

Angels of eschatological punishment in the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions and in the Gospel of Matthew

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ABSTRACT

In the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions there were two distinct types of angels who were responsible for the punishment of the wicked after the final judgement. One type merely transported the wicked to the place of eternal punishment, while the other resided in the place of punishment and inflicted tortures on the condemned. Most texts reflect one tradition or the other, but in a few instances both are represented. The Gospel of Matthew clearly presents the angels who transport the wicked to the place of condemnation (13:41-2, 49-50; 22:13), but it may also reflect the tradition of the angelic torturers in the parable of the unforgiving servant in Mt 18:23-34. In this pericope, the king hands over the wicked servant to the torturers, and there is good evidence that these characters in the story represent angelic tormentors of the condemned.

1. INTRODUCTION

In a recent monograph I argued that the Gospel of Matthew was profoundly influenced by the Jewish (and Christian) apocalyptic traditions of its day (Sim 1996).² Although the Evangelist chose the (Christian) Gospel genre and not the genre apocalypse as the medium to convey his beliefs about Jesus of Nazareth, a substantial part of his message

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² D C Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew*, (SNTSMS 88; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

was concerned with apocalyptic eschatology. This distinctive religious perspective is found both within and without the apocalyptic genre, and it can be described in general terms as a world view which focuses on the end events within a deterministic and dualistic framework. Broadly speaking the expected eschatological events include woes of the endtime, the arrival of a saviour figure, the enactment of final judgement, the punishment of the wicked by eternal fire and the salvation of the righteous who are transformed into angels; this series of events is expected to begin in the imminent future.³ These characteristic components of apocalyptic eschatology loom so large in Matthew's gospel that it does not exceed the evidence to describe the Evangelist's community as an apocalyptic sect (see Sim 1996:176-177).⁴ In this study I wish to take that earlier discussion just a little further, and demonstrate that another common apocalyptic-eschatological tradition is well represented in the Gospel of Matthew. This tradition concerns the role of angels in the context of the final judgement and its aftermath, especially with regard to the punishment of the wicked. I will argue first that many Jewish and Christian apocalyptic texts contain this motif, and then I will provide evidence which establishes that the Evangelist represents this general tradition within his Gospel. This study will therefore build upon my earlier work by providing further evidence of the influence of contemporary apocalyptic-eschatological tradition(s) on the Evangelist.

2. ANGELS OF ESCHATOLOGICAL PUNISHMENT IN THE JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

It is well known that in the centuries prior to the turning of the eras many aspects of Judaism underwent radical change. These developments are usually attributed to the influence of external religious traditions, particularly Persian thought, which impacted upon Judaism in a number of ways. Many of these originally foreign ideas were easily assimilated into the Jewish tradition, and they eventually became prominent features of both later second Temple Judaism and early Christianity. One of the more important developments was in the area of angelology.

In early Jewish thought angels were accepted as part of the heavenly court of Yahweh (e.g. 1 Ki 22:19; Job 1:6; 2:1; Ps 89:5-7; Is 6:1-7), and they acted as Yahweh's

³ For a comprehensive discussion of the religious perspective apocalyptic eschatology, see Sim (1996:31-53).

⁴ On the relationship between the genre apocalypse, the religious perspective apocalyptic eschatology and the social movement apocalypticism, see Sim (1996:23-31).

mediators with the human world. They could either protect the righteous (e.g. Gen 18:2-19:29) or test them as in the case of Job (cf Job 1:6-12; 2:1-7). Moreover, they could function as lying spirits at the behest of Yahweh (I Ki 22:19-23) and as agents of his destruction (2 Chron 21:15-16; Ps 78:49). But despite these and other references to angels in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is clear that these figures did not occupy a prominent position in early Jewish speculation about the heavenly realm and the manner in which the world above interacted with the human sphere. All this had changed, however, by the end of the "Old Testament" period. In the literature which was composed in the centuries prior to and after the common era, there was a massive expansion of angelological speculation.⁵ The texts which best reflect these developments in angelology belong to the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic genre and related revelatory genres (Oracles and Testaments).

The numbers of heavenly angels were now counted in their millions (e.g. Dan 7:10; *I En* 1:10; 14:22; 40:1; 71:8; Rev 5:11) and they were arranged according to a set hierarchy. At the top of the angelic hierarchy were the archangels, four according to some traditions (*I En* 9:1; 40:2-9; 54:6; 71:8) or seven in number according to others (*I En* 20:1-7; 81:5; 90:21-2; *T Levi* 8:2; Rev 8:2). In many of the apocalyptic texts, it is normally one of these archangels who reveals the divine secrets to the seer either by granting visions or by actually transporting him to the heavenly world. The functions of other angels lower down the hierarchy are rather diverse. To select only a few examples, there are angels who minister to God and attend to God's needs (*Jub* 30:18), angels who guard the throne of God (*I En* 71:7), angels who are responsible for the natural elements and astral phenomena (*I En* 60:11-23; 75:3; *2 En* 4:1-6:1; 19:2-6; *Jub* 2:2), angels who pray on behalf of humans (*I En* 39:5; 47:2; 104:1; Rev 8:3-4) and angels who keep a record of human sin (*I En* 89:59-62; *T Ab* 12:12). A further prominent theme in this literature is that certain angels would play an integral role in the final judgement and its aftermath. While a small number of texts specify that one or more angels would actually preside over the eschatological judgement,⁶ a far more common motif is that these figures would play a major part in the punishment of the wicked.

I wish now to evidence this statement by presenting a general survey of the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic documents which refer to these angels of escha-

⁵ For a more detailed review of this theme, see Russell (1964:240-249).

⁶ Cf *I En*. 91:15 and 11QMelch 2:13-14. In most apocalyptic texts the final judge is either God (e.g. *I En* 1:7-8; 90:24-7; 91:7; 100:4; *2 En* 66:6; *2 Bar* 5:2; 13:8; *T Levi* 4:1; *Jub* 23:31; Rev 20:11-15), or God's messianic agent (*Ps Sol* 17:26-46; *4 Ezra* 13:33-4; 4Q161; *I En* 45:3; 51:3; 55:4; 61:8; 62:2, 5; 69:27, 29).

tological punishment. Since our primary interest here is simply to establish the popularity and nature of this motif in these apocalyptic circles, questions pertaining either to the date of each document or to any literary relationships between them need not be considered in any detail. The survey will reveal that this concept was well established before the time of the Evangelist, and that it continued to grow in popularity in the centuries which succeeded him.

It is important at this stage to make the point that the theme of angels of eschatological punishment in the Judaeo-Christian tradition has a variety of forms, but two clear subtypes can be identified. One of these is rather gruesome to say the least. According to this tradition, certain angels will reside with the wicked in the post-judgement place of punishment and subject them to unspeakable tortures and torments. These horrible torturers already live in the location of retribution awaiting the arrival of the wicked. The alternative and less gruesome tradition refers to heavenly angels, particularly the archangels, who will be responsible for transporting the wicked to the place of eschatological punishment, usually the furnace of fire or some other fiery location. Having accomplished this task, they then leave the condemned in this place of torment and play no further part in their fate. These two categories of angels of eschatological punishment are not of course mutually exclusive, and in some apocalyptic texts we find them alongside one another. The following survey of the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic texts will discuss each of these subtypes in turn, and then examine those documents which seem to reflect both traditions.

2.1 Angelic torturers

The notion of angelic torturers is by far the more popular of the two traditions, and it was embraced with equal fervour in both Jewish and Christian apocalyptic circles. Just where this motif came from originally is not certain, but it has been suggested that it betrays the influence of Greek thought. There are parallels between this Judaeo-Christian theme and the role of the Furies who punish the wicked in Greek literature (see Himmelfarb 1983:120-121, and literature cited there). Whether this hypothesis is correct or not lies beyond the scope of this study and need not be pursued here. Whatever its origin, the concept of angelic tormenters clearly struck a chord in the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions as the following texts demonstrate.

Four Jewish documents make clear and unambiguous reference to angels who torment the wicked. One of these is *2 Enoch*. According to chapter 10, Enoch is taken

to the place of eschatological punishment, the northern heaven, which is described not only as fiery but as dark and icy as well. In this place are cruel angels with instruments of torture whose sole function is to torment the wicked without pity. These merciless angels are also found in the *Testament of Abraham*. According to 12:1-2 (Recension A), Abraham views a judgement scene where a number of angels with fiery lashes mercilessly drive the souls of the wicked towards the place of destruction. The patriarch witnesses a soul whose sins and righteous deeds were equally balanced. He then explains that this soul was neither turned over to the torturers nor placed among the righteous, but was set in the middle (12:18). Unfortunately, this text does not explicitly identify these torturers. While they are probably to be identified with those aforementioned angels with the fiery lashes who beat the wicked with no mercy, it is possible that they represent an entirely different group. For our purposes a decision either way is not necessary; in either case it is clear that the *Testament of Abraham* accepts as part of its eschatological scenario angelic tormenters of the condemned. Further references to such figures appear in *3 Enoch*, a much later Jewish apocalypse of the fifth or sixth century. This document mentions angels of destruction (31:2; 33:1; 44:2) and outlines their specific activities. One angel has charge of the souls in the intermediate state (neither good nor bad) and he is responsible for supporting and purifying them (44:3a). The other angel is responsible for the punishment of the wicked in Gehenna, which he does with rods of burning coals (44:3b).

The fourth Jewish text containing this motif is the *Testament of Levi*. In 3:2 the author speaks of the lowest heaven, consisting of fire, snow and ice, which stands ready for the day of God's judgement. Already present in this place are certain "spirits" who have been sent there in order to punish the condemned. While these figures are described as spirits and not as angels, there is no doubt that they are in fact angelic tormenters. The early Jewish tradition could interchange spirit and angel (1 Ki 22:19-23; cf Num 16:22; 27:16), and in the later Qumran scrolls angels are often referred to as spirits (e.g. 1 QS 3:18-21) (see further Yadin 1962:231-232; Davidson 1992:155-156). That the author of the *Testament of Levi* was familiar with this convention is clear from 3:3, where he refers to the fallen angels aligned with Beliar as spirits of error. This description of the angelic torturers as spirits is paralleled in a text outside the apocalyptic corpus. In Sirach 39:28-31 such spirits are said to have been specifically created for the purpose of vengeance; they punish the wicked by scourging and other means.

When we turn to the Christian apocalyptic tradition, we find similar notions about angelic torturers of the wicked. A glance at some of the later Christian apocalypses demonstrates that not only had certain Christian circles adopted this Jewish tradition of tormenting angels, but also that they promoted this theme with great fervour. These Christian texts in fact provide far more grisly detail than their Jewish counterparts of the horrible fate which awaits the wicked, and the particular roles which these angels of torment play in their punishment.

The most detailed description of their roles is found in the *Apocalypse of Paul*. In chapters 31-42 Paul is taken to the place of eternal punishment and witnesses the variety of horrific tortures that afflict the condemned. While angels of punishment are not associated with every torment, they do play a leading part in many of them. Paul sees a wicked presbyter being strangled and pierced by a group of angelic torturers, the guardians of Tartarus (ch 34), and an evil bishop being stoned and immersed in a river of fire by four angels of punishment (ch 35). In chapter 36 he witnesses the horrific fate of a sinful lector. This unfortunate official stands kneedeep in a river of fire and his lips and tongue are cut with a fiery razor by an angelic tormentor. Women who lost their virginity prior to marriage are led away to darkness by angels with blazing chains (ch 39). Paul also sees men and women who committed the sin of abortion (or infanticide) being torn to pieces by wild animals on a fiery pyramid and strangled by the angel of punishment (ch 40). Those who failed to show compassion are likewise consigned to a terrible eternal fate. They are clothed in rags full of sulphurous fire, serpents are draped around their bodies and angels with horns of fire beat them and close up their nostrils (ch 40).

Similar descriptions of these angelic tormenters appear in the *Apocalypse of Peter*. The Ethiopic recension makes mention of angels who kindle the fires which burn the unrighteous for eternity (ch 7), and of (angelic) torturers who chastise mercilessly the persecutors of the righteous, who burn the eyes of slanderers with red-hot irons and who continually drive homosexuals over a cliff (ch 9). The angel of wrath, Ezrael, oversees these punishments. He is the one who prepares the fire of punishment (ch 10) for murderers (ch 7), idolaters (ch 10), those disobedient to the commandments (ch 10), those who failed to honour their parents (ch 11), those who gave up their virginity prior to marriage (ch 11), disobedient slaves (ch 11) and those who are unrighteous (ch 12). The Akhmimic recension of this text also refers to angels of torment who torture the unrighteous (ch 23), who scourge the persecutors of the righteous (ch 27) and who drive homosexuals over a deep precipice forever (ch 32). Unlike the brilliantly-garbed angels

who live in the presence of God in heaven, these angels have dark raiment befitting their gloomy environment (ch 21).

Another important text reflecting this theme is the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, a Jewish document which has been preserved in incomplete form in Christian circles. The more complete Akhmimic recension numbers these angelic tormenters in their thousands (4:2), and it describes their appearance in terrible detail. They have leopard faces with the tusks of boars, and their eyes are mixed with blood (4:3). These fierce angels are equipped with fiery scourges and they are responsible for casting the wicked to the place of eternal punishment (4:6-7). The Sahidic version, despite its fragmentary state, provides a more detailed account of the tormenting role of these angels. In this text no less than five thousand angels each lash an unfortunate soul one hundred times every day (vv 1-2).

The later *Vision of Ezra* makes reference to the seven angels of hell (vv 1, 27), and it also presents in some detail the roles of these angels responsible for the infliction of punishment on the wicked. Some angels throw fire in the face of those guilty of adultery, while others whip them with fiery scourges (vv 12-18). Those condemned of incestuous relationships are beaten by angels with fiery clubs (vv 19-21), and those convicted of lust and injustice are submerged in a fiery stream by these avenging angels (vv 27-32). These tormenters also prick with thorns the eyes of those responsible for leading the righteous astray. It may be assumed that this group of angelic torturers performs many of the other torments mentioned in this text, even if they are not specifically named. They are presumably the ones who pour molten iron and lead over those church officials who did not practise what they preached (vv 45-6), and the ones who cast to the furnace of fire those men who dishonoured their parents (v 50) and those women who murdered their children (vv 51-4).

2.2 Angelic transporters of the wicked

I wish now to turn to the second sub-type in the general category of angels of eschatological punishment. This tradition refers not to tormenting angels who torture the wicked without mercy, but to heavenly angels or archangels who are responsible for casting the wicked to the fiery furnace on the day of judgement. By comparison with the motif of angelic tormenters, this tradition is comparatively rare. Only three texts, two Jewish and one Christian, depict the role of the angels in the punishment of the wicked exclusively in these terms.

The two Jewish texts are found in different sections of *1 Enoch*, the *Book of the Watchers* (*1 En* 1-36), and the *Book of Dreams* (*1 En* 83-90). In the first text the archangels Raphael and Michael are commanded by God to punish Asael (or Semyaza) and the other fallen angels by sealing them under a gigantic hole in the desert until the day of judgement (*1 En* 10:4-12; cf 21:1-6). After the final judgement has taken place, these archangels will then lead the wicked, both the evil angels and the human wicked, to the eternal fire where they will be tormented forever (*1 En* 10:6, 13-16; cf 21:7-10). There is no hint in this text that the archangels play any further part in the fate of the condemned, nor is any mention made of angelic torturers awaiting the arrival of the wicked in order to inflict further torments on them. Precisely the same holds true in the *Book of Dreams*, which is to a large extent dependent upon the *Book of the Watchers*. According to these symbolic visions, an archangel imprisons the wicked in an abyss prior to the flood (*1 En* 88:1-3) and at the final judgement the wicked, both human and angelic, will be cast into a fiery pit (90:23-7). While it is true that the latter text does not clearly identify the archangels as the ones who deposit the condemned in the place of punishment, this is clearly implied. These holy angels play a significant role in the scene of judgement; they keep the records of those who have sinned (89:61-4, 70-1, 76-7; 90:14, 17, 20) and they bring the wicked before the judgement seat of God (90:21-3). With the exception of God himself, they are the only other figures to participate in the final judgement, and doubtless they are responsible for the casting of the wicked into the fiery pit too (see Davidson 1992:106, 302). As with the *Book of the Watchers*, there is no suggestion in this text that there are angels of torment in this terrible place of punishment.

The Christian document is the canonical book of Revelation. In the very complex eschatological scenario of this text, angels play a number of crucial roles in the end events. They are responsible for the eschatological woes which afflict the world prior to the eschaton (e.g. 8:2-9:21; 15:1-16:21), and at the very end of the age a great angelic army accompanies the returning Jesus (19:11-16). These angels feature prominently in the detailed account of the dispensation of punishments in chapter 20. The initial verses describe an angel binding Satan and sealing him in the bottomless pit for one thousand years (vv 1-3; cf *1 En* 10:4). After his release and the ensuing final battle, Satan is then thrown into the fiery lake along with the beast and the false prophet (vv 7-10; cf 19:20). The final judgement then takes place and Death, Hades and all the human wicked are also cast into the lake of fire to be tortured forever (vv 11-15). Although neither of the

texts which speak of consignment to the fiery lake actually specifies that an angel (or group of angels) was responsible for this task, there is little doubt that they presuppose it. It is an angel who initially imprisons Satan (20:1-3) and in 14:17-20 angels are given the responsibility for gathering the wicked and delivering them to the place of punishment (using the imagery of the wine-press). Like the eschatological scenario in the *Book of the Watchers* and the *Book of Dreams*, the avenging angels in the Christian Apocalypse seem to play no further part in the punishment of the wicked. Moreover, Revelation remains silent on the subject of angelic torturers who inflict further torments on the wicked. The document does of course specify that the wicked will be subjected to unspeakable tortures. As 14:10-11 makes clear, the worshippers of the beast will be tortured (βασανίζω) and suffer torment (βασανισμός) for eternity in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb (Rev 14:10-11), while 20:10 specifies that Satan, the beast and the false prophet will be tortured (βασανίζώ) forever. But this torment is not inflicted on the condemned by angelic torturers; it is inflicted solely by the fiery environment in which the wicked now reside.⁷

It seems clear enough that the author of Revelation has “christianised” the traditional Jewish notion, which is represented in the two sections of *1 Enoch*, that at the eschaton the heavenly angels would be responsible for casting the wicked to the place of eternal punishment. The idea that Jesus would be accompanied by an angelic host when he returned at the end of the age was well established in the early Christian movement (cf Mk 8:38; 1 Th 3:13; 4:16; 2 Th 1:7; Jude v 14), though originally nothing is ever said that these angels will have a hand in the punishment of the wicked. The seer has therefore adopted this Christian belief and merged it with the earlier Jewish tradition that the heavenly angels would be given such a role at the time of the judgement. As we shall see later, the author of the Gospel of Matthew has done precisely the same thing.

2.3 Texts reflecting both traditions

Each of the texts surveyed thus far contains one or the other of the two types within the broad category of angels of eschatological punishment. These documents speak either of angels of torment who reside with the condemned in the place of punishment or of angels who transport the wicked to their horrible, eternal destination; in none of these

⁷ Himmelfarb (1983:121) correctly notes that the role of the angels in the eschatological punishment of the wicked in Revelation is different from the activities of the angelic torturers which is found in other Jewish and Christian texts.

texts is there a merging of these two independent traditions. There are, however, a number of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writings which seem to represent both of these themes, and these need to be examined.

The Qumran documents appear to be a case in point. Let us begin with the theme of the angels or archangels who transport the wicked to the place of affliction. The Qumran scrolls emphasise that the archangel Michael has a crucial function in the battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. He is the prince of light who rules the spirit of truth and the children of light who walk according to it, while the Angel of Darkness (Belial) rules the spirit of falsehood and the wicked who live according to that manner (1QS 3:13-4:26). This archangel also plays a prominent role in the end-time events. According to the War Scroll, he will enter the final eschatological war between the righteous and the wicked leading an angelic army (1QM 13:10-13; 17:5-8; cf 1QM 12:1-9; 1QH 3:35), and in 11QMelch 2:13-14 it is Michael, as Melchizedek, who presides over the final judgement. The latter text specifies that Michael and the other holy angels will execute God's vengeance by seeing to the destruction of Belial and his wicked followers. Since other sections of the scrolls specify that the wicked are sent to a location of eternal fire (e.g. 1QS 2:5-8; 4:11-14; CD 2:5-6; 1QM 11:10; 11QMelch 3:7; 1QpHab 10:4-5), it is reasonable to assume that they are placed there by the archangels who "execute God's vengeance".

The Qumran scrolls also know of the tradition of angelic tormenters. 1QS 2:6-7 states that the wicked will be delivered to the hands of those torturers who wreak vengeance in the place of everlasting fire, while 1QS 4:12-13 speaks of angels of destruction who will inflict the wicked with plagues and torments in the fire of the dark regions. These angels of destruction receive further mention in the Damascus document and in a hymn against demonic forces. The former makes the point that apostates from the community can expect to be punished by the avenging angels (CD 2:6), and in the latter the author praises God in order to escape the clutches of these particular angels (4QShir 1:4-5). There is, however, some dispute over the precise status and allegiance of these figures. A further reference in the Damascus Document states that those who leave the Qumran community will meet with destruction at the hands of Belial (CD 8:2), while 1QM 13:12 identifies the angels of destruction as the spirits of Belial's lot who walk in the laws of darkness. These two texts seem to suggest that the eschatological angels of torment belong to Belial and serve him rather than God. On the basis of these passages some scholars have argued that the

eschatological tormenters in the Qumran tradition are demonic and not angelic figures. A R C Leaney (1966:131, 153-154) came to this conclusion in his discussion of CD 8:2, and Y Yidan (1962:231, 323) made much the same point in his analysis of 1QM 13:12. M J Davidson (1992:157-8, 160, 170, 178, 219, 284-5, 302), however, disputes whether it is permissible to use these texts in this way. He prefers to see two separate traditions in the Qumran documents; one of these refers to angels of torment who act on behalf of God (1QS 2:6-7; 4:12-13; CD 2:6; 4QShir 1:4-5), and the other speaks of Belial's evil angels who are responsible for eschatological punishment under the sovereignty of God (1QM 13:12). Davidson's view is more likely to be correct. There is no suggestion in 1QS 2:6-7; 4:12-13; CD 2:6 and 4QShir 1:4-5 that the angels mentioned in these texts are associated in any way with Belial, and it is reasonable to expect slightly different views within a corpus of texts written over a long period of time. This point need not be pressed, however. Since fallen angels are still angels, it is safe to conclude on any understanding of these Qumran passages that we are dealing with an angelic group whose task is to torment the wicked after the final judgement.

Another example of the merging of these traditions appears in the *Parables of Enoch* (1 En 37-71). This text repeats the tradition found in the *Book of the Watchers* by stating that the archangels will cast the wicked into the eternal fires on the day of judgement (1 En 54:6). But in addition to the archangels there is another group of angels, who are variously described as angels of punishment (56:1; 62:11; 63:1) or angels of plague (53:3).⁸ One major responsibility of this group is to prepare the chains which will bind the human and angelic wicked prior to their being cast into the fiery furnace (54:1-5; cf 53:3-5), but they seem to play a further role in the punishment of the condemned. In 62:11 God delivers the wicked to the angels of punishment in order that vengeance will be exacted upon them, and in 63:1 those who are condemned plead that they may be given some relief from these angels. The fact that this angelic group is described in 56:1 as being armed with both chains and scourges strongly suggests that they continue to torment the wicked by scourging in the furnace of fire.

This mixture of angelic participants in the end-time fate of the wicked is also reflected in the second book of the Sibylline corpus. In its present form this document comprises an original Jewish sub-stratum with a substantial and distinctive Christian

⁸ M. Black (1985:200, 221) incorrectly identifies the angels of punishment with the archangels of 1 En 54:6.

overlay. The archangels play a significant part in the judgement over which God presides, but their role is quite different from that which is usually attributed to them. There is no mention of them depositing the wicked in the place of eschatological punishment. Rather, they are responsible for assembling all figures, human and angelic, before the final tribunal. The four archangels will lead the souls of mortals to judgement (2:214-20), while Uriel alone will break open the gates of Hades to bring to the judgement its mournful and supernatural occupants (2:227-35). On the other hand, the section of this document which describes in terrible detail the fate of the wicked (2:284-312) mentions a group of punitive angels. These figures will bind the wicked with fiery and unbreakable chains and whip them with fiery scourges (2:286-90).

2.4 Summary

We may now summarise the above discussion of angels of eschatological punishment in the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature. It is clear from the survey of the relevant texts that this eschatological theme was important and widespread in both Jewish and Christian circles. This tradition can be classified into two distinct types. The more common form is that of angelic tormenters of the wicked. These figures reside in the place of punishment awaiting the arrival of the wicked, and they will inflict upon them unspeakable torments as punishment for their sins. The less common form refers to the heavenly angels (or archangels) who would be responsible for the casting of the wicked into the fiery furnace (or fiery lake) after the judgement. These angels neither live in the place of punishment nor do they themselves inflict torture upon the wicked; the very environment in which the condemned find themselves produces sufficient suffering. In a few texts we find a convergence of these two angelic motifs. The archangels are responsible for transporting the wicked either to the judgement (so *Sib Or 2*) or to the place of punishment (so the *Parables of Enoch* and, by implication, the Qumran scrolls), while another group of more gruesome angels takes responsibility for the actual torture of the wicked. Having discussed this rather popular theme in the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature, we may now turn our attention to the Gospel of Matthew.

3. ANGELS OF ESCHATOLOGICAL PUNISHMENT IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

As noted above, it is Matthew of all the Evangelists who shares most in common with the apocalyptic and related literature. His apocalyptic-eschatological scheme has parallels with many Jewish and Christian apocalyptic texts, but its closest thematic links are with the Jewish Qumran scrolls and the Christian Apocalypse (cf Sim 1996:78-79, 103-104, 139, 246). According to Matthew's vision of the eschaton, Jesus the Son of Man would preside over the eschatological tribunal (19:28; 25:31-46; cf 7:21-3) after his return from heaven (cf 6:27; 24:30-1), and his judgement would bring magnificent rewards for the righteous and horrible punishments for the wicked. The former would be transformed into angels, while the latter would burn forever in the unceasing fires of Gehenna. (cf Sim 1996:129-147). An integral component of the Evangelist's end-time scenario is that angelic figures would play a crucial part in these events.

3.1 Angelic transporters of the wicked

Matthew knows of and represents the less popular apocalyptic tradition that certain angels would be charged with delivering the wicked to the place of eternal punishment. In his eschatological scheme Jesus would return in glory on the clouds of heaven as a military commander leading a great angelic army (24:30-1; cf Rev 19:11-16).⁹ These angels are so closely related to Jesus the Son of Man that Matthew can describe them as "his angels" (13:41; 16:27; 24:31). The Evangelist specifies that these angels who accompany the Son of Man from heaven play a dual role in the eschatological events which follow. On the one hand, they are responsible for gathering the elect from one end of heaven to the other (24:31), though precisely what this entails is not made explicit. On the other hand and more importantly for our purposes, these angels play a very significant role in the final fate of the wicked. No less than three Matthaean texts, all of them probable creations of the Evangelist, relate to this important theme.

Two of these references appear in the interpretations of the parables of the tares and the net (13:36-43; 13:49-50). It is generally agreed, on the basis of the characteristic Matthaean language in these pericopae and Matthew's general interest in apocalyptic eschatology, that the Evangelist himself created them using a number of common

⁹ For this understanding of the pericope, see Sim (1996:99-106).

apocalyptic-eschatological motifs.¹⁰ Matthew 13:41-2a reads, "The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire". Precisely the same point is made in Mt 13:49-50a; "So will it be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous, and throw them into the furnace of fire". The furnace of fire (cf *1 En* 54:6) in these texts symbolises Gehenna, the traditional place of fiery punishment in Jewish eschatological speculation, which Matthew refers to elsewhere in his Gospel (5:22, 29-30; 10:28; 18:8-9; 23:15, 33; cf 3:10-12; 7:19; 25:41). Both these texts thus make the point that the angels who accompany the Son of Man at the end of the age will be responsible for gathering the wicked subsequent to the final judgement and depositing them in the eternal fires of Gehenna.

The third Matthaean passage which contains this theme is the unique parable of the man without the wedding garment (22:11-13). The evidence is overwhelming that this pericope was also created outright by the Evangelist and that he created it with the tradition *1 En* 10:4a in mind.¹¹ This passage tells how the king who gave the wedding feast (Mt 22:1-10) noticed a man not in possession of the required robe, and how he called for the expulsion of the offender. Verse 13a reads, "Then the king said to his attendants, "bind him (the intruder) hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness"" (cf *1 En* 10:4a). As it stands, the tradition is pure allegory and has an eschatological term of reference. The king represents God (as in the earlier parable in 22:1-10), the man without the garment symbolises the wicked who do not deserve entry to the feast (the consummated kingdom of God),¹² the wedding garment itself represents the eschatological garment of glory which the righteous are given in the new age (see Sim 1992:15-18), the attendants symbolise the holy angels of the heavenly court and the outer darkness stands for the horrors of the eschatological fate of the wicked (cf Mt 8:12 and 25:30). The outer darkness imagery in this text does not represent an alternative

¹⁰ See Jeremias (1972:81-85, whose linguistic analysis is generally accepted in more recent studies; cf Luz (1990:338-339, 357); Davies & Allison (1991:426-427, 442); Harrington (1991:206-207); Gundry (1994:271-274, 279-80). More sceptical of Jeremias' linguistic arguments for Matthaean composition is the recent study of the parables in Matthew by Jones (1995:332-41). Hagner (1993:392, 398) also suggests that in these pericopae Matthew may have been dependent upon a source, though he accepts the possibility that the Evangelist created them outright.

¹¹ For evidence of Matthew's creation of this passage and his use of the *Book of the Watchers*, see Sim (1992:3-19).

¹² For the view that the man without the wedding garment is a composite figure, representing both wicked Jews and the wicked within the Christian movement, see Sim (1990:165-78).

tradition to the fiery Gehenna as the place of punishment. It was a common view that the place of eternal punishment would be characterised by both eternal flames and utter darkness as befitting those separated from the light of God (cf *1 En* 63:6; 103:7; *Jub* 7:29; *T Levi* 3:2; *3 Bar* 4:3; *2 En* 10:2; *Sib Or* 4:43; 1QS 2:7-8; 4:13) (see Sim 1996:49). This text thus agrees with the two pericopae in chapter 13; the heavenly angels would be responsible for transporting the wicked to the place of eternal punishment.

The eschatological role of the angels in these three Matthaean passages agrees with their function in the *Book of the Watchers*, the *Book of Dreams* and the Christian Apocalypse. Since Matthew knew the *Book of the Watchers* in literary form, it is probable that he took this motif from that text. But like the author of Revelation, the Evangelist "christianises" this Jewish tradition. The angels who will consign the wicked to the furnace of fire are now identified with the angels who accompany the returning Jesus at the parousia. The importance of this apocalyptic theme in the Gospel is evident from the fact that the three texts which mention it are all compositions of Matthew himself.

3.2 Angelic torturers

Having identified those texts in the Gospel which clearly reflect the tradition that certain angels would be responsible for the transportation of the wicked to the place of eternal punishment, we may now move on to examine the motif of angelic tormenters in Matthew. Is this particular theme found in the Gospel? Most readers of this text would argue that the motif of angelic torturers of the wicked is not present. They would doubtless contend that when Matthew describes the horrible fate of the condemned he does so in terms of their fiery environment (see above) and never in terms of their torment at the hands of punitive angelic beings. While this observation certainly holds true for most Matthaean passages which describe the lot of the wicked, there is one Gospel text which might provide the exception to this general rule. The pericope in question is the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:23-35. This tradition might well contain the idea that the wicked will be tortured by angels of torment.

The parable of the unforgiving servant appears at the conclusion of the Matthaean ecclesiological discourse. Jesus tells the parable in response to a question posed by Peter concerning how many times one should forgive one's brother (18:21-2), and he compares the kingdom to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants (v 23). One servant owes his master the enormous sum of ten thousand talents, and in order to recoup this debt the king orders that the servant and his family be sold into slavery and that all his possessions be sold (vv 24-5). The servant begs for more time,

and in a gesture of great generosity the king forgives him the entire debt (vv 26-7). After this magnanimous act of the king, the servant fails to emulate his master. He seizes a fellow servant who owes him a much smaller sum (one hundred denarii), and demands immediate repayment (v 28). When this servant cannot pay and asks for an extension of time, the one to whom mercy was shown has him put into gaol until he should pay all his debt (vv 29-30). Other servants witness these events and report what has taken place to the king (v 31). The king then reprimands the wicked servant for not showing the mercy he himself was shown (vv 32-33), and then delivers him to the torturers (τοῖς βασιανισταῖς) until he could repay his original debt (v 34). The pericope ends with a stern warning in verse 35, "So also my heavenly father will do to you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart".

There is general agreement about the nature and extent of Matthew's redaction in this pericope. Most scholars accept that Matthew inherited the basic core of the parable in vv 23-34, and that he edited it at certain points.¹³ It is also widely held that the Evangelist provided the traditional parable with a new introduction and conclusion to conform it to its new ecclesiological context. The dialogue between Peter and Jesus on the subject of forgiveness in vv 21-2 has a rough parallel in Luke 17:4 and probably represents Matthew's redaction and expansion of a Q pericope. This introduction makes the following parable applicable to the Christian movement in two ways. The initial question is asked by Peter, the spokesperson for the church, and the reference to one's brethren confines the issue of forgiveness to an ecclesiological context. The harsh application in verse 35, which concludes the passage, is accepted by almost all commentators as an addition of the Evangelist (cf 6:14-15).¹⁴ By mentioning the forgiveness of one's brother, this conclusion also serves to narrow the theme of forgiveness to the context of the church. These additions to the parable, according to most scholars, changed only the focus of the material and not its essential meaning. At the pre-Matthaeian stage, the central message of the parable is that God is merciful and all-forgiving and that those (in general) who do not imitate him in this respect will face severe (eschatological) penalties. Matthew too makes the point that God is merciful and all-forgiving, but he specifies with his edited introduction and

¹³ For the unconvincing view that Matthew composed the whole pericope in 18:23-35, see Gundry (1994:371-375).

¹⁴ See, amongst many others, Davies & Allison (1991:803); Scott (1985:430); Gnlika (1988:144); De Boer (1988:219-222); Lambrecht (1992:60-61) and Herzog (1994:135). On the other hand, Jeremias (1972:213) accepts this verse as a part of the original parable, though he agrees that the Matthaean context makes the point applicable only in a church setting (p 109).

conclusion that those in the church who do not follow God's example will meet with a terrible punishment at the eschaton (cf De Boer 1988:230-232; Davies & Allison 1991:794-795 and Lambrecht 1992:62, 63-68). It is debatable, however, whether the situation is as simple as this.

As it stands the parable in vv 23-34 contains a rather blatant inconsistency. The obvious point of vv 23-33 is that God is gracious and all-forgiving and that people should emulate him in this respect. This is demonstrated by his remission of the large debt owed by his servant in the early stages of the parable and by his reprimand of the servant in verse 33 for not forgiving as he himself had been forgiven. But in verse 34 the parable takes an unexpected and nasty turn. Rather than once more forgiving the servant for his misbehaviour, which is what we would expect of the all-merciful character of the earlier part of the story, he consigns the servant to a punishment from which there is no release; his detention by the torturers continues until he repays the original debt, a clear impossibility in view of the enormous amount involved. The presence of verse 34 therefore contradicts the very clear message of the earlier material. Far from being an all-forgiving and merciful deity, God is depicted as capricious in the extreme. He shows great mercy at one point and then fails to exercise it at another. The point which is painstakingly built in vv 23-33 concerning the unlimited mercy of God is destroyed by the reference to his furious vengeance in verse 34.

It is rather surprising that many scholars simply deny that any problem exists. They contend that the punishment in verse 34 is both appropriate and even necessary in terms of the dramatic flow of the narrative (see esp Crossan 1973:99-100),¹⁵ but this is debatable. The parable could have ended just as appropriately and certainly more consistently at verse 33. It would then have made the single point that just as the king shows unparalleled mercy and berates his servant for not imitating him, so too should we forgive others just as God has forgiven us. Other commentators note the real tension between vv. 23-33 and verse 34, but they seek to reduce its impact by suggesting that the motif of punishment is secondary to the major theme of the merciful nature of the king (God) and the need to imitate him (so Lambrecht 1992:57, 62-63; cf also Hill 1972:278; Schweizer 1976:378-379 and Donahue 1988:76-77). This explanation, however, is hardly satisfactory. Although the greater part of the parable does deal with the merciful nature of God, his unforgiving and vengeful side

¹⁵ In agreement with Crossan are Davies & Allison (1991:795 note 34). Further representatives of this general position include Jeremias (1972:213-14); Scott (1985:439-440); Herzog (1994:146-147); Hagner (1995:537, 540); Beare (1981:383) and Blomberg (1990:242-243).

serves as its climax and provides the overall point; punishment will come to those who do not exercise forgiveness. The theme of punishment is therefore hardly a subordinate theme. We are left then with a rather glaring inconsistency in Matthew 18:23-34. God is all-forgiving, but he is also unforgiving and extremely vengeful. Who is responsible for this contradiction?

It is quite possible, as most scholars assume, that the parable contained both of these (incompatible) themes at the pre-Matthaeian stage, perhaps even originating with Jesus himself. Scholars have speculated on the precise function of the reference to the torturers in the context of the story in 18:23-34. J C Fenton (1963:302), for example, claims that the servant is handed over to the torturers because he has probably hidden some of the money which he borrowed from his master; the torturers are thus called upon to extract the whereabouts of the missing money. A slightly different explanation is proposed by J D M Derrett (1970:46-47), who suggests that the role of the torturers is to ascertain the personal interests of the victim and/or to pressure his family and friends to raise the funds on his behalf (cf also Jeremias 1972:212; Davies & Allison 1991:802-803). These explanations almost certainly miss the point. It is far more likely that the reference to the torturers was never a part of the parable of the unforgiving servant prior to its adoption by Matthew. In other words, the Evangelist inherited the coherent and consistent tradition of verses 23-33 from his special sources and it was Matthew himself who was responsible for the addition of the troublesome verse 34.¹⁶ By adding the material describing the king handing over the wicked servant to the torturers, which is itself modelled on verse 30, Matthew transformed the original parable of the boundless grace and mercy of God into a threat of eternal damnation. There is good evidence in favour of this hypothesis.

To begin with, the general theme of the verse, the eternal punishment of the wicked, is clearly one of Matthew's favourite topics. The point was made above that no Evangelist more than Matthew focuses on this unpleasant theme. The fact that Matthew appends the application in verse 35 shows that in the parable of the unforgiving servant he is more concerned to highlight the threat of judgement and the vengeful nature of God conveyed by verse 34 than the merciful aspects of God's nature in the earlier parts of the parable. In the light of this, it is not inconceivable that Matthew himself introduced this very theme and, in doing so, altered dramatically the emphasis of the original pericope to

¹⁶ In agreement with Gnilka (1988:144, 147); Perrin (1976:125-126 and Broer (1985:156-157).

suit his own interests and concerns. He had already made the point in the Sermon on the Mount that failure to forgive others would result in eschatological punishment (Mt 6:12, 14-15). By editing the parable of the unforgiving servant in this manner, Matthew was obviously content to sacrifice coherence and clarity. The magnanimous king at the beginning of the parable has by its conclusion become cruel and vindictive. But this was clearly of no concern to the Evangelist. It was imperative for him to impress upon his readers, as he does elsewhere in the Gospel, that those who cause disharmony in the community will meet with severe punitive measures at the judgement (see Sim 1996:236-238).

A further indication that Matthew was responsible for 18:34 is to be found in the thematic similarity with other compositions of the Evangelist. This particular verse has close parallels with both Mt 22:7 and 22:13. The first of these is generally accepted as a redacted version of a Q text better represented by Luke 14:21 (see, most recently, Davies & Allison 1997:201-202). It describes how an angry king sent his troops to destroy the city of the ones who murdered his servants, a clear reference to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. The second passage is a Matthaean creation (see above) and refers to a king ordering his attendants to bind the man without the appropriate attire and cast him into the outer darkness. These two passages, one heavily edited and the other created outright, both refer to a king who orders the punishment of the wicked. Since Matthew 18:34 presents the same general theme, though using language and imagery appropriate to its context, there is good reason to believe that Matthew had a hand in its creation.

An even more telling piece of evidence for the Evangelist's composition of this verse comes from the motif of the torturers (οἱ βασανισταί) in this eschatological context. Even though this term is found only this once in the Gospel (and this once in the New Testament), it reflects one of Matthew's particular views about the final judgement. There is little doubt that Matthew considers the ultimate fate of the wicked to be one of great torment and torture. This is indicated by his many references to the punishment of the wicked in the eternal fires of Gehenna, but more concrete evidence is supplied in the story of the Gadarene demoniacs in 8:28-34. Matthew took this narrative from Mark 5:1-20 and characteristically abbreviated it. According to the Marcan text, the demons plead with Jesus not to torture (βασανίζω) them by performing the exorcism. The torture envisaged here results from their expulsion from the human body they now possess and their potentially homeless state thereafter. Matthew redacts this material in a manner which completely alters its meaning. In 8:29 the demons ask Jesus,

“Have you come to torture us (βασανίσαι ἡμᾶς) before the time (πρὸ καιροῦ). Since πρὸ καιροῦ here adverts to the endtime judgement and its aftermath, the super-natural demons, who are well aware of their endtime fate, define their eschatological destiny in terms of torture, and they inquire of Jesus whether this is to be inflicted before the appointed time. Consequently, Matthew has completely altered the meaning of βασανίζω from the sense it possessed in Mark and given it an overtly eschatological meaning. The importance of this point should be clear. Because Matthew envisages the endtime fate of the wicked in terms of torture, it is understandable that he could refer to torturers in the eschatological context of 18:34. Rather than speaking against Matthew’s creation of this verse, in so far as ὁ βασανιστής is a *hapax legomenon*, the presence of this term actually speaks in favour of this hypothesis.

This brings us to a closer examination of the motif of the torturers in Mt 18:34. If Matthew was responsible for the inclusion of this grisly theme in the parable of the unforgiving servant, how did he expect it to be interpreted? Most scholars, who of course argue that the Evangelist inherited this notion from his source, emphasise that Matthew interpreted this traditional motif allegorically. The handing over of the servant to the torturers alludes to the extreme horrors of eschatological punishment; it represents in metaphorical terms the consignment of the wicked to the eternal flames of Gehenna.¹⁷ While there is an element of truth in this interpretation, it might be questioned whether it is precise enough. All the characters in this parable seem to have an identifiable human or divine referent in Matthew’s allegorical interpretation of this material. The king represents God and the unforgiving servant represents the (actual or potential) wicked members of the church who refuse to forgive their brethren. The fellow servant who owes the wicked servant symbolises those in the church who commit wrong and require forgiveness on the part of those they have wronged, while the wider group of servants stands for the righteous in the church who recognise evil and demand justice from God. This leaves the torturers as the remaining characters in the story to be accounted for. Given that all the other figures represent persons, either divine or human, we should expect that this group would as well, but the common reading of this motif does not understand the torturers in this way. It identifies them not with a group of individuals

¹⁷ For this general interpretation, though with different nuances, see Davies & Allison (1991:803); Gundry (1994:375); Gnillka (1988:146) and Sabourin (1983:728). For a slightly different view, see Manson (1949:214). Manson claims that the penalty for not emulating God’s forgiveness involves torment but not *eternal* torment, but he provides no evidence. The fact that the servant has no chance of escaping the tortures seems to necessitate an eternal punishment.

but with an action, either the consignment of the wicked to Gehenna or the torment of the wicked in the fiery place of punishment. If this was Matthew's intention, then he has been very imprecise in his use of allegory. In view of the fact that he himself was probably responsible for Mt 18:34, he could easily have maintained consistency by slightly changing the imagery. He could have written that the king has the wicked servant consigned to the place of torture, and this would have immediately suggested Gehenna. But the Evangelist chose not to do so. He refers explicitly to a group of torturers and, in keeping with his allegorical interpretation of this tradition, this suggests that he has a certain group in mind. But which group is represented by this motif?

The most obvious candidates are of course angels of eschatological punishment. On this reading of the text, at the eschaton God will hand over the wicked in the church to these particular angels. But this immediately raises the further question; which angels of eschatological punishment does Matthew have in mind in 18:34? Does he identify the torturers with the group of holy angels, mentioned in 13:41-2, 49-50 and 22:13, who accompany Jesus upon his return and who are responsible for casting the wicked to the fires of Gehenna? In support of this interpretation is 22:13 which, as noted above, shares certain affinities with 18:34. If we understand the text in this way, then these angels can be called torturers in an extended sense but not in a literal sense; they are torturers in so far as they are responsible for consigning the wicked to the tortures of Gehenna. This is certainly a possible interpretation of the motif, and if it is correct then we have a fourth reference to these angels of eschatological punishment to add to the other three. It is questionable, however, whether this reading of the text accurately captures the Evangelist's intended meaning. The angels in 18:34 do not accompany the returning Son of Man, as do the angels of 13:41-2, 49-50 and, in distinction to the angelic figures of 22:13, they are clearly not a part of the heavenly court. On the contrary, these angels inhabit a more sinister environment, the torture-chamber of a prison, where they carry out the gruesome orders of the king.

Since the angels of 18:34 seem not to refer to the heavenly angels who cast the wicked into Gehenna, we are left with no option but to identify them with the other group of angels of eschatological punishment. The torturers in this text therefore symbolise angelic tormenters of the wicked who live in the place of eternal punishment in order to execute the vengeance of God on the condemned.¹⁸ There are two bits of evidence

¹⁸ This possibility is excluded out of hand by Beare (1981:383), who denies categorically that Matthew could have believed that God has a corp of torturers at his disposal.

which confirm this conclusion. First, it is certain that Matthew knew of this notion of angelic torturers of the wicked. One of the more important Jewish texts containing this theme is, as noted earlier, the *Parables of Enoch*, and there is good reason to suppose that the Evangelist either knew this text in written form or was in touch with its underlying sources. This conclusion is based upon the similarity of the Son of Man in each text. In the Enoch tradition the Son of Man presides over the final judgement sitting on a throne of glory (*1 En* 62:5, 69:29; cf 45:3; 55:4; 62:3), and Matthew makes precisely the same claim of Jesus the Son of Man (19:28; 25:31). Given that the combination of the Son of Man, the eschatological judgement and the throne of glory appears in only these two documents, it is safe to assume a link, either direct or indirect, between them.¹⁹ It follows from this that Matthew was most probably also familiar with the Enoch tradition's concept of angelic torturers. The second piece of evidence in favour an identification of the torturers in 18:34 with angels of torment comes from the redacted words of the demons in Mt 8:29. As noted above, these evil spirits ask Jesus if he has come to torture them before the appointed time. How is the motif of torture to be taken in this verse? It might be the case that the demons are referring solely to the torment they will receive in the eternal fires of Gehenna. Matthew 25:41 specifies that this will be the lot of Satan and those evil angels who have followed him. In this case there would be a clear parallel with the notion of torture which is found in Revelation (see above). But the words of the demons give the strong impression that the torture they speak of is more personalised. They ask Jesus whether *he* has come to torture them. This implies that the torture they expect to suffer at the eschaton is inflicted by an agent of torment; they expect to be tortured by an individual or a group in addition to the torment provided by their eternal, fiery environment.

It is interesting to note that this interpretation of the torturer motif has a long history behind it. Some of the church fathers who commented upon Matthew 18:34 identified the torturers in that verse explicitly with angelic tormenters of the wicked. Two clear examples are Origen (*On Matthew* 14:13) and Rabanus Maurus (*On Matthew* col 1016) (see further Wailes 1987:136). While it is often true that the fathers of the church completely misinterpreted the allegory and symbolism of Matthew's Gospel, it might well be the case that in this instance they accurately captured the intention of the Evangelist. This conclusion must remain, however, no more than a strong possibility.

¹⁹ For recent discussion of the relationship between the Gospel of Matthew and the *Parables of Enoch*, see Sim (1996:119-23) and literature cited here.

Absolute certainty is precluded by two factors. To begin with, there is no unambiguous, corroborating evidence within the Gospel that Matthew accepted the notion of angelic torturers of the wicked. If 18:34 does allude to this theme, then it stands alone. Moreover, this single reference is couched in allegorical terms, and metaphorical language can be easily misunderstood. But these points must be weighed against the fact that Matthew was well acquainted with the wider Jewish apocalyptic tradition, including the *Parables of Enoch*, and that he writes pointedly of torturers in an eschatological context when other terms and symbols were available to him.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study has attempted to build upon my earlier work on Matthew's apocalyptic eschatology, and demonstrate another case of the influence the contemporary apocalyptic-eschatological tradition on this early Christian author. It was argued that a common motif in the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature was that of angels of eschatological punishment. This theme has two distinct sub-types, heavenly angels (or arch-angels) who transport the wicked to the place of eternal punishment after the final judgement, and angelic tormenters who will inflict the wicked with horrible and everlasting punishments. The second type was by far the more common of the two, and it was especially prominent in the later Christian apocalyptic literature. While most of the texts surveyed contained only one of these traditions, a small number of texts seemed to reflect both of them. The Gospel of Matthew definitely knows of the theme of heavenly angels transporting the condemned to the place of fiery punishment, and its importance for the Evangelist is indicated by the fact that he himself created the three texts which contain this theme (13:41-2, 49-50; 22; 13). On the other hand, a fourth redactional text, Matthew 18:34, appears to refer to angels who torment the wicked. This allegorical verse refers to "the torturers" in an eschatological context, and this group is best identified with the tormenting angels who are so prominent in the contemporary Jewish literature and the later Christian apocalyptic tradition. If this is the case, then the Gospel of Matthew can be categorised with those traditions which reflect the two distinct types of avenging angel. Like the Qumran documents, the *Parables of Enoch* and the second book of the *Sibylline Oracles*, Matthew too envisages an eschatological scenario whereby the wicked are cast by the heavenly angels to the fires of Gehenna where they will be tormented forever by another group of angels. It should perhaps be pointed out that Matthew does not describe in any detail the horrible punishments inflicted by these

punitive angelic figures. In this respect his single reference to these torturers is similar to the equally laconic references in *2 Enoch* and the *Testament of Levi*, and quite unlike the graphic description of their horrible tortures in the later Christian apocalyptic tradition.

One final point requires brief discussion. How are we to explain the Evangelist's emphasis on angels of eschatological punishment? Why does he focus on the heavenly angels casting the wicked into the fiery furnace, and the angels of torment who inflict further punishments on those who are denounced at the judgement? These questions are all the more pointed once we take into account that all four texts under consideration appear in ecclesiological contexts; in each case the wicked who are punished are members of the Christian movement. Why does Matthew feel impelled to threaten his fellow Christians that those who do not measure up are destined for eternal fire and endless torment by punitive angels? In my monograph on the Gospel's apocalyptic eschatology, I argued in detail that the Matthaean community, like other apocalyptic groups of the time, was facing a number of severe social crises. In an effort to help his community come to terms with these dire circumstances, the Evangelist resorted to the religious perspective apocalyptic eschatology. One of the functions of this distinctive world view is to enhance group solidarity, since dissension between community members can have severely detrimental effects on the whole group in times of crisis. In an effort to maintain social harmony, Matthew (cf 6:12, 14-15; 18:23-33) emphasizes the notion of continued forgiveness within the community, but he reinforces this message by using the threat of judgement (see Sim 1996:235-241). In other words, the Evangelist seeks to impose social control on his troubled community by highlighting the terrible eschatological fate for those who threaten the solidarity of the group. Not only will they be consigned to the fires of Gehenna by the angels who accompany the returning Jesus, but they will also be tortured forever by angelic tormenters. The use of these grisly themes therefore reflects the highly fragmented and critical state of the Matthaean community at the time the Gospel was written. Needless to say the Evangelist's eschatological scenario, with its emphasis on the fires of Gehenna and angelic torturers, is not the most pleasant aspect of his Gospel, and many modern readers prefer to downplay or overlook it. But we need to accept that Matthew was a leader of a community in crisis, and that he responded to this crisis in a manner which was part and parcel of his cultural heritage. Like other apocalyptic authors, the Evangelist embraced an eschatological vision which delicately balanced hope for salvation with the threat of eternal and torturous punishment.

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