

RESURRECTION IN MATTHEW 27:50-54

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THE TEXT

Now Jesus again crying in *a*¹ great noise sent away the spirit. And behold the veil of the temple was divided from above until below into two, and the land was shaken, and the rocks were divided, and the memorial-tombs were opened and many bodies of the those holy *who* had been sleeping were raised, and coming out from² the tombs after his rising they entered into³the holy city and manifested to many. Now the Roman officer and those with him attending Jesus seeing the shaking and the happenings were afraid greatly, saying, truly this was *a* son of god.⁴

INTRODUCTION

There are many dramatic occurrences at this stage in Matthew's gospel. The crucifixion, where Jesus' earthly ministry had been leading him at least since his baptism⁵, has finally arrived and is being brought to its conclusion. With his final great cry, Jesus gave up his spirit and his life was ended. Interestingly, as if Jesus' crucifixion was not climatic enough, his death was accompanied with catastrophic and miraculous events.⁶ The veil in the temple (for the Jew the actual barrier between heaven and earth) was divided into two⁷, the land shook and the rocks

¹ Italicized words indicate in this translation their nonexistence in the original Greek text.

² The text is literally 'coming out out from'.

³ The text is literally 'came in into'. Combined with the above note, Matthew's emphasis may be understood as, "they really did *come out* of the tombs and they really did *come into* the holy city".

⁴ Matthew 27:50-54. Unless otherwise indicated all Scripture quotations are translations of the current writer. For an interesting article discussing the pronouncement of the centurion (specifically in Mark) see Whitney Shiner, "The Ambiguous Pronouncement of the Centurion and the Shrouding of Meaning in Mark," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 78 (June 2000): 3-22.

⁵ Matthew 3:13-17

⁶ Ancient Jewish and Greek literature commonly contained stories of catastrophes occurring at the deaths of pious individuals. Also, Jewish apocalypses sometimes mentioned a major earthquake taking place shortly before the coming of the Kingdom of God. See Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 126.

⁷ While it is possible that the tearing of the veil is indicative of the barrier between God and man disappearing, which has become the common interpretation of the event, it may be more plausible to assume that this image is a reference to the departure of God from the temple envisioned in Ezekiel 10-11. For an example of the former reading see Henry H. Halley, *Halley's Bible Handbook* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1965),

were divided⁸, and, possibly the most wondrous of all the events, many of the saints who had died were brought back to life.⁹

The current paper will focus on what Matthew intended to convey to his readers by including this resurrection event at this particular point in his narrative. The majority of the work has already been done in this area; therefore, the current work will simply serve as a presentation of what the current writer believes to be the true meaning of Matthew's account of the resurrection of the saints. First, a very brief overview of the first-century Judaic perception of the event known as 'the resurrection' will be given and second, through that ideological context, the meaning of the 'resurrection of the saints' in the passage under consideration, Matthew 27:50-54, will be addressed and followed by a summary.

WHAT DID RESURRECTION MEAN?

In first-century Judaism the idea of resurrection meant embodiment and implied that the new age had dawned.¹⁰ One example of this view, the intermingling of the resurrection and the new age, can be found in the Qumran fragment 4Q521, which has come to be known as the 'Resurrection fragment'. Echoing Isaiah 61:1, the author of the fragment, writing about the coming of the eschatological kingdom, says, "For He (God) will heal the wounded, *and revive*

452. For an example of the latter reading see Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 126.

⁸ Since the same verb is used both for the dividing of the curtain and of the rocks, the current writer's understanding is that Matthew is indicating that Jesus' death has so many ramifications that not only was the barrier where heaven and earth met divided but the very rocks were divided in the same manner; in other words, heaven and earth were essentially being split into two because of the crucifixion.

⁹ The question of how ἐγείρω and other similar words both in Greek and Hebrew functioned in the first century has been argued at great length. For example, see N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Volume III of *Christian Origins and the Question of God*) (London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003). Therefore, the position taken here is that when Matthew wrote that dead people came back to life, he meant that physically dead people, somehow, became physically alive again. Thus, the following paper will not contain an argument for what type of resurrection occurred at the death of Jesus but will present the meaning of this resurrection.

¹⁰ N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*. (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press; London: SPCK, 1999), 136.

the dead and bring good news to the poor” (emphasis added).¹¹ For the Jew, the dawn of the new age would bring about the healing, restoration, and resurrection for which Israel had been longing. In the Gospels, victory over disease and the devil is viewed as the sure sign of the initial manifestation of God’s reign.¹² Jesus’ answer to the imprisoned John the Baptist reflects this ideology, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor” (Matthew 11:4-5). Jesus assumed that this answer to the question of his Messiahship would be more than sufficient for the apparently confused Baptist.

This entire concept of restoration-resurrection can be traced back from the first century to at least around 593 BC with the ministry of the prophet Ezekiel. In Ezekiel 37:12, concerning the return and restoration of Israel from exile, Yahweh explains to the prophet, “Behold, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel” (NASB). Clearly in this passage, the resurrection of the dead, God bringing his people up out of their graves to new life, is used as a metaphor for God restoring his people back into the Promised Land. Therefore, resurrection becomes completely interwoven into the fabric of the return from exile. While in foreign territory, Israel desired restoration, and eventually, resurrection.

The return from exile, the true return, eventually begins to become expressed through the division of time into two eras: the present age and the age to come. The present age was a time when the creator God seemed to be hiding his face, Israel remained under foreign control; the

¹¹ 4Q521 frag. 2.12-13, Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 392.

¹² Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 23.

age to come would see the renewal of Israel and also, of the created world.¹³ However, according to the Gospels, the age to come, at least the beginning stages of this new age, did not dawn the way most first-century Jews imagined that it would. There was a great expectation that the patriarchs, prophets, and martyrs would be walking around again, but, as much as anyone could tell, the resurrection of all God's people had not taken place yet. Nevertheless, against all expectations the earliest church affirmed that ἐν τῷ Ἰησοῦ τὴν ἀνάστασιν τὴν ἐκ νεκρῶν had already occurred (Acts 4:2).¹⁴ It is this proclamation and understanding of the early church, this seemingly bizarre acceptance that the restoration-resurrection-dawn of the new age had already begun, that is so crucial for comprehending the New Testament writers and especially for interpreting the passage ultimately under consideration in the current paper.

WHAT DID RESURRECTION MEAN IN MATTHEW?

Matthew implies in his gospel that a foretaste of the resurrection of the saints happened after the crucifixion.¹⁵ While not only true and packed with deep theological meaning, the inclusion of this resurrection account in his narrative (Matthew is the only gospel writer to include this event) is almost polemic. As N.T. Wright has noted:

The coming to life of a single dead body, within the midst of history which in other respects was proceeding as though nothing had changed, would be, though of course exceedingly striking, quite insufficient to make Jews of the time declare that the longed-for redemption, the eventual release from exile, had in fact occurred.¹⁶

If Wright is correct, then Matthew may have included this resurrection story to emphasize the importance of what comes later in his gospel, the resurrection of Jesus. Matthew needed to show that Jesus' resurrection was a much more significant event than simply one individual

¹³ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Volume I of *Christian Origins and the Question of God*) (London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 299

¹⁴ Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 136.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 399.

rising from the dead after crucifixion. One man coming to life after execution would have been more odd than (by itself) life altering. For Matthew, the restoration-resurrection-dawn of the new age had begun, and it began at the death of Jesus.

According to N.T. Wright there are allusions to the LXX in Matthew's report of the resurrection of the saints from their tombs.¹⁷ The passages under consideration by Wright are Isaiah 26, Ezekiel 37 (see above), and Daniel 12. Wright explains that the Greek wording in all three of the Old Testament passages echo the Greek in Matthew 27. However, the current author is not as persuaded as Wright. While the vocabulary is somewhat similar (mainly ἐγείρω in Isaiah and μνήμα in Ezekiel), the verb tense of ἐγείρω in Isaiah is different than in Matthew (for obvious reasons), and instead of using the noun μνήμα found in Ezekiel, Matthew uses μνημείον (a related, although different word). There are no vocabulary similarities with Daniel 12 in the Septuagint (as Wright mentions) and since the subject matter of the passages in question should have determined to some degree the vocabulary employed by the LXX translators and Matthew, there should be no surprise if when writing about resurrection two separate authors used the words commonly used to refer to resurrection. Therefore, semantical similarities should not be highly emphasized.

However, while there may be no exact grammatical or semantical link between the New and Old Testament stories, there is surely some sort of link to be found. As Wright goes on to say concerning Matthew 27:51-54:

[Matthew] may know a tradition which speaks of these strange happenings, and is retelling it in such a way as to give a biblically alert reader a sense of their meaning: this is the real return from exile, the dawn of the new age, and perhaps even the harrowing of hell.¹⁸

¹⁷ See Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 633.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 633-34.

The well-known restoration-resurrection prophecies found in Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, the New Kingdom for which the Qumran community waited, came to pass, and was ushered in by the crucifixion and death of Israel's Messiah. Matthew used the resurrection of the saints to show that because of the death of Jesus the promises Yahweh made to Israel through the prophets were beginning to be fulfilled; the Kingdom of God had now come. But this small-scale resurrection, as amazing as it was, was still yet only a preview of the resurrection that would take place not much later in Matthew's gospel, which may be why Matthew only mentions in passing the resurrection of the saints. There was a much greater resurrection that would soon follow, one that would surpass significantly the resurrection in Matthew 27; it would be the resurrection of the Son of God.

SUMMARY

The current paper focused on what Matthew intended to convey to his readers by including the resurrection event in Matthew 27:50-54. First, a very brief overview of the first-century Judaic perception of the event known as 'the resurrection' was given. Over time, Israel viewed the true return from exile and the resurrection of God's people as two parts of the whole scheme of the coming Kingdom of God. Second, through that ideological context, the meaning of the 'resurrection of the saints' in Matthew 27:50-54 was addressed. Matthew saw, in Jesus' death, the end of exile and the coming of the Kingdom of God, which is why he includes in his narrative (possibly in case his readers did not get the point) a small-scale resurrection occurring after the crucifixion, before Jesus' resurrection.

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