistically. Dyer (1985:1215) clarifies the context and meaning of this verse by explaining that the fourth sketch pictured the victorious enemy mocking the vanquished people. The once-majestic and secure city of Jerusalem was now the object of scoffing and derision. People taunted her, poking fun at her former beauty and joy, which were now gone, and her enemies scoffingly rejoiced in their victory (cf. 3:46).

Its usage, therefore, denotes contemptuous mocking (Verbrugge 2000:232), signifying 'an expression of rage that has burst out' (Keil 1996:503), having taken on a malicious, intense character.

The term βρῦκω appears three times in Psalms (35:16; 37:12; 112:10), all conveying strong antipathy, bitterness, and anger. However, Psalm 37:12 and 112:9 add yet another dimension to the semantic range, namely, jealousy. Pertaining to Psalm 37:12, VanGemeren (1991:301) observes that the 'futile are the activities of the wicked. They "plot" in an attempt to get the upper hand. Their godlessness finds expression in

an obsession with evil and hatred of good. They “gnash their teeth” in bitter jealousy.’

VanGemeren (1991:712) singles out jealousy and envy as related to ‘gnashing of teeth’. He continues to explain that the blessedness of the wise (due to his righteousness) leaves behind a legacy. In contrast, the wicked man sees God rewarding the righteous and will ‘melt away ... he is filled with anger, bitterness and jealousy.’

Its range of use seems rather regular and consistent, always symbolising the hatred of the unrighteous towards the righteous, a hatred that harbours a strong desire to destroy the godly.⁵

The noun βρυγμός makes only two appearances in the LXX. In Proverbs 19:12, translating the Hebrew word *naham*, denoting the wrath of a king (adopted figuratively) as he groans and growls as a lion (McComiskey 1976:421). In Sirach 51:3, the writer gives thanks for deliverance from the ‘gnashing of teeth’ which is about to devour him. In other words, the word is attributable to human enemies, depicted as wild beasts with the imagery of gnashing teeth prior to attack or prior to their biting (Job 16:9 also adopts this imagery).

In essence, then, the Old Testament equivalent of ‘gnashing of teeth’ is a set of colourful illustrations which convey extremely negative, depressing, and treacherous images of

- anger (Ps 35:16),
- hatred, bitterness, and a desire to destroy (Job 16:9),
- envy and jealousy (Ps 37:12; 112:9),

⁵ This undertone later surfaces in the New Testament, where the listeners are described as gnashing their teeth at Stephen’s speech (Acts 7:54).

- a malevolent joy at the hardship of others (Lam 2:16), and
- wrath (Prov 19:12) and imminent death (Sirach 51:3)

3.3. *New Testament*

The verb βρύχω appears only once (Acts 7:54) in the New Testament, and according to McComiskey (1976:421), it is recounting the ‘angry reaction of those who listened to Stephen’s speech’. In other words, βρύχω symbolises a reaction of rage, fury, and anger so intense that one consequently grinds one’s teeth, a seemingly uncontrollable, involuntary reaction. Bullinger (1999:324) puts it this way: ‘to roar or howl, especially the death cry of a wounded hero’. According to the above passage, it is possible to associate βρύχω with a *need*, or a strong desire for murder. Rengstorf (1976, vol. 1:641) correctly connects this passion of hatred with a desire to destroy. Moreover, according to the Old Testament customs and traditions, those who ‘βρύχω’ are sinners who are opposed to righteousness, whose removal is vital by any means necessary. This is clearly manifest in later passages, as the Sanhedrin’s desire to kill Stephen finally succeeded (Acts 7:50).

The noun βρυγμός is used seven times in the New Testament, once in the gospel of Luke 13:28, and six times in the gospel of Matthew (8:12; 13:42; 13:50; 22:13; 24:51 and 25:30), always in the phrase ἐκεῖ ἔσται ὁ κλαυθμὸς καὶ ὁ βρυγμὸς τῶν ὀδόντων (‘there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’, NIV), an expression describing ‘the condition of the wicked in their future existence’ (Verbrugge 2000:232). McComiskey (1976:421) explains that due to the rare appearance and usage of this phrase in secular Greek and Jewish literature, its precise meaning ‘can be derived only from its usage in each context’. This makes any meaning derived from context partially subjective. However, because of its regular appearance in Matthew’s gospel, it remains ‘the solid place

of formula' (Rengstorf 1976, vol. 1:641) for the actual phrase, not necessarily the individual words. Consequently, scholars have not disconnected βρυγμός and ὀδόντων, but treat them as a single unit, as in the first gospel.

Although the words κλαυθμός and βρυγμός have a particular scope of connotation and denotation, collectively they form a unique and particular phrase virtually unheard of in classical or Hebrew literature. The phrase ἐκεῖ ἔσται ὁ κλαυθμός καὶ ὁ βρυγμός τῶν ὀδόντων seems to be a strictly New Testament idiom.

What follows in the next segment is an overview the three concepts associated with the phrase 'weeping and gnashing of teeth', namely, 'outer darkness', 'fiery furnace', and 'dismemberment'. These three concepts may help to provide the essential context required for understanding such a unique Matthean passage, without verbal or conceptual precedent on which to rely for accurate interpretation.

4. 'Outer darkness', 'fiery furnace', and dismemberment

The phrase 'there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' appears six times in Mathew. A brief overview reveals that the phrase stands in direct relationship to three additional phrases or concepts:

Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30	'outer darkness'
Matthew 13:42; 13:50	'fiery furnace'
Matthew 24:51	'cut him to pieces'

A brief systematic analysis of these phrases will shed light on whether those who weep and gnash their teeth are remorseful, resentful, enraged, in physical pain, or all of the above.

The thematic commonality between Matthew 8:12, 22:13, and 25:30 is that the phrase ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth’ is connected with the terms, τὸ σκότος τὸ ἐξώτερον (‘outer darkness’, NIV; BDAG suggests ‘the darkness furthest out’ [s.v. ἐξώτερος]). In 8:12, the sons of the kingdom (false disciples) are thrown into the outer darkness. In 22:13, Jesus explained that the incorrectly clad guest at the wedding banquet was to be bound hand and foot and cast into the outer darkness. Similarly, the ‘worthless’ unfaithful servant was cast into the outer darkness (25:30). The phrase ‘outer darkness’ presents a contextual interpretive challenge, since it is a distinctly Matthean expression that seems to draw a powerful contrast between the brilliantly lit banquet hall blazing with light and the utter darkness outside. The concept of darkness is elsewhere also connected with judgment in general (2 Esdr 7:93; 1 Enoch 63:10; Pss Sol 14:4; 15:10). ‘Outermost’ is a superlative, an adjective that denotes the highest order, class, or degree, exceeding or superior to all others. This seamlessly links the concept of *the* weeping and *the* gnashing of teeth that takes place in *the* outermost darkness. In any case, it seems that the concept of ‘outermost darkness’ has relevance for the main question of this article, for it helps to underpin the theme—the severity of the judgment that takes place away from the blessings experienced by the righteous.

In two instances in Matthew chapter 13, Jesus is recorded connecting ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth’ with the concept of a fiery furnace (the only two uses of this phrase in the New Testament). Surely, a fiery furnace would provide a definitive conceptual link between the

outwardly expressed physical agony of 'weeping and gnashing of teeth'.

Matthew most likely drew (almost verbatim) the imagery τὴν κάμινον τοῦ πυρός from Daniel 3:6; 11; 15; 20 and Malachi 4:1–2 (the same words are found in Matt 13:50). Hagner (1998) thinks that this is to be related to the fire of Gehenna mentioned in 5:22 and 18:8–9 (cf. esp. 2 Esdr 7:36). However, neither of these two passages provides information pertaining to the nature of Gehenna or the nature of those who suffer in this place.

Interestingly, two prominent commentators (Hill 1972; Strecker 1975) have promoted the thesis that verses 49 and 50 are Matthean insertions and cannot belong to the original parable, citing the imagery of fire as inappropriate for the disposal of worthless fish. This view, according to Mounce (1998), however, is merely the result of the failure to recognise that verses 49 and 50 are an eschatological interpretation of the parable itself. In support of the view that the parable and its interpretation are original to Christ as a dynamic whole, Carson (1983:330) cautions such commentators not to confuse the symbol with what it symbolises. He continues to explain that, if one objects to the disposal of fish in the fire, one must similarly object to the reaction of the tares, for tares do not weep or gnash their teeth.

According to Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown (1997), 'the furnace of fire' denotes the fierceness of the torment, but alludes to no direct connection between the fire in the furnace and physical pain.

MacArthur (1985), however, sees a clear connection between the 'furnace of fire', 'weeping and gnashing of teeth', and physical agony, explaining that 'fire causes the greatest pain known to man, and the furnace of fire into which the sinners are cast represents the

excruciating (emphasis added) torment of hell, which is the destiny of every unbeliever'. It is not a stretch of the imagination to equate the symbol (furnace of fire) with what it symbolises (destruction *and* physical pain). This heeds Carson's warning not to confuse the symbol with what it symbolises. Even if annihilationism is presupposed as the ultimate fate of the wicked, the process of annihilation or total destruction by fire (assuming that the wicked do not simply cease to exist, and that 'fire' is not merely metaphorical in each instance when it is connected with 'hell' and 'judgment') is in itself filled with physical torture and it is excruciating. This is an important clarification; it is difficult to imagine the original hearers in an oral culture perceiving the nature of suffering of those cast (or 'flinging' expressions of indignation, abhorrence, contempt [McArthur 1985:n.p.]) inside a furnace of fire, weeping and gnashing their teeth, as simply a psychological representation of judgment devoid of any association with physical pain and suffering. It is equally arbitrary to think that, upon hearing the Old Testament narrative of King Nebuchadnezzar casting Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Dan 3:8–30), the hearers would not be astonished by the excruciating pain that the three Israelites would feel burning inside the furnace of fire. It seems, therefore, that 'fire', 'judgment', and even 'the concept of 'destruction' are connotatively inseparable from physical suffering and torment (irrespective of the duration of the fire which torments).

The final connection worthy of mention is the connection between 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' and dismemberment in verse 51 of the parable of the faithful and unfaithful servant (Matt 24:45-51). This concept requires closer systematic analysis.

The parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants reaches its climax by means of a vivid and bizarre exposition of a two-part judgment of the

unrighteous slave. In the first portion of the verse, Jesus makes known that the master shall *cut in two* the unfaithful servant. What did Jesus mean by this, and is there an inherent 'agony-factor' that hearers and readers would recognise?

There is no scholarly consensus concerning the meaning or nature of the disloyal slave's initial doom as expressed by Matthew. Jeremias (1972:57, n. 31), for example, proposed that the expression *to cut in two* is simply a mistranslation of the underlying Aramaic ('he will apportion to him' was incorrectly translated as 'he will divide him').⁶ Jones (2004:444) suggests that the expression *cut to pieces* is a separation from spiritual grace. In Matthew's case, it is expressing excommunication from the Christian community. Or, as suggested by Harrington (1991), it is merely a way of expressing excommunication from the community in general. As an advocate of a metaphorical interpretation, Harrington notes that a literal interpretation makes little sense, since a literal dissection would leave nothing to punish for eternity (p. 344). However, as Sim (2002:176) points out, the dichotomisation of the slave takes place after the return of the master (post Christ's *parousia*) and, therefore, this activity must have an eschatological referent. Others still, based upon the improbability that a severed body would receive additional punishment, have opted for a metaphorical interpretation of the servant's dissection. Betz (1964), for example, suggested that the meaning of διχοτομήσει has undergone evolution, and in light of such, he proposed that the underlying verb for correct translation is *to cut*, a verb which shifts the readers' attention to

⁶ Sim (2002:173–74) elaborates further, explaining that other scholars are prepared to let this odd motif stand, motivating their view on the grounds that Jesus was familiar with and influenced by the story of Ahiquar, a story which contains many parallels to the parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants.

representing the dramatic punishment (death) that appropriately launches the wicked into eternity (cf. Gundry 1982).⁷

Commentators in general seem to advocate one of the interpretive schemes from above (literal or metaphorical), with varying differences (e.g. Blomberg 1990; Scott 1990). As observed by Sim (2002:177), the common thread of the abovementioned interpretations of this Matthean passage is the assumption,

...that the evangelist could not have intended the reference to the dissection of the servant to be taken literally. ... it seems that scholars have made decisions about the beliefs of the evangelist on the basis of their own standards and worldviews. Since the scenario presented in Mt 24:51 seems both impossible and bizarre to modern readers, it is immediately assumed that Matthew must have thought in similar fashion.

Standing in accord with the above sentiments, the cutting into pieces of the wicked is not connotative of excommunication, or an unfortunate mistranslation, but a *literal* dissection of the false disciple ('cut in two of the dismemberment of a condemned person,' BDAG),⁸ a most awful and ghastly form of punishment often alluded to in other portions of scripture (1 Sam 15:32; 2 Sam 12:31; Dan 3:29; 1 Chr 20:3; Heb 11:37).⁹ This position, however, raises two potential difficulties. Firstly, how can a dissected (presumably deceased) body be fit for further punishment? Secondly, if the returning master represents Jesus, will

⁷ For a more thorough historical survey of the history of interpretation, see Sim 2002:172–184.

⁸ For a brief apologetic for a literal translation, see Friedrichsen 2001:258–264.

⁹ Moreover, such forms of punishment are likewise recorded in non-canonical literature, e.g., the execution of Mettius in Livy, i. 28, Horace, Sat., I. i. 99, Herodotus 7.39, and Suetonius *Caligula* 27.

Jesus be the agent of the gruesome eschatological punishment, as the master in the parable proper? Sim's (2002:182) conclusions answer both difficulties and deserve full citation:

Matthew accepted the tradition, found in both Jewish and Christian apocalyptic circles, that avenging angels would play an integral part in the eschatological punishment of wicked Christians (cf. 18:34). In 24:51 the evangelist makes the point that Jesus would cause the angels to punish these disobedient Christians by slicing them in two. A similar story of angelic tormenters who dissect the wicked is found in the story of Susanna, one of the additions to the canonical book of Daniel and a text that was known to and revered by Matthew and his community. In light of this and other close parallels between the parable and in Mt 24:45-51 and the tale of Susanna, it can be deemed very probable that Matthew read the Q tradition he inherited in the light of the Susanna story. Just as the evil elders abused their positions of power and responsibility and were cleaved in two by avenging angels as a result, so too would those leaders in the Christian community who abused their positions be given the same eschatological punishment.

Hence, the cutting in two of the unfaithful is a literal punishment of the most severe kind. France (2007:945) elaborates, explaining that there is no verification for its use in other places as simply an allegory for ruthless chastisement. In all probability, then, it is to be taken literally as a particularly brutal execution (cf. 1 Sam 15:33; Jer 34:18; Dan 3:29; Heb 11:37), which goes far outside the parameters of the account and is intended (like the 'torturers' of 18:34) to shock the reader into a response. Physical pain is, in all likelihood, inseparable from the nature of the narrative. Dissection is agonising, and those who experience a painful transition from this life into the next, will likely experience that excruciating physical (and emotional) pain in the life to come.

5. A Brief Christocentric Consideration

The final step in this investigation into the nature of weeping and gnashing of teeth is to consider both the christocentric and missional context of the idiom.

Peppler's (2012:120) definition of the christocentric principle will be adopted here, namely, 'an approach to biblical interpretation that seeks to understand all parts of scripture from a Jesus-perspective. In other words, it is a way of *interpreting scripture primarily from the perspective of what Jesus taught and modelled, and from what he revealed concerning the nature, character, values, principles, and priorities of the Godhead.*'

Peppler (2012:121) further explains that the thrust of the christocentric principle 'is that we should interpret all of scripture from the perspective of what Jesus reveals of the nature of the Godhead. What we know of God's character, values, principles, and priorities must govern our understanding of what we believe the Bible is teaching in all its parts.'

A character portrait of Jesus speaking judgment of such sobering proportions seems counterintuitive to the gentle shepherd imagery that many believers have embraced. Throughout the four gospels, Jesus expressed the reality of judgment on numerous occasions, outside of the six Matthean passages that contain the expression 'weeping and gnashing of teeth'. In fact, in Matthew, Jesus spoke on the theme of avoiding judgment more frequently than he did on getting to heaven. It may be argued that it was not Jesus who fixated on judgment, but Matthew, as the writer, carefully considered which judgment pronouncements to include in his prudently constructed gospel. To

some degree, this is a valid observation. Notwithstanding the inspired nature of Matthew's gospel in terms of its thematic content, the fact that Matthew had plentiful judgment materials (oral and written) available to him in order to compile his gospel points towards a Saviour who often conversed with his listeners on the topic of judgment.

A descriptive survey of judgment passages within the structural context of the five teaching discourses reveals that Matthew's Gospel is 'loaded' with judgment narratives as shown in the table below (Erdey and Smith 2012:31).

Discourse / Narrative	The theme of Judgment
Matthew's Opening Chapters (1–4)	3:7-12
Discourse 1: The Sermon on the Mount (chs. 5–7)	5:19; 5:21–26; 5:29–30; 7:13–14; 7:19; 7:27.
Chapters 8–9	8:5–13
Discourse 2: Missionary Instructions (ch. 10)	10:15, 26–33, 34–39
Chapters 11–12	11:22, 24; 11:36–37; 12:31–32; 12:41–42
Discourse 3: The kingdom Parable collection (ch. 13)	<i>13:24–30, 36–43, 47–50</i>
Chapters 14–17	15:13; 16:26
Discourse 4: Community instructions (ch. 18)	18:8–9

Chapters 19–22	19:28–29; 20:16; 21:18–21; 21:40; 22:13
Discourse 5: Eschatological Sermon (chs 23–25)	Chs 23; 24; 25

Table 1: Dispersion of the judgment theme in Matthew’s gospel

Therefore, from a christocentric perspective, Jesus not only preached and taught about judgment, but he also alluded to the severity of the judgment itself in extremely sobering language. From this perspective, it seems clear that Matthew recorded Christ revealing not only the reality of judgment in general, but the nature of judgment in particular. Christ’s judgment disclosures may, therefore, unveil grace and compassion, rather than stand-alone conclusions about the severity of judgment as an end in its own. This facet of Christ’s love and compassion towards the lost becomes clearer in his final words of love and compassion to his disciples. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus seems to bring together and reinforce his entire earthly ministry with the words, ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations’. In other words, now that you understand all the things that I have shared with you (including the horrific nature of judgment), go out and spread the Good News of salvation. Moreover, John 3:16 is a pertinent passage: ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.’ In verse 17, a clarifying statement is added, explaining that ‘God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him’. That is, the harsh reality of judgment is the absolute last resort, for God has done everything within his providential power to offer salvation to all those who accept it. The very nature of God, as demonstrated though Jesus, is to have an eternal relationship with all

those who trust in him; he is a God who saves from judgment, not a God who is consumed by punishing those who reject him.

Possibly, there is a thematic connection here, for it seems that the most horrific pronouncements of judgment through the weeping and gnashing of teeth phrase as recorded by Matthew, Jesus made to the disciples in private, not to the crowds in general. For example, in the parables of the tares (Matt 13:24–30), Jesus tells the parable to the crowds, but provides the exegesis of the parable to his disciples only (36–43). The same applies to the parable of the dragnet (47–50); Jesus reveals the full extent of judgment, accompanied by the phrase 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' to the disciples, after the crowds have left. Why did Christ reveal the horrific fate of the wicked exclusively to his disciples, and not to the crowds? From a missional perspective, perhaps Jesus was 'soft' and compassionate on the lost, but hard and firm with those who considered themselves disciples. The standard has been set higher, so much so, that they should know and fully understand what will happen to those who reject salvation. Perhaps,

Jesus felt it unnecessary to emphasise this truth to the masses. Rather, Jesus emphasised the horrors of eternal judgment primarily to His disciples, probably with the goal of imparting to them a sense of urgency to reach the lost. No true disciple, upon hearing of the horrors of judgment, should remain unmoved and indifferent to the urgent need to evangelise the lost. No true disciple, upon reading Matthew's gospel, should be insensitive to the desperate plight of those who reject the Saviour of the world (Erdey and Smith 2012:37).

From a missional perspective, therefore, the message of Jesus demands from its readers an individual response to the question, 'What about those who are lost? Are you really going to do nothing, knowing the

horrific fate they will suffer?’ The Great Commission in Matthew 28 cements the demand for a response to this question. The sense of urgency is unmistakable. All believers are expected to contribute towards God’s mission to bring the gospel to the lost.

6. Conclusion

Matthew has employed the phrase ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth’ on six occasions throughout his gospel. Commentators often comment that the Matthean phrase is a vivid reference to the nature of the wicked post final judgment. However, some conclude that, based on the Matthean idiom, the existential state of the wicked goes beyond mere anger frustration and rage at God (a psychological existential state); it embraces physical pain and agony. That is, the judged will weep and gnash their teeth because of emotional stimuli *and* physical agony, possibly as a result of the literal fires of hell. This enquiry was therefore a thematic analysis of the phrase, the meaning of the individual words that make up the phrase, as well as a basic thematic consideration of the concepts that are closely connected to each occurrence of the phrase.

A synchronic and diachronic study of the individual terms within the phrase ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth’ has revealed that word κλαυθμός demonstrates a fairly extensive assortment of meanings, denoting crying for a variety of reasons; death, grief, anger, mournful dependence on God, lamentation, and even joy. The connotative range of meaning could not be wider.

In extra-biblical literature, the word βρυγμός always conveys the meaning to *gnash* (the teeth) because of (a) suffering associated with sickness and disease or (b) because one is eating noisily. The emotional

or expressive context of eating noisily is, of course, neutral. This changes fairly significantly when the word is used in the context of chattering (of teeth) due to a fever. The emotion associated with the word is therefore outwardly negative, connoting sentiments of melancholy, desolation, and even *physical pain*. Therefore, its range of meaning may and does include physical pain, and it is unwise to exclude this outwardly physical aspect of the word.

Although still denoting a chattering of teeth in the LXX, the source has clearly changed to a more negative, downbeat origin, namely, bitterness, jealousy and potent anger. A widening of scope/meaning is apparent, intensifying from implicating superficially negative emotions to far more harmful, defensive, and distrustful feelings of hostility. Therefore, the term βρυγμός may contain within it citations of existential truths from both ends of the spectrum; neutral noise as a result of eating noisily, of anger, hostility, and *physical pain*.

In the final segment of the article there was a systematic contextual analysis of each appearance of the idiom 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' *vis-a-vis* three circumstantial concepts, namely, outer darkness, furnace of fire, and dismemberment. For example, the notion of 'outer darkness' is a particularly Matthean expression that draws a powerful comparison between the intensely lit banquet hall blazing with light and the absolute darkness outside. The 'furnace of fire', another unique Matthean phrase, appears only twice in the New Testament, drawing an allusionary parallel between the suffering that fire can cause to the physical body, and the equivalent existential experience of those who weep and gnash their teeth. Lastly, the concept of dissection or dismemberment, the cutting in two of the unfaithful, is a literal punishment of the most severe kind that is inseparable from physical agony. It is difficult to accept that the hearers and readers of Matthew's gospel, in this instance, would not perceive the connotations of the

severity of judgment apropos the pain and suffering that dismemberment would cause.

Therefore, the three concepts are helpful in the sense that they re-confirm the force of judgment in general, and the severity of the full and complete suffering of those who weep and gnash their teeth, in the outermost darkness, having been cut into pieces, and thrown into the furnace of fire, where they experience total emotional and physical suffering in the inferno.

A final word of caution is necessary for interpreters. As with the phrase, ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth’,¹⁰ each of these expressions is unique to Matthew’s literary style and, therefore, defers (in some sense), rather than assists in answering conclusively the main question of this article. That is, it is difficult to discover categorically the meaning of one particularly unique idiom by merely appealing to other unique circumstantial concepts within the same verse or pericope. Thus, interpreters are left with an interpretive dilemma, required to return to a larger context of Matthew’s theology of judgment, as well as other informing scriptural passages. This article was merely a proposal to interpreters to consider more seriously Matthew’s theological communiqué that the idiom ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth’, interpreted in the light of three concepts to which it is connected, as well as the synchronic and diachronic analysis of the individual words that make up the phrase, seems to indicate that indeed, the unrighteous will suffer in the total sense of the word; soul, spirit, and body.

¹⁰ For the unique nature and function of the phrase ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth’ in the gospel of Matthew, see Erdey and Smith (2012).

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