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A re-examination of the intermediate state of unbelievers

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I. Introduction

Although Scripture teaches us little about the state of unbelievers between death and the final judgment, the prevailing view since the time of Augustine has been that the souls of unbelievers proceed immediately to a place of conscious punishment upon death.[1] This is reflected in the Reformed Confessions and in the writings of many Reformed theologians.[2] This article seeks to challenge that view by showing it to be irreconcilable with Scripture's clear teaching that unbelievers will be surprised by the outcome of the final judgment.

1. Scope and structure

In what follows I will not attempt to provide an exhaustive account of the intermediate state or of the final judgment. My aim is more modest: to re-examine Scripture's teaching about the intermediate state of unbelievers in light of its teaching concerning the response of unbelievers at the final judgment. In short, the article will ask whether unbelievers who have died prior to the *pa-*

1 Augustine writes: 'But during the time which intervenes between a man's death and the resurrection at the last, men's souls are reserved in secret storehouses, at rest or in tribulation according to each soul's deserts, according to its lot in the flesh during life' (*Enchiridion* (trans. Ernest Evans; London: SPCK, 1953), 95).

2 Chapter XXXII of the Westminster Confession of Faith states that, after death, 'the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day'. Chapter XXVI of the Second Helvetic Confession states, 'we believe that unbelievers are immediately cast into hell from which no exit is opened for the wicked by any services of the living'. For examples in the writings of Reformed theologians, see: John Calvin, 'Psychopannychia', in *Calvin's Tracts* (ed. Henry Beveridge; 3 vols.; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1851), 3.419-490; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003), 3.713-730; William G. J. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (3 vols.; 1888; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969), 2.619-640; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (1939; repr., London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 680; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1994), 822-824; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (ed. John Bolt; 4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 4.605-606.

rousia will be surprised by the outcome of the final judgment. If Scripture does indeed teach this then we must question the accuracy of the Reformed understanding of the intermediate state since, if unbelievers have already experienced conscious punishment upon death, there is no reason why they should be surprised by the outcome of the final judgment. It will be a mere confirmation of the punishment already experienced. The aims of the article are reflected in its structure. The first part will examine Scripture's teaching regarding the expectation of believers and unbelievers at the final judgment. It will be shown that while believers can look forward to the final judgment with eager anticipation because the verdict is already guaranteed, Scripture consistently teaches that some unbelievers, including those who have died prior to the *parousia*, will be surprised by the outcome of the final judgment. The second part of the article critically examines the Scriptural basis for the Reformed understanding of the intermediate state of unbelievers and proposes an alternative view – one that is consistent with Scripture's teaching about the expectation of unbelievers at the final judgment.

2. The nature, purpose and interpretation of parables

Many of the most vexing exegetical questions in this study concern the parables of Jesus and, for that reason, it seems sensible to make a few brief observations about the parabolic genre at the outset. The history of the interpretation of the parables has been dominated by two contrasting approaches. Until the end of the nineteenth century, most interpreters adopted an allegorical approach, but this was convincingly challenged by modern scholarship which insisted that allegory is completely absent from the parables.[3] Unfortunately, this approach is itself flawed in that it overlooks the undeniable allegorical elements that are present in many of Jesus' parables, and denies the authenticity of Jesus' own allegorical interpretations of his parables (Matt. 13:18-23, 36-43).[4] As Klyne Snodgrass has noted, these scholars have 'thrown out *allegory*, a literary form, while the problem was allegorizing, the interpretative procedure of reading into the parables a theology that Jesus did not intend'.[5] A preferable approach is to recognise the presence of allegory while being cautious not to read meaning into the parables which would not have been apparent to the original hearers.[6]

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3 The forerunner and leader of this new approach was Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (2 vols.; Freiburg: Mohr-Siebeck, 1889). Jülicher denied that Jesus ever used allegory and claimed that all of Jesus' authentic parables were in reality expanded similes. See the discussions in: Klyne Snodgrass, 'From Allegorizing to Allegorizing: A History of the Interpretation of the Parables of Jesus', in *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables* (ed. Richard N. Longenecker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 3-10; Robert H. Stein, 'The Genre of Parables', in Longenecker, *Challenge*, 30-34.

4 Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1972), 77-79.

5 Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2008), 6.

6 Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Leicester: Apollos, 1990), 68-69.

At root, parables are a form of indirect communication which seeks to challenge the preconceptions of the hearer through the use of analogy. They are 'stories with an intent', and this must influence the way that we read and interpret them.[7] A few points should be borne in mind when embarking on the interpretative task. Firstly, we must remember that the parables are fictional stories. Firstly, we must remember that the parables are fictional stories. They may draw on historical events and matters from everyday life, but they do not purport to depict true stories.[8] Secondly, parables are spoken into a specific context and must be read in light of that context.[9] Thirdly, parables are told for a specific purpose and it is the interpreter's role to ascertain that purpose in the context of Jesus' overall teaching. Parables are not intended to communicate trivial facts or circumstantial information. The goal of the interpreter is to ascertain the 'theological intent and significance of the parable', and this will always be consistent with Jesus' teaching elsewhere and with the whole canon of Scripture.[10]

II. Expectation of the final judgment

1. The expectation of believers at the final judgment

Scripture provides very little insight into the response of believers at the final judgment but what it does declare gives no indication that believers will be surprised by the verdict. As we will see, this is consistent with the Reformed doctrine of justification. It is necessary, however, to pause and consider two parables which at first glance appear to point in the opposite direction. It will be shown that, although the parables portray surprise, the source of the surprise is not in fact the outcome of judgment.

The Wedding Banquet – Matt. 22:1-14

The parable of the wedding banquet has unmistakable eschatological significance:[11] the wedding banquet was a common symbol for the eschatological cel-

7 Snodgrass, *Stories*, 8.

8 Snodgrass, *Stories*, 18. C.H. Dodd probably overstates the realism of the parables (*The Parables of the Kingdom* [London: The Religious Book Club, 1942], 20-21).

9 Simon Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1980), xxii-xxiii.

10 Snodgrass, *Stories*, 30; Kistemaker, *Parables*, xxiv; Dodd, *Parables*, 32.

11 The parable of the wedding banquet has much in common with the parable of the feast in Luke's account (Luke 14:15-24), but there are good reasons for thinking that they are separate parables rather than two versions of the same parable. There are a number of clear differences: in Matthew, the story concerns 'a king' while in Luke it is 'a certain man'; in Matthew a wedding banquet, in Luke a great feast; in Matthew there are two invitations, in Luke just one; in Matthew the invited guests are destroyed, in Luke the invited guests are passed over. As Klyne Snodgrass has shown, there is very little verbal correspondence between the two accounts. Of the 223 words used in Matt. 22:1-14 only twelve are identical in Luke 14:15-24 (*Stories*, 304-305). See also: Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 237-239; D. A. Carson, *Matthew* (EBC 8; ed. Frank E. Gaebelein; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 455-456.

ebration of God's people (Rev. 19:9) and the punishment described in verse 13 is familiar imagery for the eschatological judgment (Matt. 8:12; 13:42; 13:50; 24:51; 25:30).[12] Moreover, the parable sounds an element of surprise, 'the expected are absent and the unexpected are present'.[13] But the surprise precedes the eschatological event itself and is rooted in the identity of those who fail to attend and those who are invited in their place. The context (Matt. 21:13, 45) strongly suggests that it is the chief priests and Pharisees who are identified with those who fail to attend.[14] The substitute guests are said to be found at 'the road intersections', places where the poor tended to congregate, and are described as 'both bad and good' (Matt. 22:10). They were outsiders – those whom the Jewish establishment would have excluded, and it is here that the surprise of the parable is found.[15] While this clearly has eschatological significance, the surprise is already being realised in the present with the proclamation of the gospel (Matt. 8:5-13; 9:11-13). Even now, those excluded by the Jewish leaders are being called into the kingdom and although this may cause surprise at the point of initial invitation there is no suggestion that the surprise will continue on into the eschatological event itself. The surprise concerns the shift in the locus of God's people; it does not extend to the believers' response at judgment itself.

The Sheep and the Goats – Matt. 25:31-46

Jesus' teaching about the sheep and the goats is a parabolic saying, providing an analogy (vv. 32-33) followed by an explanation (vv. 34-46).[16] The analogy is between the pastoral separation of sheep and goats and the separation that will take place at the final judgment.[17] In the analogy, the sheep are those who receive a favourable judgment while the goats are those who are condemned. Both

12 W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *Matthew* (3 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 3.198-199; Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 233-234. But see the concerns of Morris and Carson about pushing the eschatological significance too hard: Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Pillar; Leicester: Apollos, 1992), 547-548; Carson, *Matthew*, 456.

13 Snodgrass, *Stories*, 322.

14 Indeed, this is consistent with the treatment of the King's servants in verse 6 and the application of the two preceding parables (Matt. 21:31-32, 42-45).

15 Morris, *Matthew*, 551; Carson, *Matthew*, 457.

16 Snodgrass, *Stories*, 12, 543.

17 There is some debate about the meaning of 'all the nations' in v. 32 and therefore about what group is in view. Commentators have suggested that the expression refers to Christians alone, to non-Christian nations, to Gentiles, or to the heathen (Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 271-274; Graham N. Stanton, 'Once More: Matthew 25.31-46', in *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (ed. Graham N. Stanton; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992); Davies and Allison Jr., *Matthew*, 3.428. The more natural meaning of *panta ta ēthnē*, however, is the whole of the human race and this is consistent with the immediate context of the expression in Matthew's Gospel (Matt. 24:9, 14; 28:19) (Morris, *Matthew*, 635; Carson, *Matthew*, 521; Snodgrass, *Stories*, 554-555).

groups sound a note of surprise upon hearing the verdict (vv. 37-39, 44). The point of interest for us is the reason given (vv. 34-36, 40-43, 45). Contrary to what some commentators suggest, neither group is surprised by the outcome of the judgment but rather by the reasons given by the king.[18] As D. A. Carson notes, 'there is no need to say the goats expected to be welcomed or the sheep expected to be rejected'.[19] The object of surprise for both is that the deeds they have done to 'the least of these my brothers' (vv. 40, 45) are deeds done to Jesus. The phrase 'the least of these my brothers' most probably refers to all followers of Jesus.[20] This is certainly consistent with Jesus' assertions elsewhere that his brothers are his disciples (Matt. 12:48-49; 28:10). As to the relevance of these deeds, there are two possibilities: they are either the basis for the judgment or the evidence of redemption.[21] Leaving aside arguments from the analogy of Scripture, the object of the people's surprise (the matter with which we are here concerned) is determinative of the issue.[22] If the righteous had been seeking to earn salvation by good works then they surely would not have been surprised by the king's reasons for his judgment. Rather, the basis for their surprise is that their good deeds toward Christians are probative, demonstrating the authenticity of their faith. It is this that causes surprise for believers at the final judgment not the outcome of judgment itself.

The doctrine of justification

The absence of surprise for believers at the final judgment is entirely consistent with the Reformed doctrine of justification and, indeed, the doctrine would itself be called into question if Scripture taught to the contrary. This is because Reformed theology considers justification to be both a declarative and constitutive act of God in the present that provides assurance for the believer in relation to judgment in the future.[23] Justification is forensic and declarative; as John Calvin put it, 'he is justified who is reckoned in the condition not of a sinner, but of a righteous man; and for that reason, he stands firm before God's judgment

18 W. George Gay, 'The Judgment of the Gentiles in Matthew's Theology', in *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation* (ed. W. Ward Gasque and William Sanford Lasor; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

19 Carson, *Matthew*, 522.

20 For a discussion of the various other possibilities, see: Carson, *Matthew*, 519-520; Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 604-606; David R. Catchpole, 'The Poor on Earth and the Son of Man in Heaven: A Re-Appraisal of Matthew XXV. 31-46', *BJRL* 61 (1978-79), 355-397.

21 Historically, Catholics have argued for the former while Protestants have argued for the latter, see Snodgrass, *Stories*, 558.

22 See Carson, *Matthew*, 522.

23 The Westminster Larger Catechism states: 'Justification is an act of God's free grace unto sinners, in which he pardons all their sins, accepts and accounts their persons righteous in his sight; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, and received by faith alone'.

seat while all sinners fall'.[24] It is also constitutive; God constitutes the new judicial relation that he declares to be in place through the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the sinner in the believer's union with Christ.[25] Justification in this dual sense is a present reality for the believer at the moment of faith (Rom. 5:1, 9; 8:1, 30; 1 Cor. 6:11). It flows from Christ's past resurrection (Rom. 4:25) and guarantees the individual's future salvation (Rom. 5:9-10).[26] As Francis Turretin notes, the judgment passed on the final day, 'is not so much justification, as a solemn declaration of the justification once made and an adjudication of the reward, in accordance with the preceding justification'.[27] This is why there is no Scriptural indication that believers will be surprised at the final judgment. The outcome is already guaranteed. Through the believer's union with Christ the penalty for their sin has already been paid and the benefits of his righteousness have already been received. This view is reinforced by the consideration that, when final judgment occurs, believers will have been raised, glorified and made like Christ (1 John 2:28-3:2). In such a state it is inconceivable that believers should be surprised by the verdict delivered.

2. The expectation of unbelievers at the final judgment

We must now consider whether the verdict passed upon unbelievers on the final day will be unexpected for those who have died prior to Christ's return. Again, it is the parables that provide the most fruitful ground for inquiry.

The Wedding Banquet – Matt. 22:11-14

When we examined the parable of the wedding banquet in the previous section, we noted that its central teaching concerns the shift in the locus of God's people.

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24 McNeil, ed., *Calvin's Institutes*, 1.726. For a discussion of the forensic import of the *dik-* word group, see Mark A. Seifrid, 'Paul's Use of Righteousness Language Against Its Hellenistic Background', in *Justification and Variegated Nomism Volume 2* (ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid; 2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 52. For a more general discussion of the declarative nature of justification in Reformed literature, see: Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3.118-134; John T. McNeil, ed., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. Ford Lewis Battles; 2 vols.; The Library of Christian Classics XX; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 2001), 1.725-728; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (ed. James T. Dennison Jr.; trans. George Musgrave Giger; 3 vols.; Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1994), 2.633-636.

25 John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 123. See also, Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 2.539-540.

26 The fact that our justification flows from Christ's past resurrection only means that, objectively, the whole body of Christ was justified in Christ's resurrection. It must be distinguished from the personal justification of the sinner. For a critique of the view that personal justification of the sinner occurred at the resurrection, see: Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 519-520.

27 Turretin, *Institutes*, 2.685.

The parable makes a further point, however, in its final four verses.[28] There we read that the King came to look at the guests and 'saw there a man who had no wedding garment' (v. 11).[29] He asks the guest how he had entered without the right garments and the guest is left speechless (v. 12). So the king orders for him to be bound and thrown into the outer darkness where 'there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (v. 13) – a clear picture of hell.[30] For our purposes, we shall focus on the response of the inappropriately attired guest. He is left speechless; he expected to be welcomed but finds himself excluded. Jesus' intent is plain; he is addressing 'those who are confident that they have a place in the coming eschatological banquet' and is telling them that they will be surprised if they come unprepared.[31] We must presume that Jesus is addressing his immediate hearers, in which case he is speaking of those who will die prior to Christ's return. Accordingly, what we have here is strong evidence that at least some of the unbelieving dead will be surprised by the outcome of the final judgment.

The Ten Virgins – Matt. 25:1-13

The primary intent of the parable of the ten virgins is explained in its conclusion: 'Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour' (v. 13). In the preceding parable (Matt. 24:45-51), the wicked servant was unprepared for the speed of his master's return. In this parable the problem is reversed – the virgins are unprepared for the delay. The virgins are probably bridesmaids who are wait-

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28 There is considerable debate about whether verses 11-14 are authentic or a Matthean addition (the encounter does not appear in Luke's parable – Luke 14:15-24). See: Davies and Allison Jr., *Matthew*, 3.194-195; Jeremias, *Parables*, 64-65, 67-69; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* (WBC 33B; Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 627-628; R. T. France, *Matthew* (TNTC; Leicester: IVP, 1985), 311. As noted above, there is good reason to believe that the parable recorded in Matthew and the one recorded in Luke are separate. If so, it is quite conceivable that vv. 11-14 are not a Matthean addition.

29 It has been suggested that it was customary in the day for hosts to provide their guests with appropriate attire but the evidence for this is not strong, see Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 439. Some contend that the garments represent repentance (Keener, *Gospel of Matthew*, 522; Jeremias, *Parables*, 188; H. N. Ridderbos, *Matthew* (BSC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 406), others probative works (Gundry, *Matthew*, 439), others righteousness in the new age (Hagner, *Matthew*, 2.631; Kistemaker, *Parables*, 105). On balance, the parallel with Rev. 19:8 favours the latter view but the symbolism is quite vague and we do well to observe D. A. Carson's caution in saying 'no more than that the man, though invited did not prepare acceptably for the feast' (*Matthew*, 457).

30 Davies and Allison Jr., *Matthew*, 3.205; Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew* (NAC 22; Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1992), 329. Carson and Morris's view that it merely represents 'uncomfortable lodging' is unsupported and they both omit to comment on the expression 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Carson, *Matthew* 457; Morris, *Matthew* 552). See the references to 'gnashing of teeth' in the context of eschatological judgment in Sib. Or. 2:203; 8:350.

31 John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 891.

ing to meet the bridegroom as he comes from the bride's house.[32] Verses 2-4 state the problem: while the wise virgins had prepared for the groom's delay by bringing extra oil, the foolish virgins had not. The groom delays and all ten virgins fall asleep (v. 5). At midnight, a cry rings out and the virgins wake and trim their lamps (vv. 6-7). The foolish virgins find themselves without sufficient oil and ask the wise virgins to share. They refuse and the foolish virgins are forced to travel to the dealers to purchase more (v. 10). In the meantime the groom arrives; the wise virgins go into the banquet and the foolish virgins are shut out (v. 11).

The parable teaches four points.[33] Firstly, like the bridegroom the Son of Man may delay his coming. Secondly, Christians should be ready for a delay. Thirdly, those who fail to make preparations will find that there comes a time after which it is impossible to ready themselves. Fourthly, it is impossible to share readiness with others. It is the third point that we intend to focus on as we consider what the parable teaches about the expectation of unbelievers at the final judgment.

The surrounding context makes it clear that the parable is intended to describe the *parousia* and final judgment.[34] The foolish virgins are those who have not done what is necessary to be ready for the appearing of the Lord and they will be condemned as a result. This is described in verses 11-12. The virgins arrive and cry out 'Lord, lord, open to us' (v. 11).[35] The words echo those spoken by Jesus in Matt. 7:21-23.[36] The foolish virgins (representing unbelievers) expect to

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32 There is a lot of disagreement about the details. Carson and Kistemaker consider that the virgins are waiting for the groom to leave the bride's house (Carson, *Matthew*, 513; Kistemaker, *Parables*, 130); Jeremias and Snodgrass argue that they are waiting for the groom to arrive (Jeremias, *Parables*, 173; Snodgrass, *Stories*, 513); Ridderbos suggests that they were waiting at the bridegroom's house on the eve of the wedding day (*Matthew*, 457); Hagner quite rightly notes that the details are actually insignificant (*Matthew*, 2.728).

33 See the discussion in Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 195-196; Davies and Allison Jr., *Matthew*, 3.392; Snodgrass, *Stories*, 518; Kistemaker, *Parables*, 136.

34 See D. A. Carson's critique of dispensational interpretations (*Matthew*, 512). N.T. Wright suggests that the parables in Matthew 25 are focused on the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 (*Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 636). Against this view is the fact that this requires *synteleias tou aiōnos* (Matt. 24:3) to refer to the end of the Jewish age, even though this lacks any NT parallel; Heb. 9:26 focuses on the introduction of the coming age, see R.T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971), 230. Moreover, as we have noted earlier *panta ta ēthnē* (Matt. 25:32), clearly has Gentile nations in view, and given the clear links between the parables in Matthew 25, and Jesus' preceding words in Matt. 24:36-51, we must presume that the Gentiles are in view throughout this part of the Olivet discourse regardless of our views on the specific point of reference throughout Matt. 24:4-35.

35 As Davies and Allison note, these words seem inappropriate when spoken to the groom and demonstrate that the parable has here merged with the reality it is seeking to describe (*Matthew*, 3.400).

36 Morris, *Matthew*, 625; France, 'On Being Ready', in Longenecker, *Challenge*, 182; Gundry, *Matthew*, 501.

be admitted.[37] They do not knock on the door pleading excuses and asking for mercy. Rather, they call out pleading what they consider to be their right – admittance to the banquet. And they are left shocked by the response. The door remains closed and the groom replies: 'Truly, I say to you. I do not know you'.[38]

The point is clear; at final judgment there will be some who expect to be let into the eschatological banquet but who will be denied. The crucial question is whether this group includes unbelievers who have died prior to Christ's return. In seeking to answer that question we must first consider whether there is symbolic significance attached to the use of *katheudō* ('sleep') in verse 5. In support of such a view is the consideration that, without such significance, the mention of sleep appears to be superfluous to the parable.[39] Although *koimaō* is a more common euphemism for death, *katheudō* is sometimes used euphemistically (Ps. 87:6; Dan. 12:2; 1 Thess. 5:10).[40] Moreover, this interpretation explains why there is no negative evaluation of the sleep in the parable. Had the sleep been voluntary then surely all ten virgins would have been rejected for their failure to 'keep watch' (Matt. 25:26). If the sleep is involuntary, however, as indeed it must be if it refers to death, then there is no reason why the virgins should be held accountable for it. Of course, the euphemism makes no sense in the immediate context of the parable (which perhaps explains the use of *katheudō* rather than *koimaō*), but it is probably an example of the parable merging with the reality it seeks to describe.[41] Even if one rejects this euphemistic reading of *katheudō*, it is still likely that the parable refers to those who die prior to Christ's return because these are the very people to whom the parable was originally addressed.[42] Parables are 'stories with an intent', and as such they are very unlikely to refer solely

37 The distinction between the wise and the foolish has a clear Hebraic background: Prov. 10:14; 14:33. However in Matt. 7:24, 26, Jesus makes clear that the 'wise' are those who obey his teaching and the 'foolish' are those who do not, and this observation is made in the context of judgment.

38 Jeremias compares these words to a rabbi's temporary ban: Jeremias, *Parables*, 175. The support for this is extremely weak, and in the context of the surrounding parables it is clear that the judgment is continuing (see Matt. 24:51; 25:30, 46).

39 It might be thought that the period of sleep is necessary to explain why the virgins ran out of oil, i.e. they left their lamps lit while they were sleeping and this consumed the oil. This is highly unlikely. *Lampadas* refers to torches rather than lamps (which would have been *lychnous* as in Matt. 6:22). As Gundry notes, these torches consisted of rags soaked in oil; they would 'resist a breeze, give a bright light, burn only about fifteen minutes, and then need to have the rags that are wrapped around the end of the stick soaked again in oil' (Gundry, *Matthew*, 498). The oil could have run out at anytime and the virgins would have been caught out regardless of whether they had fallen asleep or not. See also: Davies and Allison Jr., *Matthew*, 3.395–396; Keener, *Gospel of Matthew*, 596; Nolland, *Matthew*, 1004.

40 See Marbury B. Ogle, 'The Sleep of Death', *MAAR* 11 (1933), 81-117; Richard Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1962). Cited in Danker and Bauer, *BDAG*, 490.

41 As is the foolish virgins' plea in verse 11.

42 See Hagner, *Matthew*, 2.729.

to those who will live several millennia after they were first spoken.[43] Against this view, one might possibly argue that the warning of verse 13 is applicable to the immediate audience while the description of the virgins' response only relates to those who will be alive at the *parousia*. This is a possible reading although, as we will observe later, the unambiguous reference to Matt. 7:21-23 strongly suggests that even those who have died prior to Christ's return will be surprised by the outcome of the judgment.

The Talents and the Ten Minas – Matt. 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27

The parables of the talents and the minas can be treated together.[44] Both parables concern a distribution of money (Matt. 25:14-15; Luke 19:12-13), its use by servants (Matt. 25:16-18; Luke 19:15-26), and the judgment delivered by the master / nobleman (Matt. 25:19-30; Luke 19:15-26). Although there has been some debate in recent years about whether the parables point to the *parousia* or to the more immediate coming of judgment on Jerusalem, the weight of scholarly opinion is still in favour of an eschatological focus for both parables.[45] Their intent seems to be to exhort Jesus' followers to be faithful through active service until Christ's return.[46] Our focus will be on the third or 'other' servant and particularly on his response to the master. In both accounts, the servant fails to yield a profit from the money he has been entrusted with and he blames his master, describing him as a 'hard' (Matt. 25:24-25) or 'severe' (Luke 19:20-21) man. The master responds by ordering that the money to be taken from the third servant and given to the first (Matt. 25:28; Luke 19:24), and that he be 'cast into the outer darkness' where 'there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matt. 25:29-30). The third servant has misunderstood his master: his character, demands and expectations; and he is left shocked by the verdict.[47] The parable implies that the same will be true of any who claim to follow Christ and yet do not persevere in active obedience till the end. Once again we must ask whether this is only intended to have applica-

43 See the discussion of the nature, purpose and interpretation of parables.

44 On whether the parables are two accounts of the same parable or two similar but independent parables see: France, 'On Being Ready', in Longenecker, *Challenge*, 183-184; Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 217; I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 700-703; John Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53* (WBC; Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 910; Dodd, *Parables*, 152-153.

45 See Wright, *Victory*, 631-639; Luke T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (SP 3; Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 292-295; Luke T. Johnson, 'The Lukan Kingship Parable (Lk. 19:11-27)', *NovT* 24 (1982), 139-159; Nolland, *Luke*, 3.913; Davies and Allison Jr., *Matthew*, 3.402; Carson, *Matthew*, 515; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1228.

46 Snodgrass, *Stories*, 534-535, 539-540; Darrell L. Bock, Luke (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1543-1544; Joel R. Wohlgemut, 'Entrusted Money (Matthew 25:14-28)', in *Jesus and His Parables: Interpreting the Parables of Jesus Today* (ed. V. George Shillington; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 119.

47 Keener, *Gospel of Matthew*, 601; Bock, *Luke*, 1539-1540.

tion to those who will be living at the *parousia* and again we conclude that such a reading is unlikely in view of the identity of Jesus' original hearers.

Final judgment in the Sermon on the Mount – Matt. 7:21-23

The parallels between Jesus' words in Matt. 7:21-23 and the words he uses in the parable of the ten virgins are unmistakable. The virgins pleaded with the bridegroom 'Lord, Lord' (Matt 25:11), echoing the words of the false prophets in Matt 7:21. And the bridegroom replied, 'Truly I say to you, I do not know you', recalling Jesus' response in Matt. 7:23: 'I never knew you'. The correspondence is deliberate and should not be missed.

Matthew 7:21-23 pictures a scene on the Day of Judgment; many will come declaring, 'Lord, Lord', and pleading acts undertaken in his name.[48] The 'name' here probably refers to the 'whole person' and so the nature of their claim is that they have performed works with Jesus' authority which they present as evidence of their submission to him.[49] As Betz notes, this amounts to a legal claim; they are urging that their acts should be taken as evidence 'of a legal obligation on the part of Jesus'.[50] The petitioners expect to be admitted; they think that they have done enough; and yet Jesus declares that he will respond in a way that will shock them: 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness'. The warning in verses 21-23 is a sombre one: a confession of faith has no value unless it is translated into obedience to God's will (v. 21). We are taught that many will be surprised at the final judgment because their profession of faith will be shown to be inauthentic.

Again, we must ask whether these verses are only intended to be relevant to those living at the *parousia* and again the answer must be in the negative. Jesus is clearly referring to false prophets who were living at the time he spoke. They are those whom the disciples were earlier called upon to identify by their fruit (Matt. 7:15-20). While these verses undoubtedly have significance for those living at the time of the *parousia*, it would be a gross distortion to suggest that they are limited to that group. Moreover, these verses must influence the way that we read the parables discussed above. The verbal correspondence between Matt. 7:21-23 and Matt. 25:1-13 is so close that that we should allow these verses to confirm our judgment that the parable has the unbelieving dead in view. Indeed, as we noted in our discussion of the interpretation of parables, the theological intent and significance of a parable will always be consistent with Jesus' teaching elsewhere. We have seen that vividly demonstrated here.

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48 Jesus' use of the expression 'on that day' makes it clear that the Day of Judgment is in view (Matt. 24:19, 22, 36, 38; 26:29). Although 'Lord, Lord' was merely the conventional form of address in polite society, its setting here in the context of final judgment means that it carries overtones of divinity and the right to judge on the final day, see: Davies and Allison Jr., *Matthew*, 1.712-713; Morris, *Matthew*, 179.

49 Morris, *Matthew*, 180.

50 Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 549. Cp. Nolland, *Matthew*, 341.

III. The intermediate state of unbelievers

It has been shown that Jesus clearly taught that some unbelievers who die prior to the *parousia* will be surprised by the outcome of the final judgment. This is fundamentally incompatible with the traditional view that, upon death, unbelievers proceed to a place of conscious punishment. We must therefore re-consider the Scriptural basis for this view and will evaluate five of the most popular arguments advanced in support of the conscious punishment position.

1. Sheol *as a place of punishment.*

It is sometimes claimed that '*Sheol*' represents a place of conscious punishment for the unrighteous.[51] This view is reflected in the Geneva and KJV translations where *Sheol* is often rendered 'hell'.[52] It is, however, mistaken and based upon an erroneous exegesis of the relevant texts.

The Meaning of Sheol

The word *Sheol* appears 66 times in the Old Testament: 7 times in the Pentateuch, 4 times in the writings, 16 times in the Psalms, 19 times in the wisdom literature, and 20 times in the prophets. It is entirely absent from narrative accounts of death and is never used in legal material. As Philip Johnston has noted, this confirms that it is very much a term of personal engagement.[53] Over half the texts that mention *Sheol* use the term to denote the place of human destiny.[54] This could mean one of three places: (i) the underworld; (ii) the grave; or (iii) a place of punishment. We will defer our discussion of the third possibility until a little later. Here, we will focus on the first two options.

The majority of scholars agree that *Sheol* means 'the underworld'.[55] It is located in the depths (Prov. 9:18; Isa. 5:14; 57:9); a place of pitch darkness (Job 10:21; Ps. 88:6); filled with dust, maggots and worms (Job 17:16; Isa. 14:11); to enter one descends (Ps. 55:15; Prov. 5:5; 7:27; Isa. 14:15); and to escape one ascends (Ps.

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51 Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 685-686; Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 2.625-640; William Hendrickson, *The Bible on the Life Hereafter* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1957), 85; Desmond Alexander, 'The Old Testament view of life after death', *Them* 11:2 (1986), 44.

52 These translations undoubtedly influenced the wording of the Westminster and Second Helvetic Confessions which describe the intermediate state of unbelievers as 'hell'.

53 Philip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol* (Leicester: Apollos, 2002), 72.

54 Johnston suggests that 5 texts refer to cosmological extremity, 13 to the underworld as a general term, 7 to a personified underworld, 7 to escape, and 34 to human destiny: Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 80.

55 See discussion in: Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 73; Tony Wright, 'Death, the Dead and the Underworld in Biblical Theology – Part 1', *Chm* 122/1 (2008), 16; Robert Martin-Achard, *From Death to Life* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1960), 36-46; David Powys, *'Hell': A Hard Look at a Hard Question* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1997), 83.

30:3; Jonah 2:6).[56] This view is supported by the New Testament's description of *Hades* – the Greek rendering of *Sheol* (Acts 2:27, 31; Rev. 1:18; 6:8; 20:13).[57] More recently, however, a number of scholars have suggested that *Sheol* does not always mean 'the underworld'.[58] They note the parallel usages of *Sheol* with grave and death, and the occasional references to worms and maggots, and conclude from these that *Sheol* always or often refers to 'the grave'.[59] This understanding is rooted in a more general theological concern to demonstrate that the passages that describe the righteous as descending to *Sheol* do not refer to the underworld but instead to the grave. This view is reflected in the NIV translation but there are a number of problems with it. As Johnston and Desmond Alexander note, those who maintain that *Sheol* can mean either the grave or the underworld arbitrarily determine the meaning of the word depending on their theological assessment of the individual concerned. This leads to the illogical 'contradiction that the pious go to *Sheol* (when it means grave) but not to *Sheol* (when it means underworld)'.[60] Those who maintain that *Sheol* always means 'the grave' face even greater difficulties. Some passages simply cannot bear such a meaning (Amos 9:2; Deut. 3:22). Moreover, as Alexander notes, *Sheol* never takes the definite article in any of its 66 references, indicating that it is being used as a proper noun describing a place rather than 'the grave'. Thus, while we should observe that *Sheol* is often associated with the grave, this does not mean that the two concepts are synonymous. Rather, they overlap: the individual is placed in the grave, but at the same time they descend to the underworld, *Sheol*.[61] Johnston writes, 'Sheol has different nuances in different contexts, but these are nuances of the single basic concept of the underworld'.[62]

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56 Although hell is pictured as a place where a person's 'worm does not die' (Mark 9:48, quoting from Isa. 66:24), the role of worms in *Sheol* appears to be connected to the rotting of flesh rather than to punishment.

57 As Wright notes, it is significant that in seeking to render *Sheol* in the Septuagint the Greeks chose *hadēs* (meaning underworld) rather than *mnēmeion* (meaning grave): Tony Wright, 'Death, the Dead and the Underworld in Biblical Theology – Part 2', *Chm* 122/2 (2008), 107.

58 A. Heidel, 'Death and the Afterlife', in *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (ed. A. Heidel; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1949), 137-223; R. Laird Harris, 'Why Hebrew Sheol was Translated Grave', in *The Making of a Contemporary Translation* (ed. Kenneth Barker; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1987), 75-92; R. Laird Harris, 'The Meaning of the Word Sheol as Shown by Parallels in Poetic Texts', *JETS* 4 (Dec 1961), 129-135; Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 73-74; Wright, 'Death – Part 1', 16.

59 Harris claims that *Sheol* always refers to 'the grave' while Heidel maintains that it refers to the grave when the righteous are in view.

60 Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 74; Alexander, 'Old Testament view', 42. See also the criticisms in Edwin Yamauchi, 'Life, Death and the Afterlife in the Ancient Near East', in *Life in the Face of Death* (ed. Richard N. Longenecker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 43.

61 Michael A. Knibb, 'Life and Death in the Old Testament', in *The World of Ancient Israel* (ed. R. E. Clements; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 403.

62 Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 74-75.

The inhabitants of Sheol

It is rather difficult to determine whether *Sheol* is the dwelling of both the righteous and the unrighteous or the unrighteous alone. As we have noted, a number of texts seem to suggest that the righteous will descend to *Sheol* (Gen. 37:35; 42:38; 44:29, 31; Job 14:13; Ps. 88:3; Isa. 38:10), but these texts each recall the words of righteous men under trial and it is quite possible that they are the words of those who have interpreted their current circumstances as evidence that they are under God's judgment.[63] There are two further texts which appear to indicate that all will descend to *Sheol* – Ps. 89:48 and Eccl. 9:10. However, as Johnston has observed, Psalm 89 appears to be addressing only 'humanity as created for falsehood', and the wider context of Ecclesiastes suggests that there will be a form of definitive judgment for all.[64] Ultimately, it is unclear whether the Old Testament envisaged that all will descend to *Sheol* or just the unrighteous. What we do know is that the unrighteous were predominantly in view and that the Old Testament held out the hope of avoidance, or at least release, from the clutches of *Sheol* (Ps. 49:15).[65]

The place of punishment in Sheol

The view that *Sheol* represents a place of conscious punishment for the unrighteous is plainly mistaken if one understands Scripture to teach that *Sheol* is the abode of both the righteous and the unrighteous. Even if one does not adopt this understanding, there is still nothing to commend the view that *Sheol* is a place of conscious punishment. The texts cited in support simply do not stand up to scrutiny. We only have space to consider five such texts here, all of which are cited by Louis Berkhof in his *Systematic Theology*. Firstly, Ps. 9:17, 'The wicked shall return to Sheol, all the nations that forget God'.[66] It is sufficient to note that nothing in the text indicates that punishment is in view and the verse makes perfect sense if *Sheol* is rendered in the usual way to mean the underworld.[67] Secondly, Ps. 49:14–15, a passage which contrasts the destiny of the unrighteous with that of the righteous. As we noted above, the passage seems to envisage that the righteous will either avoid or escape from *Sheol* but this in no way indicates that *Sheol* is itself a place of conscious punishment for the unrighteous. The third text is Ps. 55:15: 'Let death steal over them; let them go down to Sheol alive'. Again

63 Alexander, 'Old Testament view', 44; Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 81-82. But see the convincing response of Wright in relation to Isaiah, 'Death – Part 1', 25-26.

64 Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 82-83.

65 There are 25 references to the unrighteous compared to 7 references to the righteous. Johnston takes the view that it is avoidance that is in view (*Shades of Sheol*, 202-204; 'Psalm 49: A Personal Eschatology', in *'The reader must understand': Eschatology in Bible and theology* (ed. K. E. Brower and M. W. Elliott; Leicester: Apollos, 1997), 74-78), but the language of redemption seems to favour the view that it anticipates a future release from *Sheol*, see: Wright, 'Death – Part 1', 22-24.

66 All five texts are cited without further elaboration (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 685). See also Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 2.625-640; Hendrickson, *Life Hereafter*, 85.

67 Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 96.

there is no indication of punishment here and, as Anthony Hoekema notes, the principle of parallelism suggests that the second line merely repeats the thought of the first.[68] If this is correct then it is the sudden death of the psalmist's enemies instead of conscious punishment that is in view. Fourthly, Berkhof relies upon Prov. 15:11: '*Sheol* and *Abaddon* [destruction] lie open before the Lord'. While the pairing of Sheol with destruction may be thought to indicate an element of punishment, this is very unlikely. Elsewhere *Abaddon* is paired with death (Job 28:22) and the grave (Ps. 88:11), indicating that it is the destruction of death rather than post-mortem punishment that is in view.[69] Fifthly, Berkhof relies on Prov. 15:24: 'The path of life leads upwards for the prudent that he may turn away from Sheol beneath'. Again, the contrast here is between life and death, rather than paradise and punishment. One final text cited by proponents of the conscious punishment view is Luke 16:23. We will defer our discussion of that until a little later as there are broader considerations to address in relation to that text.

We have seen that there is no Scriptural support for the view that *Sheol* represents a place of conscious punishment for the unrighteous but this should not lead us to conclude that *Sheol* was a place of neutrality for the Israelites. It was not; the Israelites feared *Sheol* because it signified the cessation of ordinary existence and their separation from Yahweh. Those in Sheol are described as *rĕpā'îim* ('shades') (Ps. 88:10; Prov. 2:18; Isa. 14:9), who lack a body and are inactive and silent (Ps. 94:17); they are cut off from Yahweh and cannot praise him anymore (Ps. 6:5; 88:5, 12; 115:17; Isa. 38:18).[70] *Sheol* is a place of no return (Job 16:22); a prison that holds its inhabitants captive (Ps. 18:5; Isa. 38:10; Jonah 2:6).[71] As Johnston comments, it is a 'somnolent, gloomy existence without meaningful activity or social distinction'.[72] Or as Tony Wright describes it, the dead lead a 'comatose existence in the dark silence of the underworld'.[73] *Sheol* is not a place of conscious punishment but it is just as much a part of the curse as death itself.

2. The imprisoned spirits – 1 Peter 3:18-4:6

First Peter 3:18-4:6 is sometimes cited in support of the conscious punishment position but it is a notoriously difficult text.[74] The relevant sections are 1 Pet.

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68 Hoekema, *Bible and the Future*, 97.

69 See Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs 1-15* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2004), 622-623.

70 For a discussion of the *rĕpā'îm*, see Martin-Achard, *From Death to Life*, 34-36.

71 See Martin-Achard, *From Death to Life*, 40; N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003), 90.

72 Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 85.

73 Wright, 'Death – Part 1', 19.

74 Calvin, 'Psychopannychia', in Beveridge, *Calvin's Tracts*, 3.429. See also Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.484. Murray Harris cites 1 Pet. 4:6 in support of the view that the dead are not unconscious: Murray J. Harris, 'The New Testament view of life after death', *Them* 11:2 (1986), 48. Berkhof leaves these verses out of consideration because they are of 'uncertain interpretation' (*Systematic Theology*, 680).

3:18-19 in which it is written that Christ was 'put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison', and 1 Pet. 4:6 where Peter explains that 'the gospel was preached even to those who are dead'.

Theories abound about what 1 Pet. 3:18-19 describe: some claim that the verses refer to the preaching of Christ, others to the preaching of Enoch, others to the preaching of the spirits of the dead apostles, and still others to the preaching of Noah.[75] Among those who claim that it refers to Christ's preaching, there are various views as to what he preached and to whom. Some suggest he preached release from *Sheol* to the righteous, others that he proclaimed condemnation to the unrighteous, and others that he proclaimed victory or condemnation to fallen angels.[76] There is even dispute about when the preaching took place: between Christ's death and resurrection, after the resurrection, or at the time of the ascension.[77] Given this uncertainty, we must be cautious here. The most popular view among scholars today is that verses 18-19 refer either to Christ's post resurrection preaching to fallen angels, or to Christ's preaching through Noah.[78] Neither of these views takes the verses to be referring to the intermediate state of unbelievers and thus we are wise to conclude with John Feinberg that, 'whatever one wants to say about Biblical teaching concerning the intermediate state, he must say it on the basis of some other passage than this one!'[79]

Our conclusion concerning the meaning of 1 Pet. 3:18-19 necessarily influences our interpretation of 1 Pet. 4:6 since there is no reason to believe that the *nekrois* ('dead') of 1 Pet. 4:6 refer to hearers of the gospel in Hades unless 1 Pet. 3:18-19 describe such an event. Moreover, the interpretation does not fit the context very well. In verses 4-5, Peter has been arguing that people will be judged according to their actions in this life, regardless of whether they are dead

75 See the discussion in John S. Feinberg, '1 Peter 3:18-20, Ancient Mythology, and the Intermediate State', *WTJ* 48 (1986), 306-307; Edward Gordon Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St Peter* (2d ed.; London: Macmillan, 1947), 316-317; J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter* (WBC 49; Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 201-211.

76 See options listed in William Joseph Dalton, 'Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits: A Study of 1 Peter 3:18-4:6', *AnBib* 23 (1989), 15-32; B. Reicke, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1946), 119.

77 For between Christ's death and resurrection, see: Selwyn, *First Epistle of St Peter*, 197; Reicke, *Disobedient Spirits*, 107; C. E. B. Cranfield, *I & II Peter and Jude* (TBC; London: SCM Press, 1960), 103. For after the resurrection, see: Michaels, *1 Peter*, 204–206. For at the time of the ascension, see: R. T. France, 'Exegesis in Practice: Two Examples', in *New Testament Interpretation* (ed. I. Howard Marshall; Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1977), 271.

78 The former view is adopted by: Dalton, 'Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits', 141-142; Selwyn, *First Epistle of St Peter*, 200-201, 353; Michaels, *1 Peter*, 208-209; I. Howard Marshall, *1 Peter* (IVP NTC; Leicester: IVP, 1991), 125-128; France, 'Exegesis in Practice' in Marshall, *New Testament Interpretation*, 269-270; Powys, *Hell*, 400. The latter by: Wayne Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter* (TNTC; Leicester: IVP, 1988), 157-161, 203-239; Feinberg, '1 Peter 3:18-20', 328-33.

79 Feinberg, '1 Peter 3:18–20', 336.

or alive at the final judgment. This message would be completely undermined if verse 6 held out the hope of some form of post-mortem gospel proclamation. Additionally, such an understanding of the text sets up a discrepancy with the purpose clause that follows.

3. The punishment of angels and men – Jude 5-7

Jude 5-7 is sometimes cited in support of the conscious punishment position, but again it is a notoriously difficult text.[80] The verses describe three Old Testament examples of sin and judgment: the first recalls the rebellion and judgment of the wilderness generation (v. 5); the second refers to 'the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling' (v. 6) probably referring to the 'sons of God' who cohabited with the 'daughters of men' in Gen. 6:1-4; and the third refers to the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah who 'indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire' (v. 7).[81] The point that interests us is the possible link between the judgment imposed on the angels who are said to be 'kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day' (v. 6) and the judgment passed on the people of Sodom and Gomorrah who 'serve as an example by undergoing a punishment by eternal fire' (v. 7). Verse 7 contains the words *hōs* ('just as') and *ton homoion tropon toutois* ('in a similar way') suggesting a connection between the verses. The intermediate state is in view in verse 6 and conscious punishment is described in verse 7, so this link appears to indicate that the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah are already experiencing conscious punishment in the intermediate state. But this is mistaken for three reasons. Firstly, verse 6 does not describe the conscious punishment of angels in the intermediate state; the 'eternal chains' and darkness merely refer to the restraint and containment that the angels experience as they await final judgment.[82] Secondly, the punishment in verse 7 is past punishment; it describes the punishment experienced when the cities were destroyed by fire (Gen. 19:23-29) and its present significance is simply that it serves as an example for others.[83] Thirdly, the point of comparison between the two examples is not the nature of the punishment but the conduct of the two parties – both sinned by crossing 'species' boundaries and were punished as a result.[84] Accordingly, Jude 5-7 provides no support for the view that unbelievers endure conscious punishment in the intermediate state.

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80 Harris, 'New Testament view', 49.

81 The second example is probably the one recorded in 1 Enoch 6-19. This is likely to be in view given the citation from 1 Enoch in vv. 14-15.

82 In 1 Enoch 10:12 Michael is to bind the fallen angels 'until the great day of their judgment'. See Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (WBC 50; Dallas: Word Books, 1983), 52; Turretin, *Institutes*, 3.600.

83 As Bauckham observes, 'the idea is that the site of the cities… a scene of sulphurous devastation, provided ever-present evidence of divine judgment' (*Jude, 2 Peter*, 54-55).

84 Peter H. Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude* (PNTC; Leicester: Apollos, 2006), 53-54.

4. The unrighteous are kept under punishment until the day of judgment – 2 Pet. 2:9

There are clear parallels between Jude 5-7 and 2 Pet. 2:4-10: once again the verses describe three Old Testament examples of judgment and again the fate of angels and of Sodom and Gomorrah are in view.[85] The passage functions as a single conditional sentence with verses 4-7 as its compound protasis and verse 9 as its apodosis – a verse which at first sight appears to teach that the unrighteous will undergo conscious punishment in the intermediate state.[86] The second half of verse 9 reads: *adikous de eis hēmeran kriseōs kolazomenous tērein* ('and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment'). The debate revolves around the present participle *kolazomenous* ('being punished').

The majority of translations and a number of commentators understand it to refer to punishment in the intermediate state.[87] In favour of this view is the fact that this is the most natural translation of the present participle. It also seems to fit well with verse 4 where the fallen angels are said to be cast into 'Tartarus' – a Hellenistic picture of incarceration in the lowest part of the underworld. Thirdly, the view is consistent with Jewish beliefs that the unrighteous proceed to conscious punishment between death and final judgment (1 Enoch 22:10-11; 4 Ezra 7:79-80).

There are, however, a number of good reasons for understanding the participle to refer to future punishment, thus rendering *kolazomenous tērein*, 'keep to be punished'.[88] Firstly, the future participle is used only thirteen times in the New Testament and just one of these occurrences is passive, so it is not unusual to see the present participle carrying a future sense.[89] Indeed, in 3:11, the present

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85 Commentators disagree about whether 2 Peter depends on Jude or on some alternative paraenetic tradition (Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 246-247; Davids, *2 Peter and Jude*, 136-143). There is a change in emphasis between Jude and 2 Peter, however, with the examples being used to illustrate judgment and deliverance, rather than sin and judgment, and the inclusion of the flood rather than the wilderness rebellion.

86 See Hoekema, *Bible and the Future*, 102; Harris, 'New Testament view', 49. Berkhof states that he leaves the passage out of consideration because it is of 'uncertain interpretation' (*Systematic Theology*, 680).

87 This is how it is translated in the RV, RSV, NEB, NIV, GNB, ESV. See also J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and Jude* (BNTC; London: A & C Black, 1969), 335; Simon Kistemaker, *Expositions of the Epistles of Peter and the Epistle of Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 294; R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of I and II Epistles of Peter, the three Epistles of John, and the Epistle of Jude* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1945), 316.

88 The participle is translated in this way in the KJV, JB, WNT and TNIV and the translation has the support of: Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 254; Davids, *2 Peter and Jude*, 232; John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (Edinburgh: T. Constable, 1855), 400; Michael Green, *2 Peter and Jude* (TNTC; London: The Tyndale Press, 1968), 103.

89 As C. F. D. Moule comments: 'The ruling consideration in interpreting participles is that they express something which is dependent on the main verb, or a pendant to it; and one is sometimes given a clue to the interpretation of a participle not by its own tense but by the main verb, or the context in general' (*An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (2d ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 99).

participle *lyomenōn* ('being dissolved') has a future orientation and is translated 'to be dissolved' (ESV) (see also Matt. 26:25; Luke 1:35; John 17:20 Acts 21:2-3).[90] Secondly, the imprisonment of the angels in verse 4 is not explicitly punitive. Although punishment is inferred by the pseudepigraphal texts (1 Enoch 20:2), verse 4 (and as we have seen Jude 6) only refers to the restraint and containment experienced as the angels await final judgment. Thirdly, as Bauckham has noted, *kolazomenous* is never used in the pseudepigraphal or apocryphal literature to describe punishment in the intermediate state, whereas both *kolazein* ('to punish') and *kolasis* ('punishment') are used to describe punishment at or after the final judgment (*kolazein*: 2 Clem. 17:7; Herm. Sim. 9:18:2; *kolasis*: Matt. 25:46; 2 Clem. 6:7; Apoc. Pet. A 21; Mart. Pol. 2:3; 11:2).[91] Fourthly, the context favours a future perspective. Peter's central warning to the false teachers (who are primarily in view) is not that they will one day die and face immediate punishment but that the *parousia* and final judgment are fast approaching (vv. 2:3b; 3:7). Finally, we should note that even those who favour a present aspect do not necessarily hold to the view that the verse refers to conscious punishment. Douglas Moo, for example, suggests that the punishment described in verse 6 is akin to Rom. 1:18-32 where the punishment is inherent in the people's sin and not necessarily understood by those being punished.[92] While 2 Pet. 2:9 is undoubtedly difficult to exegete, it is safe to say that it provides little if any support for the view that unbelievers proceed to immediate conscious punishment upon death.

5. Punishment of the rich man in Hades – Luke 16:19-31

In our discussion of the nature of Sheol we noted a significant text that appears to support the conscious punishment position – the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The parable describes the contrasting positions of two men: a rich man lives in luxury and self-indulgence while a poor man named Lazarus is reduced to begging for scraps from the rich man's table (vv. 19-21). In verse 22 the men die and a great reversal takes place: Lazarus is 'carried by angels to Abraham's side', while the rich man descends to Hades where he is kept 'in torment'. Verses 24–31 describe an exchange between the rich man and Abraham.

A number of commentators have questioned whether the account is really a parable; John Calvin even suggested that it records actual history.[93] In support of such a view is the fact that the account is not described as a parable; that its characters have names, unlike any other parable; and that it is unique in describing the afterlife rather than the things of this world. These differences are, however, overstated. As Snodgrass notes, Luke certainly considered the story to be a parable, 'it appears in a collection of parables, possibly stands chiastically

90 See discussion in Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 254; Davids, *2 Peter and Jude*, 232.
91 Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 254
92 Douglas J. Moo, *2 Peter, Jude* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 114.
93 Calvin, 'Psychopannychia', in Beveridge, *Calvin's Tracts*, 3.431. See also: David Gooding, *According to Luke* (Leicester: IVP, 1987), 277; Fitzmyer, *Luke X–XXIV*, 1126; Eta Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1966), 4-5.

parallel to the parable of the Rich Fool, and uses the exact same introductory words (*anthrōpos tis*) which Luke uses to introduce several other parables'.[94]

Recognising the account to be a parable (a story with an intent), it is important to consider what lessons it purports to teach. It was undoubtedly intended to challenge the rich about how they use their wealth. As Darrell Bock comments, 'the parable is a call to the rich to repent of their inappropriate use of wealth and is a reply to the Pharisees' grumbling of 16:14'.[95] The parable also teaches that our state upon death is irreversible. There is nothing we can do to change it, 'the unrepentant will experience irreversible punishment'.[96] A third lesson concerns the value of signs. The rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to warn his family (vv. 27-28, 30), but Abraham replies: 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead' (v. 31). Miraculous signs are neither necessary nor sufficient to bring people to repentance.[97]

If those constitute the three central lessons of the parable what, we should ask, does the parable teach us about the intermediate state of unbelievers? Those holding to a conscious punishment view contend that the parable provides incontrovertible support for such a position.[98] This is not, however, an opinion shared by other commentators. Indeed, most treatments of the text note that the parable is not intended to provide actual descriptions of the afterlife.[99] This is for a number of reasons.[100] Firstly, much of the imagery appears to be based upon a Jewish adaptation of an Egyptian folk-tale.[101] This is perfectly acceptable

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94 Snodgrass, *Stories*, 426. See also Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 204-205; Robert H. Stein, *Luke* (NAC 24; Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1992), 422.

95 Bock, *Luke*, 1377-1378. See also Marshall, *Luke*, 632; Richard J. Bauckham, 'The Rich Man and Lazarus: The parable and the parallels', *NTS* 37 (1991), 225-246.

96 Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 206. See also Bock, *Luke*, 1378; Stephen I. Wright, 'Parables on Poverty and Riches', in Longenecker, *Challenge*, 231.

97 Marshall, *Luke*, 632; John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34* (WBC 35B; Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 833.

98 Calvin, 'Psychopannychia', in Beveridge, *Calvin's Tracts*, 3.430-432; Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.484; Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 2.619; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 680; Harris, 'New Testament view', 48; Hoekema, *Bible and the Future*, 100-101; Hendrickson, *Life Hereafter*, 81; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 822-823.

99 Marshall, *Luke*, 63; Snodgrass, *Stories*, 430; Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 206-207; Bock, *Luke*, 1363.

100 We will not consider the argument that the parable depicts final judgment rather than the intermediate state since the use of *Hades* rather than *Gehenna* and the reference to the rich man's living brothers appears to be decisive of the point.

101 The Egyptian folk-tale records the thoughts of Setme, a man who observes that the rich fare much better in this life than the poor. Setme's son then takes him on a tour of the underworld which reveals a reversal (based on works) similar to that described in Jesus' parable. The Jewish adaptation concerns a rich tax-collector and a poor scholar. The former dies and is given a grand funeral while the latter dies and is buried with no fanfare. In the afterlife, however, the scholar is in Paradise by running streams while the tax-collector is cut off, unable to reach water. See

for a parable because parables do not purport to depict true stories, but it should caution us against viewing the details of the narrative as a realistic account of the afterlife.[102] Secondly, the parable contains details that are problematic even for defenders of the conscious punishment position. The rich man is portrayed as having a bodily existence (v. 24) and he is able to see Lazarus, suggesting that Lazarus is in Hades as well (although seemingly in another compartment).[103] The former detail is incompatible with a future resurrection of the body and the latter has more in common with 1 Enoch 22:1-14 than with New Testament descriptions of the intermediate state of believers (2 Cor. 5:1-10; Phil. 1:23; Heb. 1:23; Rev. 6:9-11).[104] Those who argue that Jesus must be describing spiritual realities in this parable face a real problem here because they either have to affirm spiritual realities contrary to Scripture (a corporeal existence in a compartmentalised intermediate state) or admit that Jesus is picturing an intermediate state that does not completely correspond to the spiritual reality, thus undermining their argument. Thirdly, it is clear that the descriptions of the afterlife are necessary in order to illustrate the central teachings of the parable. This suggests that the details are not, in themselves, intended to be teachings of the parable anymore than the actions of the dishonest manager (Luke 16:1-13) are intended to provide investment advice.[105] Fourthly, as we noted in our introductory discussion of parables, the theological intent and significance of a parable should always be consistent with Jesus' teaching elsewhere and with the whole canon of Scripture.[106] As we have seen, Scripture nowhere else teaches that unbelievers proceed to conscious punishment upon death and therefore we should be reluctant to conclude that Jesus teaches otherwise here.

6. The nature of final judgment.

Having demonstrated that there is no Scriptural basis for the conscious punishment position we move on to note a further argument that militates against the view. Scripture repeatedly portrays the final judgment as a climactic and decisive event. 'The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace' (Matt. 13:41). It is the day 'for the dead to be judged' (Rev. 11:18); the books will be opened and the dead will be 'judged… according to what they had done' (Rev. 20:12). On that day, the Lord will separate the people and say to unbelievers, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and

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Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 203-204; Jeremias, *Parables*, 178-179, 183; Fitzmyer, *Luke X-XXIV*, 1126–1127.

102 Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 206.

103 Wright, 'Death – Part 2', 114. See also Stein, *Luke*, 425.

104 Joachim Jeremias, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. G. Kittel; Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1964), 1.147; Alexander, 'Old Testament view', 43.

105 Wright, 'Death – Part 2', 114. Cp. Hoekema, *Bible and the Future*, 101.

106 Snodgrass, *Stories*, 30, 430; Kistemaker, *Parables*, xxiv; Dodd, *Parables*, 32.

his angels' (Matt. 25:41). The final judgment is a climactic event – a day on which God's justice is done and seen to be done. Yet if the conscious punishment understanding of the intermediate state is correct, the final judgment is nothing more than a confirmation of the punishment that has already commenced. As Hans Schwarz observes, it 'would make the final judgment into a reaffirmation of what had happened already in death'.[107]

This objection is rarely addressed by proponents of the conscious punishment position. Calvin is one of the few who does, devoting ten pages to it in *Psychopannychia*.[108] The bulk of his response concerns the objection as it relates to believers. He rightly points out that 'our blessedness is always in progress up to that day which shall conclude and terminate all progress'.[109] This is quite correct, but in focusing on how the objection applies to believers, Calvin is attacking a straw man. Very few would oppose the view that the final judgment of believers is a mere confirmation, or in Turretin's words 'a solemn declaration' of the justification already guaranteed by the past work of Christ.[110] But the situation is quite different when the objection is applied to the fate of unbelievers. If unbelievers are punished immediately upon death they are being punished prior to judgment. This is problematic for our conception of God's justice which is not only done but seen to be done (Matt. 25:32; Luke 12:2-3; Rom. 2:5; 3:25-26; 1 Cor. 4:5). Moreover, it is necessary to ask what purpose the final judgment serves for unbelievers if they are already being punished. It must serve some purpose since it is portrayed as having great significance in the texts we have examined. Calvin's answer, in reliance on Augustine, is that the final judgment fixes the precise measure of punishment, and this understanding might explain why contemporary scholars are keen to emphasise the distinction between intermediate punishment in *Hades* and final punishment in hell.[111] But this cannot be right. If judgment in the intermediate state is just and fair, then it must be in accordance with the correct measure of punishment. Yet if the punishment inflicted upon death is identical to eternal punishment then the final judgment of unbelievers serves no purpose and is rendered nugatory.

IV. Conclusion

We have seen that the final judgment will be expected with eager anticipation by believers but will be the cause of great surprise for unbelievers including those

107 Hans Schwarz, *Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2000), 298-299.

108 Calvin, 'Psychopannychia', in Beveridge, *Calvin's Tracts*, 3.462-471.

109 Ibid., 3.463.

110 Turretin, *Institutes*, 2.685.

111 Calvin, 'Psychopannychia', in Beveridge, *Calvin's Tracts*, 3.469. Citing Augustine, *City of God*, book xii, chap 9; book xiii, chap 8. Both Bavinck (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:606) and A. A. Hodge (*The Confession of Faith* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 382) distinguish between intermediate punishment in *Hades* and final punishment in hell.

who have died prior to the parousia. This cannot be reconciled with the traditional Reformed view that unbelievers experience conscious punishment upon death because if they had already experienced such punishment they would be utterly unsurprised by the verdict passed on the final day – it being nothing other than a reaffirmation of the punishment they have already been subject to. This finding led us to reconsider the Scriptural basis for the conscious punishment view and we found it to be wholly lacking. The Bible actually teaches very little about the intermediate state of unbelievers, but what it does teach seems to indicate that the souls of unbelievers reside in *Sheol* where they continue in a somnolent, coma-like existence, trapped until the time of the *parousia*.[112] This understanding of the intermediate state is entirely consistent with Scripture's teaching about the final judgment because it provides no indication that unbelievers will receive any insight into the outcome of judgment prior to the final judgment itself.[113]

Abstract

This article seeks to provide a re-examination of the intermediate state of unbelievers against the backdrop of the response of individuals at the final judgment. The first part examines Scripture's teaching concerning the expectation of believers and unbelievers at the final judgment. It is shown that Scripture consistently teaches that some unbelievers, including those who have died prior to the *parousia*, will be surprised by the outcome of the final judgment. This is incompatible with the Reformed understanding of the intermediate state because, if unbelievers have already experienced conscious punishment following death, there is no reason why the outcome of the final judgment would be unexpected. In the second part, the Scriptural basis for the Reformed understanding of the intermediate state of unbelievers is critically examined and found to be lacking. In conclusion, it is argued that unbelievers exist in a somnolent coma-like existence as they await the final judgment.

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112 The lack of biblical texts describing the intermediate state of unbelievers probably explains why several treatments of the intermediate state do not even mention unbelievers: Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3.724-733; Venema, *Promise*, 43-75.

113 This is of great pastoral as well as doctrinal significance. When a Christian is asked about the current state of an unbeliever who has died, they should not reply that the unbeliever is in a place of conscious punishment but rather that the individual is being kept until the Day of Judgment. While this should never be used to provide false hope (Scripture makes clear that our eternal destiny is fixed upon the day we die [Luke 16:19-31; Heb. 9:27]) it can provide comfort for Christians who are struggling to understand the necessity of eternal punishment. The Bible teaches that such punishment will not commence until the Day of Judgment itself, upon which day believers will transformed into Christ's likeness (1 John 3:2), knowing in full what they now know only in part (1 Cor. 13:12). In this glorified and enlightened state, believers will at last grasp the full gravity of humanity's sin and the exacting demands of God's holiness (Rev. 16:7).