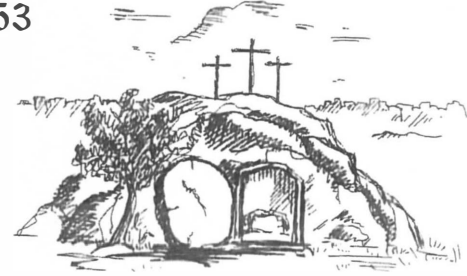


A Riddle in the Resurrection Record, Matt. 27:51-53



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Manfred E. Kober, Th.D.



Introduction:

Matthew mentions certain puzzling events in connection with the death and resurrection of the Savior which merit closer study. Several reasons might be suggested:

- (1) Matthew's unique information is usually ignored in any discussion of Easter.
- (2) The events are important to the future resurrection of all believers.
- (3) The pericope is intriguing and arouses the interest of the believer.
- (4) The passage is instructive for dispensationalists as it strongly points to a new dispensation.

At the moment of Christ's death several mysterious events of unusual significance occurred:

- (1) The supernatural tearing of the veil of the temple (Mt. 27:51a)
- (2) An earthquake in which rocks were split and tombs were opened (v. 51b-52a)
- (3) The resurrection of many Old Testament saints mentioned in the context of Christ's death but who arose immediately after Christ's resurrection.

1A. The Torn Veil: Mt. 27:51a -- ACCESS

1b. The tearing:

The inner veil is probably in view here, separating the holy place from the holy of holies (Ex. 26:31ff; Lev. 16:2,12; Heb. 4:16; 6:19-20; 9:11-28; 10:19-22).

1c. The enormous dimensions:

According to Jewish tradition, the veil was 60 feet long and 30 feet wide, of the thickness of the palm of a hand.

2c. The extraordinary design:

Josephus speaks of the veil as a Babylonian curtain embroidered with linen in various colors, "woven together with wonderful art."



2b. The timing:

At 3:00 p.m., at the time of the evening incense offering, the high priest would be standing by the curtain offering incense before the curtain (Lk. 1:8-10).

3b. The type:

The rending of the veil indicates the believer's access to heaven "by a new and living way, which He hath consecrated for us, through the veil, which is to say his flesh" (Heb. 10: 20)

The tearing from top to bottom signified that God is the One who tore the thick curtain. This supernatural event

- indicated the cessation of the Mosaic covenant
- marked ready access into the presence of God
- prefigured the physical destruction of the temple
- was ignored by the Jews, who sewed up the curtain and continued their temple worship

2A. The Trembling Earth: (51b, 51a) **AGONY**—for the creature
AUTHORITY—for the creator

1b. A sign of agony:

The earth shook at the precise instant of Christ's death. The earthquake, combined with the darkness, must have horrified the bystanders.

Apparently the darkness was a world-wide phenomenon. According to Church historian Eusebius (d. 340), Dionysius the Areopagite, who converted later in Athens under Paul's ministry (Acts 17:34), was in Egypt at the time and, experiencing the dreadful darkness, exclaimed, "**Either the Deity is suffering or is sympathetic with some sufferer!**" (M'Clintock and Strong, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature*, 1894, II, 808)



Today the visitor to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, in the center of Jerusalem, the traditional site of Calvary, is shown the rent rocks and a deep fissure in the hill, some 5 feet from where the cross ostensibly was placed.

2b. The sign of authority:

The significance of the earthquake focuses on its result. The tombs of many were opened, illustrating Christ's conquest of death by His death.

He broke the bonds of death forever and destroyed “him who had the power over death, that is, the devil” (Heb. 2:14).

3A. The Transformed Saints: (Mt. 27:51b-52) ANTICIPATION

The resurrection of the O.T. saints (“holy people,” *hagioi*) is put here rather than in chapter 28 to show the efficacy of Christ’s death.

Their resurrection raises a number of questions and commentators have a field day proffering possible answers:

- (1) What kind of bodies did they have?
- (2) When did they arise?
- (3) Did they die again?
- (4) When did they leave their tombs?
- (5) Who saw them?
- (6) Who were they?
- (7) When did they leave earth?

1b. They are a sign:



The resurrections which Christ performed during His earthly ministry were resuscitations. The resurrection of these O.T. saints occurred three days after the death of Christ, probably immediately after His resurrection. Their resurrection indicated that Christ indeed had taken the sting out of death (1. Cor. 15:55-57). However, Christ was the first to be resurrected. He is the “firstfruits of them that sleep” (1. Cor. 15:20), “the firstborn from the dead” (Col. 1:15).

2b. They are a seal:

The token resurrection demonstrated that Jesus’ death provided the basis for the resurrection of the believers before the cross and all believers subsequently. All the O.T. saints will be resurrected at the Second Advent (Dan. 12:1-2). The Church age saints will be resurrected seven years prior, at the Rapture (1. Thess. 4:16). It may be assumed that the Jerusalem saints of Matthew’s Gospel ascended with Christ to heaven after 40 days of glorious fellowship with their loved ones in Jerusalem.

Conclusion:

--The torn veil was primarily a private sign, first of all to the priest who served at the altar of incense. Its message relates to the **spiritual** realm.

--The trembling earth was more public in character and relates to the **natural** realm. The incident led to the centurion to faith as well as the Gentile company who jointly confessed, “Truly this was the Son of God” (Mt. 27:54; Mk. 15:49; Lk. 23:41).

--The transformed saints experienced a token resurrection. The marvelous events related to the **physical** realm. As a *sign* it showed that Christ's resurrection was not unique and as *seal* it indicated, in prophetic anticipation, all future resurrections, assuring us that "all in the graves shall hear the voice of the Son of God" (John 5:25, 29; 1. Thess. 4:16).

