

Exegesis of Matthew 27:51-54

A Closer Look at a Biblical Anomaly

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The account of Jesus' death along with the signs that accompanied it in Matthew 27:51-54 is without a doubt one of the most puzzling passages in the New Testament—possibly even the entire Bible. Like the accounts of Enoch's being 'taken' by Yahweh in Genesis 5:24 and the incident involving the 'Sons of God' in Genesis 6:1-4, Matthew's account of the raising of the Saints is surrounded by mystery, yet too sparse to satisfy the curiosity of the historian or Biblical scholar. As a result, numerous interpretations have been suggested as to the meaning and historicity of his account. While the views regarding the historical nature of these events are numerous, there is a somewhat general consensus among scholars of all persuasions as to the theological function of the passage. In this paper we will seek to examine the passage in light of grammatical, literary, and historical elements and then tentatively propose an acceptable interpretation of these admittedly bizarre events.

Exegesis

There are a few grammatical nuances of this passage that deserve special attention up front.¹ The first, as noted by Bruner, is that there are *seven* aorist-passive verbs

ἐσχίσθη, ἐσείσθη, ἐσχίσθησαν, ἀνεώχθησαν, ἠγέρθησαν, ἐνεφανίσθησαν, and ἐφοβήθησαν,

¹ There are no significant textual issues to be addressed. One manuscript (κ*) transposes θεοῦ and υἱὸς ἦν while adding the definite article. This is most likely a scribal error or attempt to place a higher Christology on the lips of the soldiers. The article is unnecessary, however, for a higher Christology; see the section on v.54 below.

which signify God's responses to the death of his Son. "Behind each passive 'was' and 'were' is the *divine* agent doing the work of the verbs."² Though, as we will see below, the events likely happened as many as two days apart, Matthew presents them here in a string of 'effects' in order to present Jesus' death as the climax of his Gospel.

The second grammatical feature of interest is the use of the antonyms ἐξελθόντες and εἰσῆλθον in v.53 to describe the actions of the holy ones. "Exiting...they entered..." serves to further highlight the radical difference between the tombs and the holy city by means of a 'catch phrase' that could be easily remembered and passed on to others. Through Jesus' death, the holy ones were literally able to leave death and enter life in one simple, smooth literary event. It is unlikely that Matthew's original audience would have missed this wordplay and its significance.

Matthew 27:51 Καὶ ἰδοὺ τὸ καταπέτασμα τοῦ ναοῦ ἐσχίσθη ἀπ' ἄνωθεν ἕως κάτω εἰς δύο καὶ ἡ γῆ ἐσεισθη καὶ αἱ πέτραι ἐσχίσθησαν
Now Behold!— the curtain of the temple was split, from top to bottom, in two; the earth was shaken; the rocks were split...

Whereas Luke places the splitting of the curtain alongside his account of the darkness over the land, Matthew follows Mark in separating the two events slightly and places the splitting of the curtain as having taken place after Jesus' Cry of Dereliction and the giving up of his spirit.³ Matthew uses the phrase Καὶ ἰδοὺ as he does twenty-seven other times in his Gospel to link the two events with an emphatic exclamation—"Now Behold!"⁴

² Bruner, Frederick Dale, *Matthew: A Commentary, vol.2: The Churchbook*.

³ This does not speak against Luke's historical accuracy however. Since the darkness and curtain splitting both occurred while Jesus was on the cross, few, if any, would have witnessed both events simultaneously. Therefore, both accounts are acceptable for literary as well as theological purposes. Only a rigid chronological dogmatism would render the accounts in conflict with one another.

⁴ Cf. Matt. 2:9; 3:16f; 4:11; 7:4; 8:2, 24, 29, 32, 34; 9:2f, 10, 20; 12:10, 41f; 15:22; 17:3, 5; 19:16; 20:30; 26:51; 28:2, 7, 9, 20

There is some debate as to which curtain Matthew is referring to. In the Septuagint as well as Josephus, τὸ καταπέτασμα could refer to both the inner curtain, which separated the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place, as well as to the outer curtain which separated the court of the gentiles from the inner workings of the Temple.⁵ Regardless of which curtain was in Matthew's mind, the theological significance remains—If the inner curtain was split, then the separation between God and Humanity had been removed and the Covenant given to Moses at Sinai had been completed, rendering the annual Temple sacrifice on Yom Kippur, as well as the whole sacrificial system obsolete. If the outer curtain was split, Jesus' death had accomplished what Matthew has only been hinting at all along in his Gospel—the gentiles now have access to the worship of Yahweh through Jesus' fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant that through his seed, all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Matthew's ambiguity leaves both options open and it is likely that he sees both of these covenants as having been fulfilled by Jesus' crucifixion.

For Matthew, the importance of the splitting of the curtain was that it happened in conjunction with Jesus' death. As Keener observes, “by expiring at 3 p.m., Jesus died close to the official time of the evening lamb offering in the temple, especially significant in a paschal context.”⁶ This then makes the splitting of the curtain that much more significant, as many of the very same religious leaders that sought Jesus' crucifixion would have been eyewitnesses to God's 'rending of His garment' at the death of His Son—just as they had rent their garments in response to that very claim by Jesus Himself

⁵ See for example Jos. Jwr 5:212; Exod. 26:33; 37. Cf. also Gundry, Robert H., Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art. p.575

⁶ Keener, Craig S., A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew. P.684

in the previous chapter!⁷ Furthermore, the fact that the curtain split ‘from top to bottom’ signifies clearly that it was not the work of human hands (for humans would’ve split the curtain starting at the bottom), but rather was initiated solely by YHWH. It is YHWH Himself who is responsible for the salvation that Jesus’ death brings and it is YHWH Himself who brought the covenants that he initiated with both Abraham and Moses to completion through the death of the promised Messiah.

Since Matthew himself did not witness the splitting of the curtain, the question arises: Where would he have learned of its splitting? Two possibilities exist, both from the book of Acts. Either Jesus related these events and explained their significance during the 40 days he spent privately with the disciples after his resurrection (Acts 1:3), or some of the priests who came to faith (Acts 6:7) had been eyewitnesses and the “Testimony of the Temple”, as Wilkins puts it, spread rapidly throughout the early Church.⁸

Aside from the splitting of the curtain (or possibly the cause of it!) was the shaking of the earth and the splitting of the rocks. Earthquakes in Jerusalem were not unheard of, as the city is situated on the seismic ridge stretching down to the Great Rift Valley in Kenya.⁹ However, the fact that it occurred at the moment of Jesus’ death would have had great significance in the Greco-Roman world of the 1st century. Earthquakes were connected with great crises in the ancient world, such as the death of Caesar.¹⁰ In

⁷ Cf. Matt. 26:65. See also McNeile, Alan Hugh, The Gospel According to St. Matthew: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indices. p.423 where he literarily connects the splitting of the veil with the darkness of v.45: “The very temple rent its veil in mourning, as the earth had clothed itself in darkness.”

⁸ Wilkins, Michael J., The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew. – He states: “Since only the priestly aristocracy would have knows about the tearing of the veil, when only a few weeks later a number of priests became believers (Acts 6:7), they would have informed the Christian community of this event.” p.904

⁹ Green, Michael, Matthew For Today. p.281

¹⁰ McNeile, 423

Jewish circles, stories were told of catastrophes occurring at the deaths of pious rabbis, especially those whose intercession had been vital to the world; and on rare occasions Greek writers even applied such stories to the deaths of prominent philosophers.¹¹ In every culture of his day, the events that Matthew records would have communicated Jesus' importance to the reader. More importantly though, for Matthew's primarily Jewish audience the events prophesied by Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Amos concerning God's eschatological judgment would have no doubt come to mind as they reflected on the events surrounding the crucifixion. Note the similarity between Isaiah's prophecy and the events of the passion:

Isaiah 24:18-26:9 "...For the windows of heaven are opened, and **the foundations of the earth tremble**. The earth is utterly broken, **the earth is split apart, the earth is violently shaken**. **The earth staggers like a drunken man; it sways like a hut**; its transgression lies heavy upon it, and it falls, and will not rise again... Then the moon will be confounded and **the sun ashamed**, for the LORD of hosts reigns on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and his glory will be **before his elders**... On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, **the veil** that is spread over all nations. **He will swallow up death forever**; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken... **Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise**. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and **the earth will give birth to the dead**.

Ezekiel also spoke of an earthquake in conjunction with the raising of the dead:

Ezekiel 37:7-13 "So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, **a rattling** (σεισμός – LXX) and the bones came together, bone to its bone... Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I **will open your graves and raise you from your graves**, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, **when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves**, O my people."¹²

¹¹ Keener, Craig S., *IVP Bible Background Commentary*, p.129

¹² See also the descriptions of earthquakes in Zechariah 14:4 and Amos 8:8-10.

Though Ezekiel’s account was primarily a description of Israel’s return from exile in Babylon, already by the first century what started as a metaphor for Ezekiel was being understood as a literal prediction.¹³ In fact, there may be extrabiblical records of such an event. Noting Josephus’ and the Talmud’s brief account of an earthquake and a disturbance of the doors of the Temple 40 years before its destruction (Jos. Wars, vi. 299; B. Joma 39^b), Allen proposes all of these accounts to be “reminiscences of an event that happened at the porch of the Temple at the period of the crucifixion. A cleavage in the masonry of the porch, which rent the outer veil and left the Holy Place open to view, would account for the language of the Gospels, of Josephus, and of the Talmud.”¹⁴ Regardless of whether or not Matthew is describing the same events as Josephus or the Talmud, the point he seems to be making in his narrative is that Jesus’ death has cosmic, even eschatological significance.

Matthew 27:52 καὶ τὰ μνημεῖα ἀνεώχθησαν καὶ πολλὰ σώματα τῶν κεκοιμημένων ἁγίων ἠγέρθησαν,
 ...the tombs were opened; many bodies of the holy ones who had fallen asleep were raised;

Matthew answers the question as to which rocks were split at the beginning of v.52. Tombs in Israel typically consisted of a small, slightly underground cave, the mouth of which was covered by a large, disk-shaped rock. This rock was rolled into place by means of shallow trench at the tomb’s entrance. The shaking of the earth served to split these (and possibly other) rocks, thus opening the tombs. It is significant that

¹³ Wright, N.T., The Resurrection of the Son of God, p.633. For evidence of this belief in 1st century Judaism Wright, as well as Gundry, point to the panel depicting Ezekiel in the synagogue at Dura Europos. The panel depicts an earthquake that has split open the tombs and ten OT saints dressed in white coming out. (cf. Gundry, 577)

¹⁴ Allen, Willoughby C., A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew, p.296

another earthquake will accompany another opening of a tomb in the very next chapter. We have here, then, a preview of Jesus' resurrection—which is itself a preview of the final eschatological resurrection described by the Old Testament prophets.

There is, however, some debate with regard to the chronology of Matthew's multiple resurrection account: should the two verbs ἀνεώχθησαν and ἠγέρθησαν be seen as occurring simultaneously—which leaves the resurrected holy ones in their tombs for at least two days, as v.53 seems to imply? Or does the ἀνεώχθησαν mark the end of the supernatural accounts that occurred on Friday afternoon—making the latter half of v.52 and all of v.53 a parenthetical statement before Matthew resumes his narrative in v.54? Either option is grammatically possible since καὶ can serve merely as a simple conjunction or mark the beginning of a new sentence. We must look to context, as well as the wider Biblical record regarding resurrection, in order to decide the chronology of these strange events.¹⁵ Matthew seems content in stringing everything together with seven καὶ's, leaving the details of chronology and logistics in the hands of the reader.

Aside from the question of “When?” there is also the question of “Who?”. Who were these κεκοιμημένων ἀγίων? Some, such as Gundry, feel that the Matthew is alluding to the resurrections foretold in Ezekiel 37 and Daniel 12 and “since Ezekiel and Daniel do not restrict the resurrection to a few select saints” and since “in Semitic speech, ‘many’ often meant ‘all’,” the holy ones having fallen asleep must refer to all of the OT saints.¹⁶ Matthew, though does not make this clear. Furthermore, if every holy person from the time of Adam until Jesus is referred to in v.52 then the event is almost certainly to be seen as some type of ‘spiritual resurrection’ rather than a literal bodily one—it

¹⁵ See the comments on v.53 below.

¹⁶ Gundry, 576

would border on absurdity to think that such a large-scale, literal resurrection would have gone completely unmentioned in the rest of the NT, as well as Jewish history! But it seems that Matthew *is* referring to a literal bodily resurrection due to his use of *σώματα*, which is almost certainly a physical reference in this context.¹⁷ Therefore, though not every OT saint was raised, enough were raised to warrant Matthew's use of *πολλά*.

One final question remains before we can move on to v.53: what type of 'raising' did these holy ones experience? Were they fully resurrected, as Jesus himself was; or were they merely resuscitated, like Lazarus and others? Scholars are divided on this question. Waters notes the differences between resurrection and resuscitation in scripture: "In resuscitations, there are always at least three parties involved: God, the dead person, and the human through whom God raises the dead...a resurrection is always the raising of one individual only."¹⁸ Hendriksen agrees that this passage is not speaking of simple resuscitation of the holy ones, claiming that "everything seems to point to the fact that these saints did not again die."¹⁹ Both Waters and Hendriksen, though, assume too much in their certainty of this being a genuine resurrection account. Waters observations are narrative rather than normative; the differences he notes are nowhere in Scripture set out as 'rules for resurrections vs. resuscitations.' Furthermore, the only resurrection he can point to is that of Jesus—and it is unwise to set a 'pattern' after only one example. As for Hendriksen's comment, it could just as easily be reversed:

'Everything seems to point to the fact that these saints did not live forever in a glorified state.' He offers no justification as to what he is referring to by 'everything.' In contrast

¹⁷ See the entry for *σώμα* in Danker, Frederick W., ed., A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian Literature, 3rd Edition (BDAG).

¹⁸ Waters, Kenneth L, Sr. "Matthew 27:52-53 as apocalyptic apostrophe: temporal-spatial collapse in the Gospel of Matthew" in Journal of Biblical Literature, 122 no 3 Fall 2003. p.493

¹⁹ Hendriksen, William, New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel of Matthew. p.976

to Waters, Hendriksen, and others who argue for resurrections being spoken of here, Keener feels that “Matthew is clear that these are not merely apparitions of the dead, but actual resuscitations prefiguring the eschatological resurrection at Jesus’ return.”²⁰ In light of the debate and the lack of detail provided by Matthew, Blomberg’s conclusion on the matter seems wisest—the text “simply refuses to satisfy our curiosity about these points.”²¹ It should be noted, however, in considering this issue that in Judaism of the 1st century there was no belief in any bodily resurrections until the final, universal resurrection at the end of the age. Jesus’ resurrection was seen by the early church as a unique event—the ‘first fruits’ of the final resurrection of the saints.²² If this is an account of ‘many’ other resurrections before the eschaton then it finds no parallel in the rest of the NT nor in the early church fathers. Though we can agree with Blomberg’s assessment, the burden of proof lies with those arguing against resuscitation in Matthew 27.

Matthew 27:53 καὶ ἐξελθόντες ἐκ τῶν μνημείων μετὰ τὴν ἔγερσιν αὐτοῦ εἰσῆλθον εἰς τὴν ἁγίαν πόλιν καὶ ἐνεφανίσθησαν πολλοῖς.
...and exiting from the tombs after his resurrection, they entered into the holy city and were revealed to many.

Regardless of when the holy ones were actually raised, v.53 makes it clear that they did not enter into the holy city until *after* Jesus’ resurrection—though some feel that the phrase μετὰ τὴν ἔγερσιν αὐτοῦ is a later addition meant to harmonize Matthew’s account with the theology of 1 Corinthians 15.²³ In light of the soldiers being said to have witnessed τὰ γενόμενα in v.54, Waters asserts: “the content of Matt 27:54...requires

²⁰ Keener, 686

²¹ Blomberg, Craig L., New American Commentary, vol.22: Matthew. p.421

²² 1 Corinthians 15:23

²³ “The fact it was not better placed indicates at the very least that the phrase is an afterthought most likely meant to preserve the Christological requirement that Jesus be the firstfruit of those raised from the dead.” Waters, 503. Cf. also Allen, 296.

that the raising of the saints be witnessed on Friday by the centurion...the raising of the saints must have been witnessed by the centurion and other soldiers from a literary standpoint.”²⁴ Others, however, feel that though the raising of the bodies may have taken place at the moment of Jesus’ death, the entrance by the holy ones into the holy city was a later event: “The meaning is, in all probability, that these saints were raised and left their tombs at the moment of Christ’s death. Not until after Christ’s resurrection did they enter Jerusalem and did they appear to many.”²⁵

Yet a third option remains. Arguing on the basis of grammar and lack of clear punctuation in Greek, many scholars note that καὶ πολλὰ σώματα begins a parenthetical phrase that ends with καὶ ἐνεφανίσθησαν πολλοῖς. Therefore the bodies of the holy ones are not raised in conjunction with the splitting of the rocks and opening of the tombs; rather the whole account of the raising of the holy ones and their entering into the holy city is to be seen, in the words of Bullinger, as a case of ‘*Hysterologia*’—“the events which took place later, are recorded in their consequential order, rather than in the actual historical order.”²⁶ If Matthew’s account of these raisings represents actual history, then this last option seems to be most likely—though one cannot rule out the possibility of the second. However, based on the occurrence of the term τὴν ἁγίαν πόλιν in v.53, some interpreters feel that Matthew’s account was never meant to be seen as historical in the first place.

²⁴ Waters, 493.

²⁵ Hendriksen, 976

²⁶ Bullinger, E.W., Figures of speech used in the Bible. p.705. Cf. also Carson, D.A., in *Gaebelein, Frank E., Gen. Ed. Expositor’s Bible Commentary* as well as Wilkins, 906-907 and Blomberg, 421.

Waters argues that the term ‘holy city’ itself “pulls us into the realm of the apocalyptic future.”²⁷ Matthew’s entire account, he argues, “exhibits the temporal-spatial collapse that is characteristic of most apocalyptic”²⁸ and represents a pre-Matthean apocalyptic fragment inserted into the passion narrative. Using the book of Revelation as a “Hermeneutical Key to understanding the passage,”²⁹ Waters concludes:

“...the raising of the saints in this passage refers not to an event of Matthew’s past but to the general resurrection at the end of time; that both the opening of the tombs and the raising of the saints occur not before but after the resurrection of Jesus Christ...the holy city is not the historic city of Jerusalem but the new Jerusalem of Rev 21:2...the saints who are raised are not the Jewish saints of antiquity but the Christian martyrs of Rev 20:4, 6...the ‘many’ whom the martyrs appear in the holy city are not residents of first-century Jerusalem but an eschatological community of Jews analogous to the 144,000 in Rev 7:4, 14:1...”³⁰

He bases this interpretation primarily on the fact that “in most cases [the holy city] refers also to an apocalyptic, eschatological, heavenly complex meant to replace its earthly counterpart.”³¹ It must be pointed out however that Waters only notes NT occurrences of τὴν ἁγίαν πόλιν; he fails to take into account the multiple references in the LXX and intertestamental literature where τὴν ἁγίαν πόλιν almost *always* refers to the earthly Jerusalem.³²

While not going as far as Waters in interpreting the passage as purely apocalyptic material, Green sees the term τὴν ἁγίαν πόλιν as signaling something other than the historical city of Jerusalem:

“Maybe it means the ‘Jerusalem which is above’, the heavenly city (cf Rev 21:2). And when Matthew speaks of the bodies of holy people

²⁷ Waters, 503

²⁸ Ibid., 489

²⁹ Ibid., 500. See especially footnote 33.

³⁰ Ibid., 489

³¹ Ibid., 495.

³² Cf. Isa. 66:20; 1Ma. 2:7; 2Ma. 1:12, 3:1, 9:14, 15:14.

entering into the holy city after the resurrection of Jesus he refers to his conviction, maybe reinforced by a vision, that the cross and resurrection of Jesus have paved the way into heaven for God's people all down the ages."³³

While Matthew's use of τὴν ἁγίαν πόλιν is ambiguous enough to allow for a wider interpretation than the historical Jerusalem, the passage still lacks a clear indication of the apocalyptic genre while containing enough details to argue just as strongly for a historical referent. It is interesting to note that though Keener does not see this account as apocalyptic, he does suggest that while Matthew does not borrow these signs from Mark, "the style of these verses suggest that he follows a different pre-Matthean source 'circulating in popular circles'."³⁴ Given the lack of clear detail surrounding Matthew's account of the raising of the holy ones and their entering into the holy city, Bruner offers a sensible conclusion: "the probabilities are that the historical critics are right and that Matthew writes pictorially here; but I would not put a little resurrecting past the God of this Gospel either."³⁵

Matthew 27:54 Ὁ δὲ ἑκατόνταρχος καὶ οἱ μετ' αὐτοῦ τηροῦντες τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἰδόντες τὸν σεισμόν καὶ τὰ γενόμενα ἐφοβήθησαν σφόδρα, λέγοντες· ἀληθῶς θεοῦ υἱὸς ἦν οὗτος. *Now the Centurion and the ones guarding Jesus with him, seeing the earthquake and the things happening, were terrified greatly saying, "Truly this one was a son of god!*

Just as the splitting of the curtain could be seen as a "Testimony from the Temple," and the opening of the tombs and raising of the holy ones could be seen as a "Testimony from the Dead," the confession of the Centurion and his fellow soldiers functions effectively as a "Testimony from the Gentiles"³⁶ and brings to a climax Matthew's theme that it is often the gentiles who recognize Jesus' authority while the

³³ Green, 282

³⁴ Keener, 685

³⁵ Bruner, 761

³⁶ These are the titles Wilkins uses for subheadings within the passage on pp.906-907.

Jewish leaders reject Him. Noting Matthew’s inclusion of multiple soldiers as opposed to the accounts of Mark and Luke who mention only the centurion’s confession,³⁷ France feels that “the addition of ‘those who were with him’ provides a confessing group to balance the mocking group of vv.39-43, 49.”³⁸

Furthermore, we know from Jesus’ use of the opening words of Psalm 22 in v.46 that it was this Psalm that He was fulfilling through His death. Matthew’s mention of the confession of the Roman soldiers is clearly meant as a mini-fulfillment of vv.27-28:

*“All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the LORD,
and all the families of the nations shall worship
before you.
For kingship belongs to the LORD,
and he rules over the nations.”*³⁹

This recognition of Jesus’ significance on the lips of the very Gentiles who had tortured and killed him is a powerful foretaste of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20) and Jesus’ future reign over all the nations of whom “every knee will bow...and every tongue confess that Jesus the Messiah is LORD” (Phil. 2:10-11).

It is quite possible that the Centurion and some of the soldiers with him were present throughout Jesus’ trial and heard the charges leveled against Him by the Sanhedrin and the High Priest Caiaphas—as well as Jesus’ refusal to deny the charges. They had also, in all likelihood, been present at the crucifixions of many would-be messiahs and rebels; yet nothing like these events had happened at the death of the others! While Luke records the confession that Jesus was ‘innocent’, Matthew and Mark speak of the soldiers claiming Jesus to be θεοῦ υἱὸς ἦν. But what exactly did they

³⁷ Cf. Mark 15:39; Luke 23:47

³⁸ France, R.T., The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary. p.401

³⁹ Cf. also, Bruner, 764.

witness (τὰ γεινόμενα) that would lead them to proclaim such a thing? And what exactly did the soldiers mean by this?

In answer to the first question, Waters dismisses τὰ γεινόμενα as inauthentic:

“...the phrase ‘and the things that happened’ is an editorial addition, and an inept one at that, because it forces the centurion to witness events he could not possibly have witnessed. The addition could not be from the same hand that composed the phrase ‘after his resurrection’—that is, it could not be from the author we are identifying as Matthew. Matthew added the phrase ‘after his resurrection’ to make a pre-Matthean fragment consistent with post-Pauline Christology...it was added by someone who misunderstood and was misled by the placement of ‘after his resurrection.’ It was added by someone who failed to realize that the opening of the tombs and the raising of the saints come not before but *after* the resurrection of Jesus. A coherent reading therefore requires us to excise the phrase ‘and the things that happened’ from the text.”⁴⁰

Waters, based on his insistence that the raising of the saints must, grammatically speaking, occur at the same time as the earthquake, as well as his insistence that Matthew is adapting a prior apocalyptic fragment, leads him to conclude that τὰ γεινόμενα is an “inept editorial addition.” It should be noted, however, that Waters conclusion is based entirely on his presupposition of reading Matthew 27:51-54 in light of Revelation rather than on any textual or historical evidence. Any interpretation of a passage that requires “us to excise the phrase...from the text” apart from clear manuscript evidence is unwarranted and can therefore be dismissed. As we noted earlier, the grammar of vv.52-54 can easily support the idea that the raising of the holy ones’ bodies occurred after Jesus’ resurrection on Sunday morning. The reference τὰ γεινόμενα could also just as easily refer to a number of events recorded in this chapter—the cry of the crowd in v.23, Jesus’ refusal of the anesthetic wine in v.34, the darkness in v.45, Jesus’ Cry of Dereliction in v.46, or the earthquake and splitting of rocks in v.51. Whatever it was that

⁴⁰ Waters, 504

the soldiers observed, it was enough to terrify them and lead them to confess Jesus as θεοῦ υἱός.

A final matter to be clarified is what the soldiers meant by θεοῦ υἱός. Were they merely referring to Jesus as ‘a son of god’ in the Greco-Roman sense of a supernatural man who performed great deeds, or is υἱός to be taken as definite, as at least one early scribe did by adding the article to it?⁴¹ While many scholars view the lack of the definite article in front of υἱός to be a strong argument for a generic confession of Jesus’ innocence and importance by the soldiers, others cite “Colwell’s Rule” in order to argue that υἱός is a definite noun in this case and the soldiers confession is a genuine, though “raw and not perfect” Christian confession.⁴² Regardless of what the soldiers themselves meant by their confession, given Matthew’s ongoing motif of gentiles confessing Jesus as Lord and worshipping Him, he most likely sees this confession as an act of worship—even if the soldiers themselves were ‘speaking better than they knew’ as was the case with the ‘ironic prophecy’ of Caiaphas (John 11:49) or, more importantly, the crowd’s response to Pilate that “his blood be on us and our children,” which Matthew records in this very chapter (Matt. 27:25).

Conclusion

In looking at Matthew’s depiction of the events surrounding Jesus’ death, one can’t help but feel that the main image bank from which Matthew draws is Isaiah’s

⁴¹ See footnote #1 above.

⁴² Bruner, 764. cf. Tasker, R.V.G., The Gospel According to St. Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary. p.267, 269; France, 402; McNeile 242; Gundry, 578. For Colwell’s Rule, see Wallace, Daniel B. Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics, p.5, where he summarizes Colwell: “The rule is simply that “Definite predicate nouns which precede the verb usually lack the article...a predicate nominative which precedes the verb cannot be translated as an indefinite or ‘qualitative’ noun solely because of the absence of the article; if the context suggests that the predicate is definite, it should be translated as a definite noun...”(see also pp.256-257). Wilkins bases his conclusion on the disciples’ reactions in 14:33 and 17:16 and their similarity to the Centurion’s. Wilkins, 908.

eschatological prophecy and hymn of rejoicing found in Isa. 24-27. Overall, Isaiah describes the following events as taking place at the hands of YHWH: Judgment on the inhabitants of the earth (24:1-13), future worship of YHWH by the gentiles (24:14-16), the shaking of the earth (24:18-20), the darkening of the Sun as YHWH reigns on Mt. Zion (24:23), YHWH providing fine meat and wine (25:6), the destruction of a curtain that covers the earth by YHWH Himself (25:7), the destruction of death itself and the removal of sin by YHWH (25:8), the raising of dead bodies (26:19), guilt being atoned for (27:9), and believers from foreign nations worshipping YHWH in Jerusalem (27:13). Like Matthew's Gospel itself, Isaiah's prophecy consists of an *inclusio*, beginning and ending with gentile worship of the One True God. It is no wonder then that Matthew uses such imagery, which depicts God's rescue of His people, in his description of the events surrounding the very means by which that rescue is ultimately made possible. However, Matthew is not claiming by these events that the end has come, and along with it the final resurrection of God's people (an idea of which Paul had to correct the Thessalonians); rather the raising of the saints after the splitting of the veil and the earthquake serve "to prefigure the final resurrection, proleptically signified in Jesus' death and resurrection."⁴³

In trying to answer the question as to the historicity of these events, Wright cautions: "...it is better to remain puzzled than to settle for either a difficult argument for probably historicity or a cheap and cheerful rationalistic dismissal of the possibility."⁴⁴ In a passage as rich in theological content, yet as sparse in logistical detail as Matthew 27:51-54, dogmatism must be avoided. The point Matthew clearly intends to

⁴³ Keener, 686

⁴⁴ Wright, 636

convey is summed up quite well by Bruner: “The death of Jesus reaches out as far horizontally into history as it reaches up vertically into eternity. The two directions of the cross—outward and upward—teach the universality of Christ’s work.”⁴⁵ Beyond this, one must be content with a bit of mystery regarding questions left unanswered by Matthew and regarding events left untouched by the other NT authors.

⁴⁵ Bruner, 763

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