

The Demand for a Sign (12:38–45)
(Matthew 16:1-4; Mark 8:11-12; Luke 11:29-32)

“After Jesus is asked by the scribes and Pharisees for a sign, he responds with a speech which takes up three points, the first being the sign to ‘this generation’ (the sign of Jonah; 39–40), the second being the sayings about past generations (41–2), the third being the fate of ‘this generation’ (vv. 43–5....”¹

Matthew 12:38 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.”

“For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,” (1 Corinthians 1:22, ESV)

scribes².... “The scribes now join the Pharisees, who are the main opponents of Jesus in chap. 12.”³ “One type of scribe that Josephus referred to that is different from the Graeco-Roman notion of scribes was the sacred scribe who was an experienced interpreter of signs (J.W. 6.291).”⁴ This is particularly interesting in the light of the current request that Jesus show them a sign.

answered⁵.... The scribes and Pharisees are not at all happy with Jesus’ previous comments. They have charged him with being in league with Beelzebul. He has responded to that in such a way as to expose them as evil and in danger of eternal damnation. They are angry and have no intention of leaving it there. They want him dead and now they maneuver to threaten him with judgment for being a false prophet.

Their request for a sign is driven by Deuteronomy 13:1-5. **Their goal is to first discredit Jesus and then to put him to death.**

“If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says,

¹ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (vol. 2; International Critical Commentary; London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 351.

² *scribes γραμματεῖς* “...a recognized expert in Jewish law (including both canonical and traditional laws and regulations)—‘one who is learned in the Law, expert in the Law’ or ‘... Law of Moses.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 544). New York: United Bible Societies.

³ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 216.

⁴ Peter Tan-Gatue. (2012, 2013, 2014). Scribe. In J. D. Barry, L. Wentz, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair-Wolcott, R. Klippenstein, D. Bomar, ... D. R. Brown (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

⁵ *answered ἀποκρίνομαι* “...to respond to a question asking for information—‘to answer, to reply.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.' (Deuteronomy 13:1–5, ESV)

We know that as recently as verse 14 they were conspiring to kill him.

"But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him." (Matthew 12:14, ESV)

If he failed in the sign they were after, this would have been the only proof needed to put him to death. But what makes them particularly hypocritical was the fact that Jesus had performed a plethora of signs already that they chose not to notice.

"Then a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw." (Matthew 12:22, ESV)

This most recent one they inexplicably ascribed to the power of Satan. **That sign did not work for them simply because it did work for the blind and mute man. They were not looking for success; they were looking for failure. Failure provided the opportunity to murder him.**

sign⁶.... Of course, they had seen many signs, but what they are saying is that these other signs could just as well have come by the spirit of Beelzebul, these signs were not at all clear, show us one in which there can be no doubt as to its origin, one which God alone could empower. However, they are not specific as to what they want to see, what they will then accept as from God.

Notice they did not ask for a miracle, they asked for a sign. **The Pharisees are saying that they have seen miracles and believe they point to Satan. Their request is that he show them one that unambiguously points to God.** "...they were asking for a "sign" performed on command to remove what seemed to them to be the ambiguity of Jesus'

⁶ *sign σημεῖον* "Sign, mark, token, miracle with a spiritual end and purpose. In the pl., miracles which lead to something out of and beyond themselves; finger-marks of God, valuable not so much for what they are as for what they indicate of the grace and power of the Doer...." Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament*. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

miracles.”⁷ The Pharisees are looking for a sign with an arrow that points only to God with no possibility that it points to Beelzebul. “What the Pharisees wanted was something like the signs performed by Moses to convince Israel that God had appointed him to his mission (Exod. 4:1–9). They had witnessed his healings and exorcisms, but now they wanted irrefutable evidence that defied natural explanation.”⁸ And yet, many of Moses’ miracles were also counterfeited by demons.

“But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts. So Pharaoh’s heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.” (Exodus 7:22, ESV)

So, was there even a possibility that any sign would have satisfied them? Actually, no; they were looking for a reason to put him to death, not for a reason to believe.

The Sign Of Jonah; 39–42)

This Generation (39–40)

Matthew 12:39 But he answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

evil and adulterous.... “The term **adulterous generation** takes the adjective in a metaphorical sense to mean “unfaithful” or “apostate.”⁹ This term would remind his audience of Ezekiel, and Hosea and their attestation, that it was Israel who was guilty of spiritual adultery against God.

“And I will judge you as women who commit adultery and shed blood are judged, and bring upon you the blood of wrath and jealousy.” (Ezekiel 16:38, ESV)

“But righteous men shall pass judgment on them with the sentence of adulteresses, and with the sentence of women who shed blood, because they are adulteresses, and blood is on their hands.” (Ezekiel 23:45, ESV)

“And the LORD said to me, “Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins.” (Hosea 3:1, ESV)

⁷ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 294). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁸ Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew* (Understanding the Bible Commentary Series; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 120.

⁹ Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew* (Understanding the Bible Commentary Series; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 121.

““Adultery” was frequently used by OT prophets to describe the spiritual prostitution and wanton apostasy of Israel....”¹⁰

generation¹¹.... “...*generation* extends the scope of his condemnation beyond his immediate questioners to the sum total of the contemporaries they represent.”¹² “The generation is being likened to those sent into exile.”¹³ This was indeed prophetic; Jesus will go into greater detail on this subject in chapter 24.

“The Pharisaic scribes here take on a representative role, speaking for their generation in its unbelief.”¹⁴

seeks¹⁵ or **demands**.... Seeking for a sign was not in and of itself evil. Deuteronomy 13:1–5 made its value clear as a method of evaluating false prophets. But this request in the context of Jesus’ ministry of healing multitudes demonstrates its evil nature. Their hope was that he would eventually get one wrong, and then they would have him! It was evil because it was born in their evil murderous hearts. They rejected sign after sign hoping for one that would allow them to fulfill their murderous goal.

no sign will be given to it.... Jesus refuses a new miracle on demand, but promises one in the future. **They will find that sign inadequate as well.**

except the sign of the prophet Jonah.... This would have been a most disappointing “sign” to the Pharisees. They were looking for some flash right now, not a reference to something that happened nearly 800 years earlier. “Rightly understood the sign...is not a sign at all as Jesus’ opponents understood the word. It becomes a sign only for those with eyes to see. ...Jesus offers no miraculous token on demand.”¹⁶

¹⁰ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 295). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

¹¹ *generation γενεά* “...people living at the same time and belonging to the same reproductive age-class—‘those of the same time, those of the same generation.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

¹² Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 324–325.

¹³ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 510). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

¹⁴ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 510). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

¹⁵ *seeks ἐπιζητέω* “...which I have translated “demand” here, is a stronger compound of ζητέω, “seek;”....” France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

¹⁶ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 295). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

“And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.” (Jonah 1:17, ESV)

“For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation.” (Luke 11:30, ESV)

Luke clarifies the statement a bit by using the phrase “became a sign to the people of Nineveh” an evil and adulterous generation. So Jesus will “become a sign” to his current evil and adulterous generation. “References to the Book of Jonah in extant Jewish literature show that it was not his preaching that was their main interest, but his experience in and deliverance from the sea-monster...”¹⁷

Matthew 12:40 For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

At this point, his audience would have no idea what Jesus is talking about. But in time, Jesus’ ***three days and three nights in the heart of the earth*** will become a sign.

“The time in the belly of the sea monster functioned to confirm Jonah (ahead of the actual exercise of his ministry) in his role as a preacher of judgment; the three days in the earth will function to confirm Jesus (at the end of his ministry) as one who has had to declare judgment, inasmuch as his ministry met with rejection, a rejection which culminated in his death.”¹⁸

“...in both Luke and Matthew “both the old and the new sign of Jonah consist in the authorization of the divine messenger by deliverance from death.””¹⁹

Jonah’s three-day confinement was before his ministry to Nineveh, Jesus’ three-day confinement will be after his ministry. Both were supernaturally delivered from their grave. Jesus’ supernatural resurrection after a three-day entombment is to be remembered as a sign of a coming judgment by God.

three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.... But, was Jesus in the “heart of the earth” three days and three nights?

“...if the normal sequence of Passion Week is correct..., Jesus was in the tomb only about thirty-six hours. Since they included parts of three days, by Jewish reckoning Jesus was buried “three days” or, to put it another way, he rose “on the third day” (16:21). But this does not cover more than two nights. Some advocate a Wednesday

¹⁷ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (pp. 490–491). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

¹⁸ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 511). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

¹⁹ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 492). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

crucifixion date...; but though that allows for “three days and three nights,” it runs into difficulty with “on the third day.” In rabbinical thought a day and a night make an *ōnâh* [day], and a part of an *ōnâh* [day] is as the whole.... Thus according to Jewish tradition, “three days and three nights” need mean no more than “three days” or the combination of any part of three separate days.”²⁰ So, according to the way the phrase was used in that culture at that time, yes, the phrase is accurate.

“God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.” (Acts 2:24, ESV)

“This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses.” (Acts 2:32, ESV)

“and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.” (Acts 3:15, ESV)

Through the book of Acts, the resurrection of Jesus is identified as a sign of God’s approval of Jesus’ life and ministry.

Past Generations (41–42)

..Matthew 12:41 The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

In Matthew 10:15 and 11:22, 24 we read of Jesus’ condemnation of wicked Gentiles. “...but now we are introduced to Gentiles who turned to God, and who can therefore appear for the prosecution against “this generation” at the day of judgment.”²¹ **The thought of evil Gentiles bearing witness against holy Jews would be a most offensive statement to these men. Few things could have been said that would have angered them more.**

“Ninevites were persuaded by Jonah’s call to repentance, but “this generation” has not responded to the call to repent (4:17; cf. 11:20) by the second Jonah. And yet this second Jonah is not just a repetition of the first, because ... “something more than Jonah is here.””²²

The men of Nineveh saw a sign and repented; the men of Israel saw greater signs and without repenting, asked for more.

²⁰ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 296). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

²¹ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 492). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

²² France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 492). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

rise up at the judgment.... Judgment has been a recurring theme in Jesus teaching. Others repented; Israel would not. Others would have repented and will therefore receive a lesser judgment; Israel will receive a greater judgment.

“Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.” (Matthew 10:15, ESV)

“Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.”” (Matthew 11:20–24, ESV)

with this generation.... “...‘with this generation’ points rather to the general resurrection of the dead for the day of judgment.”²³ Some who call themselves “full Preterists”, more accurately “unorthodox Preterists,” teach that all judgments mentioned in the Bible were fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. However, this judgment is to take place when the **men of Nineveh** are present, that is, the last day. This verse and the ones in chapters 10 and 11 above show this to be impossible—hence the word “unorthodox” to those who deny a future judgment beyond A.D. 70.

they repented.... “To Jonah’s surprise (and consternation) the Ninevites repented at his preaching. The unspoken point is that Jesus’ generation has not repented at his preaching, and this despite the fact that ... they are experiencing something greater than what was available to the Ninevites.”²⁴

something greater than Jonah is here.... “With a spokesman for God greater than both Jonah and Solomon in their midst, these Jewish leaders should be that much quicker to repent! Jesus has now been shown to be greater than priest, prophet, and king—a comprehensive list of those to whom God’s message came in OT times....”²⁵

²³ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 512). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

²⁴ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 512). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

²⁵ Craig L. Blomberg, “Matthew,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007), 44.

Matthew 12:42 *The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.*

The queen of the South.... “The queen of the South is the queen of Sheba, a kingdom of Semitic peoples in southwest Arabia. Her visit to Solomon is reported in 1 Ki. 10:1–13; 2 Ch. 9:1–12.”²⁶ On the last day, not A.D. 70, she will “rise up” to condemn Jesus’ generation.

from the ends of the earth.... “...the Gentile identity of the Ninevites and the queen of the South should probably be taken as a quiet pointer to the place for non-Jewish people in the future that Jesus’ ministry is forging, as by and large this generation of Jews abandon the place that is naturally theirs.”²⁷

Jesus has already alluded to his in 8:11-12.

“I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matthew 8:11–12, ESV)

something greater than Solomon is here.... This is the third time Jesus has compared himself to the great of the Jewish faith declaring that he was greater than what came before—the temple, Jonah and now Solomon.

“I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.” (Matthew 12:6, ESV)

“The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.” (Matthew 12:41, ESV)

“Jesus is the Messiah, who will introduce the promised eschatological age. Therefore the queen of Sheba will rise at the Judgment to join the Ninevites in condemning the unbelieving generation of Jesus’ time.”²⁸

“If “something more/greater” than all these key authorities is now present, and if moreover all their functions have now been brought together into a single person, Jesus’ questioners have a thought-provoking basis on which to consider the question of

²⁶ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (pp. 512–513). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

²⁷ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 513). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

²⁸ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 297). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

his authority. **Temple and priesthood, prophet, king and wise man—something greater is now here.**²⁹

The response of the Pharisees is not recorded but it is not hard to envision their shock and anger.

This Generation Vv. 43–45

(Luke 11:24-26)

“Against the broader background in Matthew of the Beelzebub controversy and the sign of Jonah, in sweeping out the house and ridding it of its demons, Jesus has been testifying to the presence of the kingdom (12:28). Yet many of that “wicked and adulterous generation” are so neutral toward him they require signs (12:38) and fail to see that one greater than Jonah and Solomon has come.”³⁰ The message is directed to the extreme danger of being neutral toward Jesus.

“The message reflects that of v. 30: **if they are not positively “for” Jesus they will turn out in the end to be “against” him.**”³¹

Matthew 12:43 “When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none.

When the unclean spirit has gone out.... A major part of Jesus’ ministry has been the casting out of demons. But the response of the leaders of the nation was a rejection of the Spirit’s work in Jesus.

“But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons.”” (Matthew 12:24, ESV)

waterless places.... “...the imagery is probably based on the idea that the demons will move naturally in realms where conditions are antithetical to human well-being, and devoid of the blessing of God.”³²

seeking rest.... It is interesting that even unclean spirits and the lost seek rest, but none is found.

²⁹ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 493). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

³⁰ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 298). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

³¹ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 494). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

³² Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 514). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

“And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’” But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’” (Luke 12:19–20, ESV)

“And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.” (Revelation 14:11, ESV)

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28–30, ESV)

“And I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ‘Blessed indeed,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!’” (Revelation 14:13, ESV)

Matthew 12:44 Then it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order.

I will return to my house from which I came.... The threat here is that after Jesus has left, the evil spirits will return to Israel. And in fact, that is what happened.

the house empty, swept, and put in order.... “Nothing of all that Jesus’ ministry is offering has found a place to lodge here.”³³ The house, nation, is ***empty, swept, and put in order*** but not filled with repentance and faith. It is spiritually empty.

“They may have appreciated its immediate benefits but have kept themselves safely distant from its deeper challenges and larger significance. Their houses may have been tidied, but they remain empty; so an awful fate awaits them.”³⁴

Matthew 12:45 Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation.

³³ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 515). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

³⁴ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 515). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

“...a home which has been cleaned out is not fit for an unclean spirit, and so he recruits seven (the number of perfection) others worse than himself to help him render it unclean enough to be habitable again.”³⁵

Having rejected the work of Jesus—

“But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons.”” (Matthew 12:24, ESV)

it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself.... “The point here and in Luke is that those who through the kingdom power of God experience exorcisms must beware of neutrality toward Jesus the Messiah [Matthew 12:30], for neutrality opens the door to seven demons worse than the one driven out. Commitment to Jesus is essential.”³⁶

“Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.” (Matthew 12:30, ESV)

Now that Jesus is rejected and gone, there is no barrier to the demon returning with more in tow. And when did this demon do this? Revelation 9 gives us the picture 40 years later as the hounds of hell descend on Israel.

“The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number. And this is how I saw the horses in my vision and those who rode them: they wore breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire and of sulfur, and the heads of the horses were like lions’ heads, and fire and smoke and sulfur came out of their mouths.” (Revelation 9:16–17, ESV)

“... it appears to suggest the number of demons that were released on Israel and Jerusalem. Remember the story of the demon possessed man from Gerasenes (Luke 8:30)? He was possessed by a legion of demons. A legion was from 5,000 to 6,000 men, and all this is in but one man!”³⁷

seven other spirits.... “The number ‘seven’ probably denotes a whole set. Presumably the measure of evil of a demon is its capacity to inflict evil on its host. The

³⁵ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 494.

³⁶ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 298). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

³⁷ Bass, R. E. (2004). *Back to the Future: a study in the book of Revelation* (p. 243). Greenville, SC: Living Hope Press.

final outcome is a massive escalation of the problems of the one who was the place of residence of the unclean spirit at first.”³⁸

“Jesus will describe such “believers” in this Gospel in several ways: as useless salt (5:13), spiritually or charismatically proud (7:21–23), without obedience to Jesus’ words (7:24–27), who believe only during good times (13:21–22), rotten fish (13:47–50), unforgiving even though forgiven (18:21–35), wedding guests without wedding garments (22:11–14), servants of God who turn abusive (24:48–51), wedding guests without oiled lamps (25:1–13), stewards with unincreased talent (25:14–30), or persons with uncompassionate life....”³⁹

this evil generation.... Jesus is not referencing a few men who had demons cast out, this is opportunity to explain that his complete ministry had brought healing and cleansing to the nation, but that condition will be short lived, soon the demons will return and do so in greater force than ever. For this will happen with “this evil generation.”

But as Peter makes clear, the interpretation of this passage to the Jews of first century Israel must then be applied to first century and twenty-first century Christians who are guilty of the same sins.

“For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first.” (2 Peter 2:20, ESV)

³⁸ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 515). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

³⁹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Christbook, Matthew 1–12* (vol. 1, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 580.