



Conducted by
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“We have a problem concerning the resurrection which centres around the scripture Matthew 27 verses 51-53. What we want to know is, “Was Jesus the first to be resurrected, and if so, what happened to the bodies of the saints in the tombs?”

THIS problem seems to hinge on the following points. Verse 51 speaks about an earthquake which rent the rocks and opened the graves. Verse 52 speaks of saints being raised, and then goes on to say (v53) that they “Came out of the tombs after his resurrection”. This would appear to be after the resurrection of Jesus.

The questioner refers to the scripture which says that “Christ became the first-fruits of them that slept”, yet here we read of bodies being raised before Jesus had himself been buried. This is indeed a knotty problem, and I feel sure that we shall do well if we are able to shed a little light on it.

The Synoptists

It hardly seems necessary to explain to people in Churches of Christ what is meant by the Synoptic Gospels, but it is relevant to the question so I will do so. This was a name first used by a biblical scholar by the name of Griesback for the first three gospels, those of Matthew, Mark and Luke. This name was used because these gospel records present such a similarity in matter and from that they readily admit of being brought under one and the same view or synopsis. Therefore we must look to see how the Synoptists viewed this incident referred to in the question.

The Gospel Records

The rending of the veil of the temple is recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke, and the wording in Mark is similar to that of Matthew. Luke, however, connects it with the spreading of darkness over the earth, and the darkening of the sun prior to the death of Jesus. Matthew connects it with the earthquake which occurred after the death of Jesus, and which he alone mentions. Mark mentions it after the death of Jesus, but seemingly without any special connection with anything else. Let us tabulate all the events and see if they tell us anything.

	Matt.	Mark	Luke
1. Rending of veil	Yes	Yes	Yes
2. Darkness	Yes	Yes	Yes
3. Earthquake	Yes	No.	No.
4. Cries of Jesus (Loud voice)	Yes	Yes	Yes
5. Reaction of Centurion	Yes	Yes	Yes
6. Raising of saints	Yes	No.	No.

So we see, Mark and Luke are silent on two very important events which Matthew records, viz., the earthquake, and the resurrection of the 'saints'. How could they have been unaware of so portentous events. Or was Matthew mistaken?

Authority and Location

You may think this to be a strange heading but let me explain. What was the location of the gospel writers when Jesus was crucified? If they were at the scene of the crucifixion how could they have known about the veil of the temple being rent? It seems reasonable to believe that they were at the scene of the crucifixion for Luke records, "And all his acquaintance, and the women that followed him from Galilee, stood afar off, beholding these things" (Luke 23: 49). You will understand, of course, that the veil was the entrance to the Holy of Holies which was situated in the innermost recesses of the Temple. It follows, then, that if what we have said is true, the gospel writers must have had some authority for saying the veil had been rent; perhaps the authority was the priests, 'a great company' of whom became 'obedient to the faith' after Pentecost (Acts 6:7). Likewise, for any event of which the recorder was not an eye-witness, he must have relied on the authority of others who were eye-witnesses. This does not mean such reports would be untrue, but I think we all realise that if two people were eye-witnesses of an incident, and they were called upon to give reports, then those reports would be alike in essence but would contain variations of the incident. Such would be the case, I think, with the writers of the Synoptic Gospels.

What about the Miracles?

So what about the earthquake and the resurrection of the saints? Do we disbelieve Matthew? Certainly not! That something extraordinary had happened is testified to be the exclamation of the Centurion (Mark 15:39). Furthermore, scholarship has it that Westcott, Ignatius, and Eusebius refer to happenings like this taking place.

The words used for 'resurrection' and 'saints' are unusual, though, The word for 'resurrection' occurs nowhere else in the N.T., nor in the Septuagint in this sense. The usual word in Matthew 22:23,28,30,31 and elsewhere, in Gospels, Acts, and the Epistles is a different Greek word. The word for 'saints' is found nowhere else in the gospels; and elsewhere in the N.T., the word is used always of christians. Perhaps these 'saints' are those who had accepted Jesus as Messiah before the crucifixion and Pentecost.

What was the Purpose?

The rending of the veil would indicate that the special sanctity of the Holy of Holies was ended. That which had been screened off was now open to all, both Jew and Gentile. In Christ each christian is a high priest (Heb. 9:19).

Is it possible that the raising of the bodies was a manifestation of the power of Jesus over death and the grave? They were taken out of the graves; clothed with a resurrection body; and obviously given permission to appear in the Holy City to those who knew them. We are not told what happened to the bodies subsequently, and it is idle to speculate.

And what of the earthquake? Matthew again speaks of an earthquake concerning the moving of the stone from the Lord's tomb (Matt. 28:2). Mark and Luke do not mention this either. What all of them do say is that the Lord cried with a loud voice. Who can tell what majestic power attended that cry? We know that when God's presence came to Moses that the mountain shook. And when Jesus cried with a loud voice Lazarus came forth (John 11:43). Certainly, there were many strange and mighty events taking place when Jesus was crucified.

The First-fruits

In the O.T. the idea is of the chief or principal part (Num. 18:12), or the earliest ripe of the crop or tree (Ex. 23:16). In the N.T. the presence of the Holy Spirit with the believer is said to be the first-fruit of the harvest of the crops (Rom. 8:23). As applied to the resurrection of Christ he is the first-fruit of all believers who have fallen asleep.

Matthew does not use the word and I am quite sure that it is not really relevant in the situation which we are studying, although some have suggested that this is what he had in mind when he had the raised bodies of the 'saints' languishing in their graves for three days until Jesus had risen.

It is true to say, of course, that people were raised from the dead before the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, but these people presumably died again. Paul says of Jesus, "who is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; that in all things he might have the pre-eminence. Christ rose never to die again, and in this context he is the first-fruits of them that slept. This is applied to the results of the gospel, for Paul teaches the Roman christians "For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection" (Rom. 6:5). This is why I believe that the Matthew passage is not significant in this respect, except perhaps as a portent of that which was to follow.

Well, dear questioner, I realise that I may not have removed all the doubts, but I hope I have said enough to stimulate some thoughts which will result in further study.