

Did the Resurrection of the Saints in Matt 27:51-53 really happen?

After Jesus cries his last breath the Gospel of Matthew 27:51-53 narrates the following strange incident: “⁵¹At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. ⁵²The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. ⁵³After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.” - NRSV

This account is labelled “completely puzzling” and a “legend” by James Dunn.¹ According to Dale Allison who quotes two other authors: “Matthew 27:51b-53 recounts ‘a miracle unsurpassed anywhere else in the Gospels or other books of the Christian scriptures.’ Indeed, if it happened, it is ‘the most amazing event of all time.’ But it did not happen.” While many would categorically reject the story on the mere basis of it being miraculous, Dale Allison is not such a scholar. There are a number of supernatural miracles of the highest order in this short account, yet even conservative commentators who accept a Biblical worldview and believe Jesus rose from the dead routinely consider this story theological or non-historical. Donald Hagner wrote, “I side, therefore, with such recent commentators as Gundry, Senior (*Passion of Jesus*), Gnilka, Bruner, Harrington, D. R. A. Hare (*Matthew*, Interpretation [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993]), and R. E. Brown (*Death of the Messiah*) in concluding that the rising of the saints from the tombs in this passage is a piece of theology set forth as history.” I must admit, as one who does accept the Biblical worldview, reading this does trip my skepticism meter but for those unwilling to dismiss miracles simply for the sake of being miracles, there are a few other reasons to think Matthew is engaging in theological fiction. One can still read a miraculous account and believe it resembles fiction even if you accept and believe in other miracles. So while many scholars would look at this account and think its embellishments to Mark are obvious, we are going to look at some specific problems with treating the account as historical.

This account is not found independently anywhere else

No one mentions this fantastic incident outside the Gospel of Matthew. We don’t find it in Mark, Luke, John, Acts, any of the Pauline corpus or other works of the New Testament. It is absent from non-canonical works like the Didache and all Christian texts roughly contemporaneous with Matthew. No non-Christian author narrates any details of this remarkable event either. Aside from later authors literarily dependent upon the text of Matthew, there is nothing. There is complete radio silence. Raymond Brown warns us that arguments from silence have to be used with extreme caution since the failure to write does not necessarily mean the failure to know and “exegesis that embraces what the evangelists did not actually convey in writing becomes very speculative.”² This is absolutely true but in this instance the silence is absolutely deafening. David Wenham writes, ““Although arguments from silence are to be treated with the greatest caution, in this case the phenomenon described is so remarkable that some mention of it might be expected in the other gospels or Acts.”³

Wenham’s attempt to apologize for this silence is baffling and does not find wide scholarly agreement: “if it is recognized that the resurrection narratives in the gospels are extremely

¹ Jesus Remembered, James Dunn, pg. 869-870.

² Introduction to the New Testament, Raymond Brown, pg. 38-39;

³ The Resurrection Narratives in Matthew’s Gospel,” *TynB* 24 (1973): 42–3:

compressed and that the evangelists have been selective in their description, then it will not be regarded as surprising if they are found to have concentrated on the central event to the exclusion of other things. In this particular case it is easy to see how the tradition of the appearances of the saints, which may have been isolated appearances and comparatively poorly attested, could have come to be completely eclipsed by the tradition of Jesus' resurrection."⁴

To most modern exegetes there is nothing “easy” about this interpretation. It is inexplicable that such a public event, that has been described as the most fantastic miracle of all time, would not feature heavily (or at all) in any first century Christian polemic and apologetics outside a fleeting reference in the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew does not describe “isolated appearances” (**many** times two) : or an event that could be “poorly attested.” Not only did Jesus rise from the dead but the general resurrection may have begun as **many** saints rose from the dead and appeared to **many** in the Holy City of Jerusalem. While the record from the time period is incomplete we do have enough surviving material to reasonably conclude such an epic event would have been recalled by multiple authors—especially if we include Christian ones and later Christian authors who might have drawn on now lost texts in referencing the incident. Robert Gundry writes, “The verb “appeared” connotes a juridical appearance for the purpose of testimony (see Acts 23:15, 22; 24:1; 25:2, 15; Hebrews 9:24, for example), so that this appearance provides the miraculous demonstration of Jesus’ divine sonship that he refused to give at the Devil’s behest in the holy city (4:5–7). All in all, these events combine with Jesus’ resurrection to preview the certainty of resurrection and vindication for all who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness (5:10–12).”⁵

When Paul asks the Corinthians “how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?” (15:2) why would he not refer to this magnificent incident in his argument? Why does Paul not relay this information in his response to the questions in 1 Corinthians 15:35: “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” Why does Paul not console the Thessalonians concerned about those believers who have died with this narrative (1 Thess. 4:13-18)? Some of this difficulty can be mitigated by the fact that Corinth and Thessalonica a far from Jerusalem where these events happened yet unless his audiences had already heard of and dismissed this incident, one might still expect something from Paul or any other author in the first century. Out of the 27 works in the New Testament, not a single reference outside these two lines of an utterly fantastic event that would shake the world more than the alleged earthquake that opened the tombs. Individual silences can be attributed to the vagaries of memory or other factors. For example, Paul only mentions the Eucharist once (1 Cor 10) because disputes had arisen over it. Had that problem not arisen, some exegetes might erroneously be arguing it was a later invention of the church since it shows up nowhere in the Pauline corpus and doesn’t feature outside the gospels. But Matthew’s account here is far more fantastic and public than the last supper and it found only as a short glib in one gospel. The complete silence across a broad array of sources and literary genres is very troubling.

Dale Allison writes of this incident: “It stands alone, half a century or more after the incredible events it reports. Yet the stupendous marvels depicted in Mt. 27:51b-53, had they firm grounding in known fact, would quickly have become a bedrock of Christian apologetics, especially as the

⁴ The Resurrection Narratives in Matthew’s Gospel,” *TynB* 24 (1973): 44

⁵ Robert Gundry, *Commentary on Matthew*, EBook shorts, Baker Academic

text speaks of “many” saints and “many” witnesses. While this is, to be sure, an argument from silence, some arguments from silence have force.⁶ Matthew 27:51b-53—which fails to name any of the “many” saints or any of the “many” to whom they appeared—is a religious fiction spawned by the religious imagination, the same source that gave us the seven sleepers of Ephesus and Saint Catherine’s exploding wheel. Reality has here melted into fable.”⁶

The Account Itself Is Disjointed

Matthew narrates that just as Jesus breathed his last breath, the temple veil tore, an earthquake occurred that shook open the tombs, the dead saints were raised but only *after his resurrection* did they come out of their tombs.⁷ Those three words create several difficulties. What did they do between good Friday and Easter morning? Were they raised before Jesus but only appeared to others after He did? Is Jesus still the “first-fruits” if the many dead saints were raised before him? Matthew’s narration is extremely odd here. Other questions remain about what saints were raised (how was this chosen?), the nature of their bodies (resuscitated like Lazarus or an imperishable spiritual body?), their fate after appearing to the many (where did they go, did they die, get raptured?).

Matthew’s Special Material Creates Friction with Mark

Matthew, which was literarily dependent on the Gospel Mark, adds several features to the account which are difficult to harmonize. In Matthew there are multiple earthquakes, the resurrection and appearance of the saints in Jerusalem. The table on the next page compares the accounts side by side.

| Mark 16:1-8 --NRSV | Matthew 28:1-8 --NRSV |
|---|--|
| <p>When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³ They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” ⁴ When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵ As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶ But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place</p> | <p>After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my</p> |

⁶ *The Resurrection of Jesus: Apologetics, Polemic, History*, Dale Allison, Pg 168

⁷ An equally strange alternative translation is that they immediately came out of their tombs but waited outside Jerusalem until after Jesus rose from the dead.

they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” ⁸ So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

message for you.” ⁸ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

After comparing the two accounts we are left with some questions to ask. Was the stone rolled back before they arrived (Mk 4) or did they witness the angel of the Lord doing it and experience the earthquake as a result (Mt 28:2)? Did they see a young man in white (Mark 16:5) inside the tomb (Mk 16:5) or the Angel of the Lord (Mt 28:2) sitting on the just moved stone (Mt 28:2)? Maybe both? Did they run and tell no one (Mk 16:8) or the disciples (Mt 28:8)? It must be noted that the incident with the holy ones rising from the grave does not contradict Mark itself. Yet, many of the surrounding details, when added to Mark’s portrait, do appear to be in conflict with the shorter Gospel. Both accounts cannot be true in all that they narrate if they contain mutually exclusive descriptions of the same event. This diversity engenders doubt about the accuracy of Matthew’s portrayal. To be fair, Matthew *could have* gotten these supplementary bits right and corrected Mark. Just because Mark was written earlier and was utilized by Matthew in no way excludes this possibility but are we to assume Mark, Luke and John didn’t know this information or that they simply chose to exclude it? Dale Allison writes, How do we account for Mark 16 if Matthew’s special material in 27:62–28:15 is historically true? One can understand someone adding, for theological and apologetical ends, the guard (Mt. 27:62-66; 28:4, 11-15), the sealing of the tomb (27:66), and an earthquake (28:2). But how do we explain someone subtracting those things, which are also missing from Luke and John? I am unable to conjure a satisfactory motive. Mark’s far simpler account of Jesus’ burial and resurrection commends itself as being earlier. Matthew’s much more elaborate and apologetically oriented narrative, which even features a trinitarian formula, impresses one as later, as full of secondary developments, as indeed being on its way to the *Gospel of Peter*, with its spectacular, colorful details that nobody mistakes for history.”⁸

Matthew’s Rising of the Holy Ones Creates Friction with Paul and Revelation

Colossians 1: 18: ¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. – NRSV

Revelation 1:5: “and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” – NRSV

1 Corinthians 15:20: “²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.”

Jesus is the “firstborn from the dead” and the “first fruits of those who have died.” But according to Matthew at the moment of Jesus’s death there is an earthquake and “many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.” It is not at all immediately clear to me how, if these Saints

⁸ *The Resurrection of Jesus: Apologetics, Polemic, History*, Dale Allison, Pg 168

came to life at the moment of Jesus's death (before he did), any of these appellations in the Pauline corpus or Book of Revelation are literally true. Did Matthew envision a few saints? A few dozen? A few hundred or thousand? Answers to this question vary. All we have to go by is "many." Chronologically speaking, is Jesus actually the first fruit or the five-thousandth fruit?

Some scholars suspect it is for this reason Matthew probably has the raised saints remain in the tomb until after the Resurrection. Jesus is the first to leave "the realm of death" as Gundry puts it and can retain his status as the first fruits or firstborn of death.⁹ It is also been suggested by several scholars that "after his resurrection" may be a post-Matthean gloss (textual addition) meant to resolve the discrepancy this passage seemingly creates.

A Cumulative Argument

Conservative exegetes are often fond of divide and conquer apologetics and might try to tackle these arguments one at a time, casting doubt on the firmness of their conclusion. An even stronger and more robust argument for creative fiction can be grounded by putting all four of the previous headings together.

[1] Matthew's several added details (e.g. the guards) create friction with Mark, the source he copied heavily. The four gospels do contain mutually exclusive details in their narration of easter Sunday. Everything they narrate cannot all be true.

[2] Matthew embellishing Mark's account with these very public details is much easier to imagine than the other three gospel authors purposefully omitting or not knowing them.

[3] This peculiar account has the resurrected ones oddly sitting in the tomb doing God only knows what for a few days before coming out. Many scholars feel the raising of the holy one creates problems with early Christian belief about Jesus being the "first fruits" as seen in the Pauline corpus (and Revelation). Matthew may have thus painted himself into a corner.

[4] Couple this extremely public and most fantastic of all miracles, a potential apologetic powerhouse and cornerstone of Christian polemic, with a complete lack of attestation outside the Gospel of Matthew in the entire New Testament and all contemporaneous non-Biblical sources and we have a silence so deafening we can scarcely accept this incident as historical.

When framed in this manner it is hard to find fault in Charles T. Gorham's description of the raising of the saints: "A story so incoherent, and totally unsupported by evidence, is not worth the trouble of examination."¹⁰ Matthew appears to have embellished the text of Mark.

⁹ This is not the only place chronological issues have led to discussion in the early church and even alterations of gospel texts by scribes. Raymond Brown (*Death of the Messiah* V. 2 p 1129) writes, "We encountered this difficulty in discussing Luke 23:42-43, which implied that Jesus would come into his kingdom this very Friday of his death and take along to paradise the wrongdoer hanged with him. Dismayed by such a view that appeared to neglect the resurrection and Easter, scribes seemingly changed the Lucan "into your kingdom" to "in your kingdom;" shifting the reference to the *parousia*; and commentators explained that paradise was not really the highest heaven, to which Jesus and his companion would go only after the resurrection. Similar maneuvering has been at work in Matt 27:53, centered on the phrase in 53b about the resurrection, on the earthly or heavenly reference of "the holy city" in 53c, and on the types of bodies that were made visible in 53d.

¹⁰ Charles T. Graham, *First Easter Dawn*, 4 – as quoted by Alison, *Resurrection*, 16.

The Concern for Modern Readers

Was Matthew intentionally adding fictional details to his Gospel? Was he trying to mislead or simply mistaken? Is it possible that those after Matthew made the mistake of assuming the resurrection of the Holy ones and even things like the posting of the guards at the tomb were historical? This might seem an odd question to some but in lieu of the difficulties a number of serious scholars promote this possibility. In this view, Matthew's original audience would have known the basics of the Passion account and recognized and appreciated his dramatic additions to the basic narrative. In commenting on the silence of the other evangelists Dunn thinks this is a Matthean rhetorical flourish and writes:

“It is a way of indicating the eschatological significance of the event (cf. Matt. 24.7 pars.; Zech. 14.4-5). Readers of the time would be familiar with the device (used also in Scripture) of signaling epochal events by referring to such perturbations in heaven or on earth (see, e.g., Brown, *Death* 1113-16, 1121-23).” James Dunn *Jesus Remembered*

Brown writes: “. . . its forte is atmosphere, not details.... When one appreciates the symbolic, poetic, and popular apocalyptic character of the four lines of 27:51b-52b with the phenomena they describe, they offer no major problem.”

For conservative exegetes, this would get Matthew and the Bible “off the hook” so speak. That these details did not happen as literally written on the page is not a lie or mistake on the part of the Bible. The only error lies in the interpretation of later Christians who incorrectly assumed these details were true. After all, as Allison wrote, “Everyone who has read the apocryphal gospels knows that some Christians, in the second century and later, were motivated to invent religious fictions, including fictions about the Easter events. My argument in this chapter is that those inventors were not without first-century predecessors who, among other things, contributed to the canonical traditions about Jesus' resurrection.”

Whether or not all these second century (and our four 1st century) gospel authors believed all that they wrote is an open question. There are three general options: Matthew was knowingly adding fiction to Mark's passion narrative, Matthew was purposefully lying and trying to deceive his readers or Matthew may have both created these extra details and believed what he wrote. Many scholars take the first option but Joel Marcus thinks the water is a bit more muddy. In a paper titled, “*Did Matthew Believe his Myths?*” he writes:

“Matthew, in adding the three earthquakes and associated events, and by making similar changes to his Markan *Vorlage*, may have thought that he was putting the history of Jesus “in the best light”, but that this amelioration was not a distortion but the plain truth of what had happened in that earth-shaking event.”

This latter view might seem odd but it is not without precedent or cogent arguments. Neither of the three options jumps at me as being obviously true. As a Christian I am more sympathetic to the first and third ones but I leave this issue to the consideration of the reader.

Even if it were true that his initial audience was familiar with the death and resurrection of Jesus as told in the early church and would have appreciated this as theological fiction, where does that

leave us? Many scholars believe Matthew gives absolutely no indication he intends to relay material any different than that which precedes and comes after the details about the resurrected saints.¹¹ David Wenham writes, “The majority of Matthew 27 has all the appearance of being in intention a straightforward description of historical events, and there is no hint given of any changed intention in verse 51 or elsewhere in the chapter. On the contrary the earthquake is said to have been witnessed by the surely historical centurion, and the resurrected saints are said to have appeared to many. However attractive the appeal to supposed metaphorical or symbolic language may be, some reliable criteria are needed for identifying such language, if the appeal is to be convincing.”¹² Though again, we are not in the same position as Matthew’s original audience. Our background knowledge is not theirs.

I understand this is troubling for many Biblically based Christians as once this can of worms is opened, how do we know what in Matthew is historical and what is theological fiction? Were there actually guards at the tomb? Multiple earthquakes? We can even extend this to the other Gospels as well. Did the temple really render? Was Jesus’s tomb really kingly with a rolling stone?¹³ These are difficult questions to answer and it is frustrating because the modern mind is preoccupied with *certainty*. We *certainly* are left with a vexing theological puzzle and as noted before, it is much easier to imagine Matthew adding these details to Mark’s account than to imagine all three other Gospel authors not knowing or including them. Dale Alison writes, “Whether the desire to avoid the repercussions of all this have anything to do with Wright’s refusal to recognize Mt. 27:51b-53 as unhistorical I do not know; and I refrain from conjecturing about Licona’s motives for classifying the passage as a piece of Haggadah, as poetic legend, as theological “special effects” never intended to represent the literal past. One understands, however, why some conservative Christians found Licona’s proposal upsetting and, in defense of their idea of biblical inerrancy, anxiously took to berating him publicly. Once the nose of the camel of fiction is inside the tent of resurrection, who knows what else may enter?”

NT Wrights logic was a bit bizarre in not conceding a lack of historicity here but instead claiming “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 One might suppose the desire to avoid a theological slippery slope has guided his caution. Whether or not Christian authors such as Matthew knew all their fiction (as identified by us) was fiction is not an issue that I think we can

¹¹ Raymond Brown disagrees (Death of the Messiah V2 p1118-1133) but see Donald Senior,, *Revisiting Matthew’s Special Material in the Passion Narrative: A Dialogue with Raymond Brown*, in *ETL* 70 (1994) 417-424, p. 421.

¹² Wenham, David. 1973. “The Resurrection Narratives in Matthew’s Gospel.” *Tyndale Bulletin* 24 (1): p. 44.

¹³ Joel Marcus writes, based on an article in *BAR* by Kloner, “Most Second Temple cave-tombs in and around Jerusalem are sealed with square or rectangular stones; only four of the nine hundred-plus tombs so far discovered are sealed with circular stones, and those tombs apparently belonged to rich and prominent people (most famously, the Herodian family and Queen Helena of Adiabene). The rectangular stones, weighing roughly five hundred pounds, are chiseled to fit like stoppers into the tombs’ openings and would have been difficult to maneuver into position (see Kloner, “Rolling Stone”; McCane, “Stone, 33). The round disk-shaped stones, though much more massive, (some fifteen hundred to three thousand pounds, by Kloner’s estimate), are set upright in transverse channels, which would have facilitated their rolling into place with the aid of levers (cf. Finnegan, *Archaeology*, 202).” [Anchor Bible Commentary on Mark]

¹⁴ NT Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son Of God*, p. 636

ultimately resolve. Determining the inner workings of an ancient author's mind in such a situation is largely guesswork regardless of where we fall on the theological spectrum.

A Way Forward

On a more positive note I can say that we know the Gospels do contain a lot of history. In addition to problematic material that manifests itself as created, we know a great deal of it is very plausible as history and there are many instances where we see strong limits on creativity in early Christian tradition. One can compare a much simpler and less adorned Mark to second century gospels and point to things like the unlikely to be created presence of the women at the tomb. The gospels are reliable enough to provide us with many universally accepted details about the historical Jesus that even secular scholars largely agree with.

I find it true to say that the gospels blend history and theological fiction together at times. In this case we looked at one aspect of Matthew in detail but the same sort of analysis will demonstrate similar features in the other three canonical gospels. Does this make them unreliable or untrustworthy? The Gospels are ancient bios but *ancient bios* is not *modern history*. We should expect inexactness, flexibility and embellishment given the conventions of the time. Exactly what we see in other works within this genre. I don't agree with the notion that a text must be infallible or perfect to be useable or reliable for its intended purpose. I don't use such an "all or nothing" philosophy in life so I will not force it upon the Bible. So to answer the question, it depends on what you want the Gospels to be reliable or trustworthy *for*. To provide us with a verbatim, video-camera accurate account of what Jesus said and did? They cannot do that. To prove a man rose from the dead 2,000 years ago? They are insufficient here as well. To give us a historically reliable, basic overview of the mission and ministry of Jesus, what happened to him, the types of things he talked about and said, and what his earliest followers in the first century believed about him after his death? They are adequate to that task. To be the Good News the Holy Spirit uses to change lives through Jesus, the Good News that transforms sinners into a life of repentance, the Good News that mends broken relationships with God, and the Good News that should drive individuals to compassionate, selfless and charitable lives? That track record speaks for itself.

James 1:27: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." [NIV]