



Conducted by
Frank Worgan

Question: *"In Matthew 27: 51-53 we read, 'many holy people who had died were raised to life'. Have we any way of knowing who these people were, why they were raised, and what happened to them?"*

The straightforward answer to these questions has to be "No!"

Having said this, the three verses in Matt. 27, from which the questions are derived, are well worth examining because they record details of the extraordinary events which occurred when the Lord 'dismissed his spirit' - voluntarily died - on the cross.

1st. The beautiful curtain which separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place - was torn from top to bottom, symbolising that access into the Presence of God had become possible. And, of course, as has often been observed, the fact that this curtain was torn from the top *downwards*, rather from its lower hem *upwards*, indicates that this was a miraculous event.

2nd *There was an earthquake.* Since Judea lay in an area of the Middle East which was notoriously subject to earthquakes, this would not, in itself, have been regarded as

very unusual. The fact that the earthquake occurred *when* it did, marks it out as more than mere coincidence; hence, its effect on the Centurion in charge of the soldiers who carried out the crucifixion (v.54).

3rd *Certain graves were opened by the earthquake and their occupants brought back to life.* I think we should notice that Matthew, writing many years after the events had occurred, 'concertinas' them chronologically, as though they all happened at once, when in fact, some time elapsed between them.

The 'collapsing' events in this way, is a literary device not uncommon in biblical historical accounts. **Joel 1:28-29** is an example in which we see that events which were separated by centuries were recorded as though they occurred one after the other.

In other words, when the earthquake opened their tombs, these 'saints', holy 'ones' or 'righteous ones', did not come to life immediately and emerge from their tombs, but did so three days later. It is plainly stated in verse 53, that they emerged out of the tombs *after* the Lord Jesus Himself was raised.

Their resurrection followed His own and was made possible by it, and thus constituted both a striking testimony to the power and efficacy of His redeeming sacrifice and an assurance of the resurrection of all who have faith in Him.

I suggest that it is *possible* to accept this explanation of what happened, but it is surely *impossible* to believe that these people came to life and *remained, alive in their opened tombs* for three days.

4th. *These resurrected 'holy ones' then entered the city.* Remember that the dead were never buried within Jerusalem's walls. This was regarded as unlawful, because even to touch the dead, or even a tomb, was to contract religious defilement.

5th. *And many people saw them alive in the city.*

These statements are all made by Matthew in the simplest and plainest of terms, so we cannot possibly fail to understand what he is telling us. This means that the options open to us are extremely limited - and equally plain.

SOME ATTEMPTS AT AN "EXPLANATION"

We must either accept that these events occurred as recorded; or we must give attempt to explain them away.

It is not surprising, since what Matthew records are indeed miraculous occurrences, that all kinds of supposed 'explanations' have been advanced in order to discredit the record. Here are some of them.

1) *"No corroborating evidence has been found, which supports what Matthew records."* We have only his account, and the critics therefore claim that it is reasonable to assume that if such amazing events had occurred, other Gospel writers would also have mentioned them.

But it does not follow that Matthew's record in these verses is unreliable because it has no parallel in the other three 'Gospels'. If this is the way in which the reliability of biblical records must be judged, we shall find ourselves having to discount other passages in the Gospels, simply because they record events which are not mentioned by other writers. That would be plain foolishness.

2) *"Even if we accept that certain graves were opened by an earthquake, the story of bodies being raised was only the result of someone's over-active imagination."*

In other words, someone saw the opened tombs and mistakenly *assumed* that dead people had been brought back to life and, as often happens, the story grew with the telling! A rumour was soon circulating which claimed that these 'resurrected' people had been seen in the city.

However, this argument does not explain verse 54, which tells us that *the 'centurion' and those who were with him* - i.e. - the Roman soldiers on duty - *'saw the earthquake and what took place'*. Were they also suffering from over-active imaginations? Verse 54 states that it was the witnessing of what transpired when Jesus died, which filled the Roman officer and his men with such awe that they said of Him, *"Truly this was the Son of God!"*

3) *These verses do not really belong to the original Gospel according to Matthew, but must have been added to the record at some stage."*

This is often the argument which unbelievers use when they have nothing else to fall back on! Deny the genuineness of the record!

But, Alfred Plummer, whose scholarship is still widely recognized, tells us in his commentary on the Gospel according to Matthew, that *"there is no textual evidence that the passage is an interpolation."*

Having said all of this, the fact remains that there remain questions which we may ask but which we cannot answer.

Who were these 'righteous people'? Were they men and women of God from Old Testament times, such as His servants the prophets, perhaps? That word 'saints' is really an Old Testament word, first found in **Deut. 33:2-3**, and tombs of the prophets may still be seen in the area around Jerusalem.

Were they people who had lived during the Lord's earthly ministry; righteous people such as Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist? Or Joseph, the husband of Mary, who, almost certainly, had died before Jesus was crucified?

There were others, also, who rejoiced to see the fulfilment of the Messianic prophecies, of this we may be sure. But we can say nothing further.

We noticed that they appeared to 'many' - not to everyone.

If they really were people of New Testament times, perhaps this means that they appeared to people who had known them during their life-time, their friends and relatives and others who shared their hope.

And what happened to them? Where did they go? Here, again, we are confronted with a mystery which we cannot solve. Though a range of weird and wonderful solutions have been suggested through the centuries.

Some expositors have even suggested that these 'holy ones' were raised to witness to the fact of the resurrection of the Lord Himself, and that, having borne witness, they later returned to their graves! This seems to me to present an eerie - even incredible - picture of these resurrected people calmly going back to their tombs to lie down and die again!

Perhaps there is something to be learned from the account of the raising of Lazarus, found in **John ch.11**. The passage tells us that when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead great crowds came to see him and believed in Jesus because of him, to the intense annoyance of the Jewish chief priests. But we are not told how long Lazarus lived, or what became of him afterwards. We may, of course, be absolutely sure that he did not live for ever, and we must assume that, sooner or later, he died again.

This may be what happened to the 'righteous ones' referred to in Matthew's history. They lived for a time, and then died.

As was stated at the commencement of this article, we cannot hope to find, or offer, an explanation of these amazing events. Yet even though this is true, neither can these things be explained away!

It is impossible to dismiss what Matthew describes as mere fantasy. We must,

therefore, either reject his account as untrue *because we cannot explain it*, or accept it as fact, *even though we cannot explain it*.

(Questions to: Frank Worgan, 5 Gryfebank Way, Houston,
Renfrewshire, Scotland. PA6 7NZ.)

E-mail: Frank Worgan <frank@fworgan.freeseve.co.uk>