

I have had a long thread of fairly heavy hitting posts for over a week now, dealing with whether Matthew, and his audience, were Jewish. I still have a few things to say about related issues (such as whether, at the end of the day, Matthew and the apostle Paul would have been able to see eye-to-eye, and whether rather than being Jewish Matthew should be considered *anti*-Jewish). But I think it's time for a break from the hard-hitting discussions for something a bit different and humorous. And so I have an anecdote to tell about a passage that I quoted in one of my earlier posts from Matthew, where Jesus says:

“Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (8:8-10).

One of my teachers at Princeton Theological Seminary in the later 1970s and early 1980s was the great New Testament scholar, Bruce Metzger. One of Metzger's teachers at Princeton University (where he received two degrees in classics), in the late 1930s and early 1940s, was the classics scholar Coleman Norton. Norton, a Greek scholar, was in the Second World War, and afterwards wrote an article that was published in a prominent biblical journal, The Catholic Biblical Quarterly.

In this article Norton indicated that during the war he was stationed in North Africa, and at one point, during a lull in the action, he was visiting a Muslim mosque in a nearby town. The leaders of the mosque were pleased to have an American scholar of antiquity visit, and they informed him they had a very old book in their possession, written in Arabic. Coleman indicated in the article he wrote after the war that while he was leafing through the manuscript he found a page that had been stuffed in the middle, a page written not in Arabic but in Greek!

This Greek fragment was obviously from an unknown commentary on the Gospel of Matthew by some anonymous church father of the early centuries. The fragmentary commentary was discussing just this passage from Matthew 8 that I quoted above, and indicated that there was an ancient tradition that the conversation between Jesus and his disciples actually continued beyond where it stops in the familiar canonical version.

In this previously unknown version, after Jesus says: “the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth,” the disciples responded to his words with some consternation, “But Master, what of those who have no teeth?” And Jesus replied to them: “Teeth will be provided.”

It's a great story. Norton, in his learned article, described the manuscript fragment, his discovery of it, its character, and its amusing textual variant to the well-known saying of Jesus; obviously, since it was in an academic journal he treated the account with the utmost seriousness as a bona fide discovery of real importance.

But as it turns out, it was all a hoax. Norton made the whole thing up. There never was a manuscript fragment, never was a record of a further conversation of Jesus and the disciples. My teacher, Metzger, was the one who showed this beyond any reasonable doubt. As it turns out, *before* the war, in one of his graduate seminars, Norton had told this very same joke about the passage - and Metzger remembered it. This was a case then (not the first, not the last) of a modern forgery, possibly promoted by the perpetrator because it was interesting and humorous, and possibly to see if he could get away with it. He almost did.



[Personal, Executive Privilege: My Daughter and Homeschooling!
My New Course for The Teaching Company \(The Great Courses\)](#)