

When the Saints Go Marching In (Matthew 27:52-53): Historicity, Apocalyptic Symbol, and Biblical Inerrancy

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Reports of the bizarre and unexplainable have been around for thousands of years. A decade ago, an evangelical wrote the following of Christian apologist James White, “I bid God’s blessing on him and His [sic.] work for the kingdom, praying that he will channel his considerable talent and zeal toward the more pressing need of defending Christianity against those who deny the fundamentals of the faith, not those who affirm them.”¹ What makes that statement so bizarre is the scholar who penned those words is Norman Geisler.

Since the beginning of August, Dr. Geisler has made a big issue of the interpretation I proposed for a controversial text in Matthew’s Gospel, the text concerning the saints raised at Jesus’ death. From the beginning, I’ve refrained from participating with Dr. Geisler in what would amount to a circus on the internet while those outside the Church look on. Instead, I believe the most appropriate place to discuss the matter is within the academic arena. As a result, I asked the EPS leadership for permission to change my paper topic in order to address this issue. And I am grateful to them for allowing me to do so. I am also participating in a ‘virtual’ roundtable discussion on the matter in the Southeastern Theological Review, which should be published around the end of this year.

Let’s begin by making some observations from the relevant texts in the Synoptics pertaining to phenomena that occurred at Jesus’ death.² All of the Synoptics report that darkness fell on the whole land between the sixth hour until the ninth. All of the Synoptics report that the temple veil was torn in two. Mark & Matthew place it upon Jesus’ death whereas Luke locates it prior to it.

Matthew reports four additional phenomena:

¹ Norman L. Geisler. *Chosen But Free*, Second Edition (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2001), 263. This is the last statement in the book.

² Mk 15:33-38; Matt 27:45-53; Luke 23:44-46.

⁵¹ and the earth shook and the rocks were split. ⁵² The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; ⁵³ and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many.

John lists none of the phenomena. Matthew's report of the raised saints has baffled scholars for years, leaving several questions. Did Matthew intend for his report to be understood literally, allegorically, or otherwise? Or is it legend that Matthew included or invented (*a la* Bultmann)? Were the saints raised at Jesus' death or resurrection? Were the saints raised in their same mortal body only to die again as was Lazarus or in resurrection bodies? Who were these saints?

In what follows, I'm going to cover 3 major points: (1) Some arguments for interpreting Matthew's raised saints in a literal/historical sense; (2) some arguments for interpreting them in a symbolic/non-historical sense; and, (3) how this all relates to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy.

1. Arguments Supporting Interpreting Matthew's Raised Saints as Historical

Given time limitations, I can only cover what I believe are the two strongest arguments for this conclusion. First, almost all of the Church fathers who comment on the issue regard Matthew's raised saints in a historical sense.

At least 12 Church fathers mention them. But 3 are probably spurious and most of the 12 are quite late. For example, only 4 predate AD 300. Let's look at those 4. Given time limitations I can only name them and give their views. Ignatius is our earliest source. He writes, "how shall we be able to live apart from Him, who also the prophets, disciples in the Spirit, did wait for Him as their Teacher? And because of this, He whom they rightly waited for, having arrived, raised them from the dead."³ According to Ignatius, Jesus raised the prophets from the dead when He arrived. Although uncertain, Ignatius may be referring to Matthew's raised saints. However, Ignatius is too vague to go beyond that. What did he mean when he said, when Jesus arrived, He raised the prophets from the dead"?

³ IgnMg 9:1-2.

Having arrived where and when? In Hades and when Jesus died? And how were the prophets raised? Ignatius simply does not say.

Irenaeus locates the raising of the saints at Jesus' death when he descended into Hades and preached to them, an event many evangelical scholars now reject. Clement of Alexandria likewise locates the event at Jesus' death, is ambiguous and possibly problematic. For Clement either says the saints were raised in a resurrection body, which would make them the firstfruits rather than Jesus, or he's saying they went to heaven and that this was a universal state of affairs. What he meant by that is unclear. Finally, Origin is confusing. In one place he says that the raised saints appeared in heaven's Jerusalem rather than in Palestine and elsewhere he interprets them allegorically.

Questions remain. But the bottom line is that at least 2 and possibly 3 of the 4 early Church fathers regarded Matthew's raised saints as historical.

Another argument supporting interpreting Matthew's raised saints in a historical manner is that they appear within a context of other historical details such as Jesus' death. Thus, it's claimed that to understand them in anything other than a historical sense would be a forced interpretation.

But one may immediately cite Jesus' Olivet Discourse just three chapters earlier in Matthew. In the context of speaking of the coming of many false prophets and false messiahs, the abomination of desolation standing in the temple and people fleeing to the mountains, Jesus says that the sun and moon will go dark and the stars will fall out of the sky. Jesus says that they will then see the Son of Man coming on the clouds and gathering His elect.

Many scholars interpret the celestial phenomena involving the sun, moon, and stars as purely apocalyptic symbols even though they're sandwiched between events generally interpreted in a fairly literal sense. Craig Blomberg writes: "Jesus portrays his return with the typical apocalyptic imagery of cosmic upheaval. He does not intend his language to be taken as a literal, scientific description of events but as a vivid metaphor, much as we speak of earth-shaking

developments. From this moment on, the universe can no longer continue as it has been (cf. Rev 6:12–17; 8:12). Jesus’ imagery may well also point to the overthrow of the cosmic and demonic powers often associated in paganism with the sun, moon, and stars.”⁴ If Blomberg and many others holding the same position are correct, we have poetic or apocalyptic symbols sandwiched between the historical.

Accordingly, what are perhaps the two strongest reasons for interpreting the raised saints in a historical sense cannot be ignored. But their limitations should likewise be noted.

2. Data Supporting Interpreting Matthew’s Raised Saints as an Apocalyptic Symbol or Poetic Device

We have seen that it’s possible Matthew has already employed celestial language to be interpreted as apocalyptic symbols in Jesus’ Olivet Discourse. The same may be said of the celestial phenomena tied to the Pentecost event in Acts 2 where Luke seems to link the wonders in the sky and signs on the earth prophesied by Joel to the wonders and signs performed by Jesus and His apostles, even using the same terms in the same context to describe them. Yet, Joel lists these as blood, fire, vapor of smoke, the sun going dark and the moon turning into blood. But these phenomena apparently did not occur on that day. Moreover, Joel as repeated by Peter says that in that day “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Luke then reports Peter encouraging the Jews to call on the name of the Lord and be saved. Then he reports that about 3,000 believed that day. Thus, Peter appears to believe the prophecy of Joel was fulfilled at Pentecost.

Accordingly, it’s reasonable to hold that Joel and Luke intended for these celestial phenomena to be understood as apocalyptic symbols for the divine acts witnessed at Pentecost—specifically the speaking in tongues—without intending for readers to interpret them in a literal sense. It’s somewhat similar to us saying

⁴ Blomberg, C. (2001). *Vol. 22: Matthew* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (362–363). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

the events of 9/11 were “earthshaking.” Far be it for a historian a thousand years from now to conclude that an earthquake occurred that day that was felt around the world. Could we be making a similar mistake when reading apocalyptic language in a literal manner?

Matthew 24 and Acts 2 are just two examples of what may be apocalyptic symbols in the biblical literature. What about other Jewish literature?

Josephus tells of nine wonders that accompanied the destruction of the Temple: a star shaped like a sword hovered over the city, a comet appeared and remained for a year, during one night for one hour a light that was as bright as daylight shone on the altar and the holy house, a cow gave birth to a lamb in the temple, the eastern gate of the temple’s inner court which could hardly be moved by twenty men opened by itself, chariots and angels were seen in the clouds surrounding the city, while in the inner court of the temple the priests felt a quaking and heard a large number of people say, “We are departing from here.” Josephus says that even the strangest of these things actually happened. He adds a ninth portent: A man named Jesus started proclaiming the destruction of the temple in AD 62.

Similar phenomena are reported in Greco-Roman literature. Pertaining to the death of Julius Caesar, Pliny the Elder reported that an unusually long eclipse of the sun occurred when Julius Caesar was killed.⁵ Josephus reports that the sun turned away its light.⁶ Plutarch says that the sun was faded for a year, a great comet appeared for 7 nights after Caesar’s murder, and a phantom appeared to one of the assassins.⁷ In what is certain poetic literature, Virgil reports sixteen phenomena that occurred after Caesar’s death: prolonged darkness, dogs and birds acted unusually, Etna erupted, fighting in the heavens was heard (a detail that we saw has a parallel in the portents reported by Josephus prior to the destruction of the temple), the Alps shook near Germany, a powerful voice was

⁵ *Natural History* 2.30.

⁶ *Ant.* 14:309.

⁷ *Caesar* 69.4.

heard in the groves, **pale phantoms were seen at dusk**, cattle spoke, streams stood still, **the earth opened up**, ivory idols wept and bronze idols were sweating in the shrines, dark intestines appeared outside of animals in their stalls, blood trickled in springs, wolves howled, lightning appeared in a cloudless sky, and a bright comet was seen.⁸

We do know that a comet appeared at that time because we have corroborating reports from the Chinese. It also appears very likely that Mt. Etna erupted around that time. However, we also know that no visible eclipses were viewable from within the Roman empire in 44 BC. And are we to believe that cattle spoke, streams stood still, dark intestines appeared outside of animals and that pale phantoms were seen at dusk when Caesar died? If you regard any of these as poetic additions, then you will understand that the ancients could mix factual observations with poetic devices.

Dio Cassius reports six phenomena connected to the death of Claudius: a comet, raining blood, lightning striking Pretorian standards, Jupiter's temple opening up by itself, bees swarming in the camp, and an incumbent of every political office dying.⁹ Here again, we can confirm that a comet appeared at that time, since it's also reported by the Chinese. But we find an interesting report of Jupiter's temple opening by itself. This detail has a parallel with Josephus' report that the eastern gate of the temple's inner court opened by itself just prior to its destruction.

Dio likewise reports eight phenomena that occurred when Julius Caesar enslaved Egypt: It rained where it had never rained previously, it rained water, blood, and weapons from the dead—another parallel to what is reported by Virgil and Josephus, the sound of musical instruments was heard, a huge snake appeared and let out a loud hiss, there were comets, **apparitions were seen**, images frowned, and the image of the bull deity Aris lamented and wept.¹⁰

⁸ *The Georgics*, Georgic 1.466ff.

⁹ *Roman History* 60.35.1.

¹⁰ 51.17.4-5.

The Roman poet Lucan describes portents surrounding the same event.¹¹ Among the many are a blazing comet that stretched from east to west, noiseless lightning in a cloudless sky—which has a parallel in Virgil related to Caesar’s death, the sun went dark at noon, mothers gave birth to monsters, strange voices were heard in the woods—a detail with a parallel in Virgil’s poetic account of Caesar’s death, **spirits walked the earth**, a woman with hissing snakes in her hair patrolled the town, and on and on.¹² Lucan probably wrote between AD 55-65, very close to the time the Synoptics were written.

Again, we can confirm that a comet appeared when Caesar enslaved Egypt. We can likewise confirm that an eclipse of the sun occurred around 10:30am on August 9, 49 BC. But there are obvious additions that appear to be poetic in nature. Once again, we observe that historical details are comingled with the poetic. And apparitions, phantoms, and spirits appear in several of these accounts. All of these reports weigh in favor of interpreting Matthew’s raised saints as an apocalyptic or poetic device.

But there are some things that, for me, complicate interpreting Matthew’s raised saints in a non-historical sense. Of the 9 portents reported by Josephus related to the destruction of the temple, Tacitus reports 5 of them related to the same event.¹³ He mentions all but the sword-shaped star, the comet, the cow giving birth to a lamb and the man who predicted the temple’s destruction. He then says that some Jews assigned a meaning to these events. This suggests that Jews of that day did not regard these phenomena as a literary device. Two questions remain for me: What was Tacitus’ source? If it was Josephus, Tacitus is not an independent source. But if Tacitus knew of another report that the portents he mentions actually occurred, then he’s an independent source and provides a reason for regarding at least some of the temple portents as historical. And if those were historical, they may provide a strong reason for interpreting Matthew’s raised saints as historical. That Tacitus does not mention the cow

¹¹ Marcus Annaeus Lucanus (AD 39–65), known as Lucan in his work *Civil War (Pharsalia)*.

¹² (1.523-2.1) <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0134%3Abook%3D1%3Acard%3D523>.

¹³ *History* 5.13.

giving birth to a lamb in the temple allows for the possibility that Josephus mixed the historical with the poetic. Thus, historical questions remain pertaining to Tacitus and may be impossible to answer. I also find it noteworthy that none of the Church fathers interpreted Matthew's raised saints as apocalyptic symbols or poetic devices. This too prevents me from holding this interpretation with any firmness.

So, for now, I remain undecided pertaining to how Matthew intended for his readers to understand the raised saints. And I'm not alone. In his 2003 volume *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, N. T. Wright comments, "[I]t is better to remain puzzled than to settle for either a difficult argument for probable historicity or a cheap and cheerful rationalistic dismissal of the possibility. Some stories are so odd that they may just have happened. This may be one of them, but in historical terms there is no way of finding out."¹⁴

Pertaining to the temple curtain splitting and the raised saints, Craig Blomberg writes, "All kinds of historical questions remain unanswered about both events."¹⁵ In the book *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?* edited by Paul Copan, William Lane Craig responded to Jesus Seminar fellow Robert Miller who claimed that Matthew freely added to Mark's Gospel the story of the resurrection of the saints, a story which Matthew did not take literally, but included it as a figurative expression of the apocalyptic significance of Jesus' death. Dr. Craig commented, "Dr. Miller's interpretation of this passage strikes me as quite persuasive, and probably only a few conservative scholars would treat the story as historical."¹⁶

Does Geisler think Blomberg and Craig are likewise denying biblical inerrancy because, like me, they remain undecided pertaining to how Matthew intended for his readers to interpret the raised saints? We don't know because Dr. Geisler won't say, in spite of the fact that several have pointed out to him that Dr. Craig has publicly taken this position in writing and in two other public debates.

¹⁴ 636.

¹⁵ Blomberg, C. (2001). *Vol. 22: Matthew* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (421). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

¹⁶ 164-65.

3. This brings us to my third major point: Must one hold to the historicity of Matthew's raised saints in order to affirm the doctrine of biblical inerrancy?

In its most basic form, biblical inerrancy states there are no errors in Scripture. It says something about the character of the literature. It doesn't interpret the literature. As Professor Michael Bird says, "Many preach the inerrancy of the Bible, but they practice the inerrancy of their hermeneutics." The next time Jehovah's Witnesses come to your home, ask them whether they hold to biblical inerrancy. Without any hesitation, they'll say "yes, of course!" When they then deny the deity of Christ, they are not saying Paul was mistaken on the matter. Instead, they are interpreting Paul's statement that Jesus is the firstborn of all creation as meaning He was created and, thus, could not be deity. They are not denying the inerrancy of the Bible. Rather, they are denying a certain interpretation of it. They are mistaken. But that's a hermeneutical matter rather than one concerning the inerrancy of the text.

I hope that it has become clear in this paper that my intent was not to dehistoricize a text Matthew intended as historical. If I had, that would be to deny the inerrancy of the text. Instead, what I have done is to question whether Matthew intended for the raised saints to be understood historically.

Despite the fact that I have said that and repeated it, a few evangelicals are asserting that we can't even ask that question. But in taking that position, they are now asking the doctrine of inerrancy to do what it's not designed to do: judge between attempts to interpret what the biblical authors were trying to communicate.¹⁷ The doctrine of biblical inerrancy can no more do that than a Geiger counter can specify your weight.

This confusion between inerrancy and hermeneutics is clearly illustrated in theological debates over interpreting the creation account in Genesis. Al Mohler

¹⁷ On the other hand, A. J. M. Wedderburn writes the following in his 1999 volume on the resurrection, "I will again and again have to stress that the argument which I am advancing goes beyond anything that any of the New Testament writers actually say, however much I may take them as a starting-point. Indeed they may at many points contradict my arguments" (104). Obviously, one cannot make such a move and hold to the inerrancy of the text. The position on the deity of Christ is hermeneutical whereas Wedderburn's position on the resurrection of Jesus is not.

who takes a young earth view of Genesis contends that the theological costs of the old earth view held by Geisler are difficult to reconcile with a historical Adam in Genesis and Romans.¹⁸ Other young earthers often accuse old earthers of denying the inerrancy of the text.

But at an ICBI meeting, old earther Gleason Archer said it is the **young earthers** who are “undermining the inerrancy of Scripture.”¹⁹

Norm Geisler wrote that Genesis 1 reports “*space-time events which actually happened as reported in the book of Genesis. . . . Likewise, the use of the term ‘creation’ [in ICBI] was meant to exclude the belief in macro-evolution, whether of the atheistic or theistic varieties.*”

It is of interest, then, that B B Warfield, who was unquestionably committed to the inerrancy of the biblical text, was open to theistic evolution. Moreover, some evangelicals hold the Framework or Literary Hypothesis, which interprets Genesis 1 in a symbolic manner and as poetry rather than historical. It denies that Genesis 1 is an account of how things actually happened and says that it’s not trying to report how creation actually occurred, is quite poetic and symbolic.

I want you to hear the words of a major scholar describing this view. It’s 4.5 minutes and an edited version of a longer speech but well worth the listen.

[.....]

According to the scholar you just heard, Genesis 1:1—2:4 is a “prose poem” and a “quasi-liturgical celebration of the fact of creation . . . and certainly not a kind of naïve observational account of what we would have seen if we could have traveled back in time and hovered above the chaos.”

This scholar goes on to assert that stories such as Eve’s being created from Adam’s side, of her encounter with the serpent, and of the tree of life are symbols

¹⁸ Al Mohler, “Why does the universe look so old? The theological costs of old earth thinking.” <http://www.icr.org/article/why-does-universe-look-so-old/>.

¹⁹ Archer, Gleason. “A Response to the Trustworthiness of Scripture in Areas Relating to Natural Science.” *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible: [papers from ICBI Summit II]*. By Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus. Grand Rapids, MI: Academie, 1984, quoted by Whitcomb, John Clement, Terry Mortenson, and Thane H. Ury. *Coming to Grips with Genesis: Biblical Authority and the Age of the Earth*. Green Forest, AR: Master, 2008.

and may not at all have been what we would have seen had we been there as observers.

The scholar whom you've just heard is J I Packer. Some of you may be uncomfortable with the Literary hypothesis. But it would be difficult to accuse Packer of having a view incompatible with inerrancy. After all, he was an ICBI framer. Dr. Geisler says that the Chicago Statement requires interpreting Genesis 1 as "space-time events which actually happened." But it's obvious Packer would disagree. So, Geisler's being an ICBI framer does not guarantee he has a correct understanding of it.

Professor Packer says, "What I'm trying to do as a theologian is to read my Bible in a way which receives the message that it intended to give me." That's precisely what I was trying to do with Matthew's raised saints. Observe that the approach to Genesis 1 known as the Literary Hypothesis has far greater theological implications than an apocalyptic or poetic interpretation of Matthew's raised saints. Consequently, I'm bewildered that Dr. Geisler can know that an ICBI framer interprets all of Genesis 1 as a prose poem and says nothing but then reads my proposal pertaining to Matthew's raised saints and has a cow—apocalyptically speaking, of course.

Unfortunately, such disagreements are often not benign. Many of you have witnessed some of the actions taken against me on the internet since August and some of you are aware of the behind the scenes efforts to have me ostracized from all future ministry. But punitive measures haven't been limited to me. Gary Habermas and Paul Copan have both been uninvited from previously established speaking engagements. Why? Although they both interpret Matthew's raised saints in a historical sense, their crime was opining that I had not abandoned inerrancy. For even though I had stated that I was now undecided on how to interpret Matthew's raised saints, I had not abandoned the possibility that Matthew meant for them to be understood in a non-historical sense. A professor at a Southern Baptist seminary is now being called a "liberal" for committing the same crime while another has had his teaching career negatively impacted. For the self-appointed magisterium, the only acceptable way of interpreting

Matthew's raised saints is in a historical sense. Not only must you fall in line with this interpretation, you must also condemn those who won't or you, too, will suffer consequences.

The danger in all of this is manifest: We can become so committed to a particular interpretation of a text that we unconsciously canonize the interpretation, so that those who disagree with it are now disagreeing with Scripture.

There is also a cost to scholarship. For when evangelical scholars see this happening, some of them will go back to their office, save their recent research on a jump drive and, rather than publishing it, they will tuck it away in their home office for fear of becoming the next target. Thus, good scholarship is lost when theological bullying is unanswered.

So, what are we as evangelical scholars to do about such things?

As a starting point for a discussion, I would like to suggest that when a debate over an interpretation arises, we should ask ourselves whether the matter under dispute involves one of the fundamentals of the faith. Not whether the issue can somehow be tied to a fundamental, because one can quite easily make a tie between a cherished position and a fundamental. Does the matter concern a fundamental? If it doesn't, then write a critique of the interpretation in a journal article or a book. Discuss it in your classroom. But going on a rampage against a brother or sister in Christ for differing on a non-fundamental issue brings no glory to the kingdom of our Lord Jesus.

Ammianus Marcellinus was the last of the Roman historians and had witnessed the brutalities of Rome. In contrast, he had also witnessed the conduct of the Christians. At the end of the fourth century, Marcellinus would write, "no wild beasts are such dangerous enemies to man as Christians are to one another." May God help us.