

## Is God a Mad Dictator Who Kills His Own People?

### An Analysis of Matthew 22:1 – 14

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

Initial impressions of God: Troubling!

- Narcissistic, brutal dictator who kills his own people
- Vengeful in a way that is out of proportion to the crime: set their city on fire?
- Retaliates brutally against the one guy not dressed correctly
- On top of all that, does God choose for people to be damned and destroyed from the start?

### STEP ONE: Understand the passage as a whole

*Historical context: The Jewish leaders at the time of Jesus were nationalistic, ethnocentric militants.*

- Nationalistic: They wanted the land that historically belonged to them.
- Ethnocentric: They did not want the Gentiles to be included in the people of God, or perhaps only as second-class citizens.
- Militants: They expected a military Messiah to arise and defeat the Roman Empire, and eventually overthrow them. ‘Jews are good, Romans are evil.’
- Theologically, the Jewish leaders believed they were already the elect, the chosen people.

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

- 163 BCE: Judas Maccabeus recaptures Jerusalem and cleanses the Temple, providing the model for a resistance tradition.
- 40 BCE: Hezekiah leads revolts and skirmishes. He was put down by Herod the Great. Samaia the Pharisee objects to this.
- 4 BCE: Young men, as Herod lay dying in 4 BCE, pull down Roman eagles from Jerusalem, who were then killed on Herod’s orders. They were supported by the teachers Judas ben Sariphaeus and Matthias ben Margalothus (Josephus, *War* 1.648-55; *Antiquities* 17.149-66).
- 3 BCE: ‘A countless multitude’ from all over Palestine, especially Judea itself (Josephus). Another violent revolt occurred the following Passover, which was renewed at Pentecost (*War* 2.1-13; 39-50; *Ant.* 17.206-18; 250-64). They laid siege to the Romans and besieged the commander himself in the palace. At this, anarchy broke out in Palestine (*War* 2.55; *Ant.* 17.269, referring to ‘continuous and countless new tumults’), including a revolt by Herod’s veterans and one by Judas, son of Hezekiah.
- 6 CE: Judas/Theudas the Galilean (*War* 2.118, *Acts* 5:37), probably the same person as Judas the son of Hezekiah (see N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, p.180). Judas, together with Zadok, a Pharisee, headed a large number of Zealots. Judas proclaimed the Jewish state as a republic recognizing God alone as king and ruler and His laws as supreme. The revolt continued to spread, and in some places serious conflicts ensued. Josephus calls this the most serious incident between Pompey’s conquest of Palestine (63 BCE) and the fall of Jerusalem (70 AD). Two thousand Jews were crucified. Judas was called Messiah.

- ‘The Samaritan’ led a group of armed followers and ended up in guerilla warfare. The unnamed ‘prophets’ described by Josephus (*War* 2.258–60/*Antiquities* 20.167b–8) are subsumed under the general brigandage noted in *Antiquities* 20.167a. ‘Prophets’ and their followers entertained dreams of violent revolution.
- ‘The Egyptian’, according to *War* 2.262, intended to force entry to Jerusalem, overpower the Roman garrison, and set himself up as a tyrant.
- The unnamed prophet of *Antiquities* 20.188 appeared in the context of widespread brigandry.
- Jonathan the Weaver (*War* 7.437–50) had, according to Josephus, *Life* 424ff., aroused an uprising in Galilee.
- ~28 CE: The Galileans Pilate crushed at Jerusalem, mingling their blood with their sacrifices (Lk.13:1)
- 30 CE: Barabbas and the revolt in which he took part (Lk.23:19; in John 18:40, Barabbas is described as a *lestes*, ‘brigand’). Presumably the two *lestai* crucified alongside Jesus count as well.
- 40’s CE: The sons of Judas the Galilean, Jacob/James and Simon (*Ant.* 20.102), continued their father’s insurrection. They were crucified in the late 40s by Roman governor Tiberius Julius Alexander.
- The ‘common people’ who were punished along with Eleazor ben Deinaeus; in *War* 2.253, Josephus says the number of them was ‘incalculable’.
- Jesus ben Ananias enters Jerusalem on the Feast of Sukkot and decries the Temple; the governor interrogates him but later releases him.
- Brigands reported by Josephus in *War* 2.264f.; these may be the same ones who are mentioned in 2.271, but in the earlier passage it appears that the revolutionary fervor was far more widespread than a small group.
- 55 CE?: A so-called ‘Egyptian prophet’ (an allusion to Moses?) and 30,000 unarmed Jews do an Exodus reenactment and are massacred by the procurator Antonius Felix (*War* 2.13.5, *Ant.*20.8.6)
- 66 CE: Multiple Jewish revolts occur, which are together called the First Jewish-Roman War. A faction led by John of Gischala and his followers revolt in Galilee and then take Jerusalem (refs. in Wright, *NTPG*, p.177 n. 54). The Sicarii, the ‘dagger men,’ led by Menahem, another son or grandson of Judas the Galilean (*War* 4.198, *Ant.* 20.186f., etc.), forced their way into the Temple and then burned the houses of Ananias, Agrippa, and Bernice, and the Record Office with the records of debt. Menahem broke into the armory at Masada, distributed arms, and returned to Jerusalem as ‘king’ over the revolutionary forces. Menahem was called Messiah.
- 70 CE: The Romans, led by future Emperor Titus Flavius, conquer Jerusalem and burn the city and Temple to the ground. Josephus claimed that 1,100,000 people were killed, mostly Jews; 97,000 were captured or enslaved (*War* 6.9.3). This ends the First Jewish-Roman War.
- 73 CE: The Romans recapture the fortress Masada from the Jewish Sicarii. The defenders, 960 Jews, commit mass suicide before the Roman victory.
- 115 – 117 CE: Diaspora Jews in Cyrene, Cyprus, Mesopotamia, and Egypt lead widespread revolts around the Mediterranean region against Romans. These are together called the Kitos War, the ‘rebellion of the exile,’ or sometimes the Second Jewish-Roman War.
- 132 – 135 CE: Simon Bar-Kochba leads a Jewish uprising at Masada. Bar-Kochba was called Messiah and supported by Pharisee Rabbi Akiva. The Romans crush the uprising at great cost. Roman historian Cassius Dio writes that 580,000 Jews were killed, 50 fortified towns were razed, and 985 villages were destroyed. This was the called the Third Jewish-Roman War, if one counts the Kitos War as the Second.

If you were trying to stop religious leaders from a jihad campaign, what language would you use? Probably language that would jar them and completely challenge their worldview. From this historical overview, it is much easier to see why some parts of Jesus’ language in Mt.22:1 – 14 is a *figure of speech* designed to provoke the Jewish leaders to see that God is not on their side, as they think. Jesus wants to stop them from continuing the supposed ‘liberation of Jerusalem’ from the Romans, and to stop their jihad-like posture against the Romans. So we have to allow Jesus to be a prophetic social critic, against the war, who uses language in a very sharp way. But whether this parable, in all details, reflects God’s doing, remains to be seen.

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

Jesus vs. Pharisees = Paul vs. Judaizers = Luther vs. Catholics =	‘Salvation by grace through faith’ vs. ‘salvation by works and self-righteousness’
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Hence, we miss the centrality of Jewish racism, ethnocentrism, and militant nationalism. While I believe in ‘salvation by grace through faith,’ I don’t believe in the ‘penal substitutionary atonement theory’ that often lies behind it in much Protestant thought (important!), and I don’t think that it is accurate to interpret 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews by 16<sup>th</sup> century European Catholics. Notice that some Jews rejected Jesus because he loved Samaritans and Gentiles as such (e.g. Luke 4:14 – 30), not for any other theological reason. Jews did ask the question, ‘Are you keeping the Mosaic Law and Temple sacrifices?’ But this was part of a larger *Jewish* question, ‘Are you *Jewish* enough?’ Most Jewish leaders effectively had a theology of *Jewish purity* and *Jewish solidarity against outsiders*. The 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish question was broader than the 16<sup>th</sup> century Catholic question, ‘Are you doing enough good works *as an individual*?’ For more information, see N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Fortress Press, 1992) and the extensive literature he references on what first century Judaism was like.

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

- <sup>Luke 13:1</sup> Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup> And Jesus said to them, ‘Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate? <sup>3</sup> I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. <sup>4</sup> Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup> I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.’
- <sup>Luke 13:34</sup> O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it! <sup>35</sup> Behold, your house is left to you desolate; and I say to you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!’
- <sup>Luke 19:41</sup> When he approached Jerusalem, he saw the city and wept over it, <sup>42</sup> saying, ‘If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. <sup>43</sup> For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side, <sup>44</sup> and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation.’
- <sup>Luke 21:5</sup> And while some were talking about the temple, that it was adorned with beautiful stones and votive gifts, he said, <sup>6</sup> ‘As for these things which you are looking at, the days will come in which there will not be left one stone upon another which will not be torn down.’ <sup>7</sup> They questioned him, saying, ‘Teacher, when therefore will these things happen? And what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?’ <sup>8</sup> And he said, ‘See to it that you are not misled; for many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he,’ and, ‘The time is near.’ Do not go after them. <sup>9</sup> When you hear of wars and disturbances, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end does not follow immediately.’
- <sup>Luke 23:28</sup> But Jesus turning to them said, ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. <sup>29</sup> For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed...’ <sup>31</sup> For if they do these things when the tree is green [i.e. fruitful and peacemaking], what will happen when it is dry [sinful and violent]?’

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

<i>Parable</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<sup>22:1</sup> Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying, <sup>2</sup> ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son.	King = God; son = Jesus; wedding feast = celebration of union between God and humanity in Jesus
<sup>3</sup> And he sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come. <sup>4</sup> Again he sent out other slaves saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited, ‘Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything	Slaves = disciples of Jesus; ‘those who had been invited, were unwilling to come’ = Jewish leaders

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

*Historical context: In this context, Jesus is challenging the Pharisees and Jerusalem leadership about their assumption that they are ‘the chosen people.’*

- ‘Chosen people’ is a title. In Matthew 22:14, ‘chosen’ (*eklektoi*) is a predicate adjective used with *eisin* (to be). So the more accurate grammatical reading is, ‘For many are the called, but few are *the chosen*.’ It is not a verb, and hence, strictly speaking, it is not accurate to read this as, ‘For God invites many but chooses few.’ The word occurs in the New Testament only two other times – Colossians 3:12 and Revelation 17:14 – and in those contexts seems to have the same meaning.
- Jesus took that title away from Israel as a whole, and carried it himself as the ‘Chosen One’:
  - Mt.3:16 After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on him,<sup>17</sup> and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.’
  - Mt.12:15 But Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. Many followed him, and he healed them all,<sup>16</sup> and warned them not to tell who he was.<sup>17</sup> This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet:<sup>18</sup> ‘Behold, My Servant whom I have **chosen**; My beloved in whom My soul is well-pleased; I will put My Spirit upon him, and he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles.<sup>19</sup> He will not quarrel, nor cry out; nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.<sup>20</sup> A battered reed he will not

break off, and a smoldering wick he will not put out, until he leads justice to victory. <sup>21</sup> And in his name the Gentiles will hope.’ *Notice that the Gentiles would hope in him.*

- Lk.9:35 Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, ‘This is My Son, My **Chosen** One; listen to him!’
- Jesus redefined ‘chosen people’ around himself, since he was ‘the Chosen One.’
  - Positively, to be part of ‘the chosen people’ now means ‘those who are Jesus’ people, commissioned by Jesus to carry out his mission in the world.’ That task is to announce God’s salvation and invite people to Jesus.
  - Negatively, to reject Jesus’ invitation to become one of the ‘chosen people’ means that one is motivated by individual pride or collective racism or both!

If you support a high federal Calvinist theological tradition, I recommend (at the very least) that you find support for your tradition from elsewhere in Scripture. Not every passage has to confirm your tradition. So let go of Matthew 22:1 – 14 and take a more academically rigorous approach to it. Otherwise, you’ll have a really hard time saying, ‘The Jewish leaders just wanted to earn their own salvation, therefore God brutally destroyed them, and behind that, He chose to damn them from the start.’ Non-Christians will almost certainly reject that out of hand. And that’s grossly inconsistent with other parts of Scripture.

**STEP TWO: With non-Christians, ask certain questions that are relevant and will lead them to new insight or ask new questions**

Suggested Questions:

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

Main point: State the *positive* things that Jesus was doing: anti-racism, reconciliation, peace, and new humanity for all humanity. You have to read this passage in its historical context and take into account how sharp rhetoric actually works.