
The Veil Was Torn in Two

What Happened on Good Friday?

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And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

(Matt. 27:51 NASB)

From the Bible, we know that the death of Jesus is a glorious truth, foundational to our Christian faith. It grants us peace with God (Rom. 5:1), redemption and the forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:14). But how does the Bible express the significance of Jesus's death in narratives, like the Gospels? This is exactly what we find at the crucifixion of Jesus and the tearing of the temple curtain (or veil) immediately after his death. Though the tearing of the veil is described in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45), none of them stops to explain it. Presumably, they thought the event was clear enough to their original readers. But what are we to make of it?

To complicate matters, the account in the Gospel of Matthew recounts a host of extraordinary events that puzzle us today. Yet in them the apostle Matthew, ever with his mind steeped in Israel's sacred Scriptures, helps us to understand the significance of the historical realities around Jesus's death. And all this occurs on Good Friday, where we see the goodness of God in Christ on display in anticipation of Easter Sunday.

WHAT VEIL IS MATTHEW TALKING ABOUT?

It may seem strange to readers that Matthew refers simply to "the" veil of the temple, without any explanation as to which of the many hangings, curtains, and veils in the Old Testament tabernacle and subsequent temple he had in mind. Interpreters must simply presume that Matthew would have expected his readers

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to know what he meant. Since Matthew makes such frequent appeals to the Old Testament (Matt. 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 5:17; etc.), presuming it to be an important authority for his readers, it is to the Old Testament we must look.

The word for *veil* used by Matthew (*katapetasma*) is a technical term that, in the Greek version of the Old Testament (Septuagint), is used for *three different* hangings in the tabernacle and temple. But the syntax of Matthew's statement "veil of the temple" (Matt. 27:51 NASB) suggests only one hanging can be in view: the inner veil before the holy of holies. This veil, described first and most fully in descriptions of the tabernacle, was made of blue, purple, and scarlet yarn and finely twisted linen, with cherubim worked into it by a skilled craftsman (Ex. 26:31; 36:35). It was to be hung before the holy of holies, which was a perfect cube of ten cubits per side. The veil was hung by gold hooks on an acacia-wood frame, which itself was overlaid with gold (Ex. 26:32–33), and the ark of the covenant was kept behind the veil (Ex. 26:33).

Generally, this veil served to separate the holy place from the holy of holies (Ex. 26:33) and shielded the atonement slate¹ of the ark (Ex. 26:34). The veil was also used to cover the ark of the testimony while in transport (Num. 4:5). Sin offerings were made against the veil (Lev. 4:6, 17), and entry behind it was permitted only for a ritually pure priest, Aaron or a descendent, who would enter behind the curtain on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:2, 12, 15). In Solomon's temple, patterned after the tabernacle, there was a veil "of blue, purple and crimson yarn and fine linen, with cherubim worked into it" (2 Chron. 3:14 NIV).

The veil was near the very center of the tabernacle, suggesting a rank of holiness that is also reflected in the quality of its construction. As with the other hangings in the tabernacle, the veil was made of "finely twisted linen" (Ex. 26:31 NIV), a fine grade of linen. The curtains were violet—or, as some suggest, blue-purple or a darker purple compared to the lighter purple. This color was occasionally thought to be the color of the sky,² which may help account for its association with the heavenly firmament (Gen. 1:6) in later Judaism. This color,

1 Author's rendering of what many translations refer to as *mercy seat* or *atonement cover*.

2 Cf. *b. Soṭah* 17a.

which required twelve thousand murex snails to yield only 1.4 grams of pure dye, was known for its association with both divinity and royalty in the ancient Near East, which lends itself to the notion that Yahweh was both the sacred deity and the King enthroned in the midst of Israel within the tabernacle.

The use of royal colors and materials should come as no surprise, as the tabernacle in general and the angelic wings over the veil in particular are often thought to represent the kingly presence of Yahweh among his people. This is confirmed by the description of Yahweh's presence with Israel as being "enthroned between the cherubim" (1 Sam. 4:4 NIV; 2 Sam. 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; 1 Chron. 13:6; Ps. 80:1; 99:1; Isa. 37:16), which, when coupled with a reference to God's enthronement "in heaven" (Ps. 2:4 NIV), may support the notion that the holy of holies was thought to be a replica of heaven.

WHAT DID THE VEIL DO?

Integral to interpreting the tearing of the veil is some explanation of its purpose and function. Surprisingly, few interpreters look explicitly to the Old Testament to address this issue. Yet we find some information about the veil that is imperative for interpreting the meaning of its tearing at the death of Jesus.

As we have seen, the unique workmanship required for the veil is directly related to the presence of cherubim on the veil. These figures symbolized the presence of Yahweh and were woven of elite quality, "the work of a skillful workman" (Ex. 26:31 NASB). In biblical tradition, cherubim served a guardian role from their first appearance in canonical texts, where they guarded "the way to the tree of life" (Gen. 3:24 NASB). They were carved on walls around Solomon's temple and Ezekiel's visionary temples (e.g., Ezek. 10:1–20; 11:22; 41:18–25).

Elsewhere, the cherubim are present at man's meeting with God (e.g., Ex. 25:22; Num. 7:89), and they are the winged throne upon which God sits or mounts to fly (2 Sam. 22:11; Ps. 18:10). Yahweh instructs Moses to make "two cherubim out of hammered gold" (Ex. 25:18 NIV), with wings spread upward and overshadowing the atonement slate. They were to be arranged in such a manner as to face each other (Ex. 25:20; cf. Heb. 9:5), where they were guardians

of the atonement slate from which the divine Glory would speak to Israel (Ex. 25:1–22). Perhaps the cherubim on the veil, then, similarly served to guard the way to the sanctuary of God within the holy of holies, as their presence suggests the presence of Yahweh enthroned among his people.

The veil's primary function was to separate the holy place from the holy of holies (Ex. 26:33). This separation is at the heart of the entire priestly code of the sacrificial system (e.g., Lev. 11:1–45): to separate (*badal*) between the unclean and the clean. Likewise, in Ezekiel's vision of the temple, there is to be separation of "the holy and the profane" (Ezek. 42:20 NASB; cf. Ezek. 22:26). The veil, then, was a physical barrier that both represented and enforced the separation from the holy presence of the enthroned Yahweh within from Aaron and his sons—the violation of which brought death (Num. 18:7; cf. Lev. 16:2).

Exception for entering the holy of holies was made only in the context of the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:11–28), when the high priest would take the offering behind the veil as a sin or purification offering (Lev. 16:11). Here the blood was taken into the holy of holies and sprinkled on the atonement slate of the ark (Lev. 16:14). On the Day of Atonement, Aaron was to use the blood of the sin offering to purify and consecrate the altar (Lev. 16:19). Yet the man entering must be the high priest and may not enter "whenever he chooses," says the Lord, "for I will appear in the cloud over the atonement cover" (Lev. 16:2 NIV; Num. 7:89).

Even on the Day of Atonement, when the high priest was permitted physical accessibility to God within the holy of holies, the atonement slate was hidden from sight by the cloud, in this way saving the high priest from death (Lev. 16:12–13). That is, the physical restriction was extended to the visual (e.g., Ex. 35:12; cf. 39:20b [MT=34b]). Even while in transit, the veil was used to conceal the ark from sight, as it was the most sacred object of the tabernacle (Ex. 25:10–22), where the Lord spoke to Moses. Looking upon the holy things, even by a high priest and even for a moment, incurred death (Lev. 16:13; cf. 1 Sam. 6:19–20). Thus it seems the veil served as a physical and visual barrier, protecting the priest

from the lethal presence of the enthroned Lord and reinforcing the separation between God and humankind.

The prohibitive function of the veil—conveyed implicitly and explicitly in the Old Testament—underscores the restrictions placed upon Israelite worship based on the holiness of God. This is important because worshipers in the old covenant were restricted in their access to God in the temple, and could approach him only through sacrifice and prayer, and not at any time they chose. Only a high priest who was ritually pure and without defect could approach Yahweh without being put to death. The severity of this punishment primarily concerned the holiness of God himself and the sanctity of objects directly related to worshiping him (cf. Ex. 33:19–23). Even Moses was forbidden to see the face of the Lord, “because man may not see my face and yet live” (Ex. 33:20 author’s translation).

THE VEIL IN JESUS’ DAY

There were a few legends about the veil of the temple in the days of Jesus. One from the Dead Sea Scrolls describes angelic worship in the heavenly sanctuary, where animated cherubim, embroidered in the curtain, sing praises to God.³ Some rabbis, writing long after the temple was destroyed by Rome in AD 70, depict the veil as symbolic of the heavenly firmaments (cf. Gen. 1:6). In this way, the veil was a barrier between heaven and earth, behind which divine secrets were kept, known only to God.⁴ The Jerusalem temple during the days of Jesus had been significantly renovated by Herod the Great (rule 37–4 BC).⁵ The historian Josephus, himself a priest, describes the structure, including the veil, in some detail.⁶ He says it was made of “Babylonian tapestry,” scarlet and purple, clearly depicting royalty. The “marvelous skill” with which it was made was rich in symbolism that depicted the elements of the universe. Embroidered into the

3 4Q405 f15ii-16:3 and 4Q405 f15ii-16:5.

4 *Targum of Pseudo Jonathan*, Gen. 37:17; *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, §7; cf. *b. Hagigah* 15a.

5 Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 1.22.1 §401.

6 *The Jewish War*, 5.5.4 §§212–214.

veil was “a panorama of the heavens,”⁷ meaning it resembled the heavens, likely the heavenly firmaments (Gen. 1:6) or the sky.⁸

THE VEIL IN MATTHEW’S NARRATIVE

Matthew’s account of the death of Jesus (Matt. 27:50–54), which most scholars presume expands on the parallel account in Mark (Mark 15:38–39), contains some unique features throughout in the immediate context (Matt. 27:35–54). We must constantly recall, however, that all of these features are immediately relevant to the primary subject matter of the passage—the death of Jesus. The passage is replete with irony: He is mocked with a sign indicating that he is “King of the Jews,” but in fact he really is! He is cajoled to save himself and come down off the cross, “if you are the Son of God” (27:40)—the precise language used by the devil in the temptation (4:1–11)—and yet his saving activity is achieved for others, not himself, by remaining on the cross (cf. 27:42). When he cries out in a loud voice (v. 46), his quote from Psalm 22:1 (Hebrew *Eli, Eli*) is confused by the bystanders with *Elijah*—who has already come in the person of John the Baptist (Matt. 11:14).

At his death, “Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit” (27:50 ESV). Right afterward, Matthew writes, “and behold!” and instantly the reader is transported from Golgotha on Friday (cf. v. 33) to the temple veil in Jerusalem (v. 51a), then (presumably) to the Mount of Olives (vv. 51b–53a), then into “the holy city” (Jerusalem) on Sunday (note “after his resurrection,” v. 53), and only then back to the scene at the cross (v. 54). What has prompted Matthew to take his readers on such a whirlwind, and what are we to make of it? The events—including the tearing of the veil and all the other occurrences in verses 51–53—are just as historical as the death and resurrection of Jesus itself. Yet Matthew’s presentation of these events is done as commentary—historical commentary, of course—on the significance of the death of Jesus. In other words,

7 *The Jewish War*, 5.5.4 §214

8 In *The Jewish War*, Josephus says that the veil was among the cultic articles delivered into Roman hands (cf. 6.8.3 §389) and taken to Rome as plunder (7.5.7 §162) when the temple was destroyed in AD 70 (cf. also 1 Macc. 1:22; 4:49–51).

the death of Jesus is so profoundly significant that it has triggered the following events, which explain to some degree the meaning of Jesus's death.

Paradise Reopened

But before we look at what these events indicate about the significance of Jesus's death, our next step is to examine what Matthew has *already said* about it. To Matthew, Jesus's death is both necessary (16:21) and expected (cf. 16:17; 17:22–23), albeit temporary (17:9)! His death, like John's, is that of an innocent prophet inaugurating the restoration of “all things” (17:11–12; cf. 3:1–15). Significantly, Jesus's death is a “ransom” for many (20:28)—a payment offered to rescue another, perhaps borrowed from the sacrificial language of the Old Testament. Matthew is explicit that Jesus's death is for the purpose of the forgiveness of sins (26:28). It is by his death on the cross—as a ransom that achieves the forgiveness of sins—that Jesus accomplishes his mission to save his people from their sins (1:21). Having seen what Matthew has *already said* about the death of Jesus, we can now look at *what else* he says about it in the tearing of the veil and the ensuing narrative.

Matthew's many uses of “and behold” (27:51) typically introduce something surprising in the narrative (e.g. 2:13; 3:16–17; 17:5; 28:20). The passive-voice construction “the curtain of the temple *was torn*” (27:51 ESV) implies that God himself tore the veil. This is confirmed by description of the damage: “from top to bottom.” Note also the extent: “in two.” This singular cultic artefact is now irreparably damaged—it can no longer perform the function for which it was intended. This means that there is no longer a physical barrier to God, suggesting that the theological necessity of it is thereby removed. The angelic guardians are disarmed, and reentry into the Edenic presence of God is again permitted for the first time since the fall.

The crucial element here is this: all this is accomplished *by the death of Jesus*, a ransom for many (20:28), whose blood accomplishes the forgiveness of sins and establishes the new covenant (26:28). But Matthew insists that it is only the “pure in heart” who will see God (5:8; cf. Ps. 24:4). So Matthew seems to imply what writers like Paul make explicit: the death of Jesus accomplishes the forgive-

ness of sins and establishes the (imputed) righteousness of the believer (e.g., Phil. 3:9). (Remember that the Gospels were written for Christians who were already converted and knew something of the gospel message; cf. Luke 1:1–4.)

The Turning of the Ages

But there is more! Matthew provides additional explanations to his readers than Mark does in his simple statement about the torn veil and the centurion's statement (Mark 15:38–39), all of which teach something about the significance of Jesus's death. "And the earth shook" (Matt. 27:51b ESV). Earthquakes were frequently present in theophanic scenes (see Rev. 6:12; 8:5; 11:13, 19; 16:18), but here Matthew draws at least in part from Ezekiel 37 (recall the valley of dry bones), where an earthquake (Ezek. 37:7) precedes the opening of graves and the resurrection of people who return to the land of Israel (Ezek. 37:12–13). In Matthew's context, the earthquake indicates a dramatic manifestation of God at a climactic event in his redemptive-historical plan. So violent was the earthquake that Matthew adds "and the rocks were split," demonstrating the power of God (Nah. 1:5–6; 1 Kings 19:11; Ps. 114:7; Isa. 48:21). Here the likely allusion is to Zechariah 14:4–5, where the Lord himself will come and split the Mount of Olives.

Matthew's statement that "the tombs were opened" (v. 52a NASB) recalls Ezekiel 37:12–13, where the Lord says through the prophet, "Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. . . . And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people" (ESV). The raising of the dead saints, then, is a declarative statement about God making known his identity, which in Matthew is through Jesus as Immanuel ("God with us," Matt. 1:23). Those who are to be raised in Ezekiel 37 are the righteous believers who have died prior to the coming of Christ (cf. Zech. 14:4–5; Dan. 12:2), though Matthew seems less concerned with identifying these people than he is with depicting their resurrection triggered by the death of Jesus.

Furthermore, their coming out of their tombs (Matt. 27:53a) is directly from the prophecy of Ezekiel 37:12. But Matthew adds a statement about timing, "after

his resurrection” (27:53b ESV), presumably in recognition that Jesus was the first to be raised from the dead (cf. 1 Cor. 15:20–23; Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5). When Matthew says, “they went into the holy city” (27:53c ESV), he indicates Jerusalem (cf. 4:5–6), where they “appeared to many” (27:53d), seemingly to indicate eyewitnesses to the event.

These unique images are all drawn from various prophetic texts—such as Ezekiel 37:1–14, Daniel 12, and Zechariah 14—to indicate things that will occur in the future as depictions of salvation, often with the notion of deliverance and restoration from exile. The deliverance here, though, is of a different kind: the events anticipated in the *future* have occurred at the death of Jesus. And Jesus did not come to save his people from exile, but from their sins (Matt. 1:21), a mission tied up in his very name which, in Hebrew, is the same as Joshua and means “Yahweh saves” or “Yahweh is salvation.” In Jesus, the salvation of Yahweh has been accomplished, and the so-called “special material” is a dramatic illustration that the long-awaited turning of the ages—the hinge-point where redemptive history turns from the old covenant to the new covenant—is accomplished here, at this very point in all history.

Notice that while Mark mentions only the centurion at the cross, Matthew draws attention to the plurality of witnesses: “When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus . . .” (27:54 ESV). Matthew then explains that they “saw the earthquake and what took place.” Though this may include the tearing of the veil, the more natural reading of this verse would be that they saw the earthquake and all the other events thereafter. Such “events” (*tagenomena*) in Matthew typically occur in the life of Jesus in fulfillment of Scripture and to inspire a response, such as repentance (e.g., 1:22; 11:21, 23; 18:31; 28:11). But how could a centurion at Golgotha on Friday see events that occurred on the Mount of Olives and then in Jerusalem on Sunday? It may be that Matthew is simply telescoping. That is, Matthew notes the earthquake, the rocks splitting, the tombs opening, and the dead rising—and, parenthetically, he notes that these resurrected people appeared to many in Jerusalem after Jesus’s resurrection

on Sunday. Suffice it to say that Matthew took no pains to clarify, and so perhaps does not share our concern for explanation.

A Revelation from Heaven

But herein lies a secondary, little-considered function of the tearing of the veil that is hinted at both by the historical depiction of the veil by Josephus and by the Gospel of Mark. As we have seen, Josephus describes the veil in terms of the sky, or the panorama of the heavens.⁹ In the Gospel of Mark, noted as a source for Matthew, the connection between the veil and the heavens is made explicit: the veil is torn (*schizō*) at Jesus's death (Mark 15:38), and the heavens are likewise torn (again *schizō*) at Jesus's baptism (1:10). Add to this the fact that Mark describes Jesus's death as a kind of baptism (10:38–39) and the literary connection becomes clear. The splitting of the heavens introduces the heavenly voice revealing the identity of Jesus as God's Son (1:11), and the tearing of the veil is in part symbolic of the tearing of the heavens, and serves to reveal to the centurion the identity of Jesus as the Son of God (15:39).

Importantly, only here in Mark's Gospel does a human being enter into this supernatural perspective: the voice from heaven declares Jesus to be the Son of God (1:11; 9:7), the evil spirits also recognize it (Mark 3:11), but in Mark's Gospel, only at the cross does a human being recognize Jesus as "Son of God" (15:39). This happens, I suggest, when the historical event of the rending of the temple's veil is allowed to take on an additional, symbolic role in the Gospel narrative, equating it with the rending open of heaven as an apocalyptic revelation.¹⁰ The centurion, like Cornelius in the book of Acts (Acts 10:3–7), receives a special revelation from God. And in Mark's Gospel, it is here at the cross where Jesus's "Son of God-ness" is displayed in all its fulness and glory—the sacrificial death on the cross for sins.

How this bears out in Matthew is evident in the response of the centurion and those standing there: "they were filled with awe and said, 'Truly this was

9 *The Jewish War*, 5.5.4 §214

10 It is important to observe that events in the Bible can be *both* historical *and* symbolic (e.g., the exodus and passing through the waters of the Red Sea).

the Son of God!” (Matt. 27:54 ESV). The language of “filled with awe” may be misleading, as the NIV’s “they were terrified” (*ephobēthēsan sphodra*) is more accurate to the sense. This response resembles that of the disciples when Jesus is transfigured (17:6) and suggests a supernatural display (cf. 14:27, 30; 17:6; 28:5, 10). Their fear is followed by a statement about the identity of Jesus. Despite objections, Jesus truly was the Son of God, as claimed by God himself (3:17; 17:5), affirmed by Jesus (26:63–64), and even acknowledged by the disciples (14:33; 16:16). But the disciples recognize this identity only when a miracle has occurred (14:33), and even then, their recognition cannot be the result of natural deduction but rather the result of a supernatural revelation from the Father in heaven (16:16–17). With the centurion’s acknowledgement of Jesus as the Son of God, he too has received a revelation from the Father, an acknowledgement of the true identity of Jesus to which the miraculous events surrounding his death, introduced by the torn veil, bear witness.

CELEBRATING ACCESS TO THE FATHER

The veil was a physical, visible barrier indicating that access to God was strictly prohibited *because of his holiness*. It is imperative to remember that the holiness of God remains *unchanged from all eternity*—even after the veil is torn. What has changed, then, is that the atoning death of Jesus on the cross has provided the appropriate wrath-bearing sacrifice, one which the bulls and goats of the old covenant could not provide (Heb. 10:4).

The author of Hebrews expounds on this very clearly: “we have confidence to enter the holy places” (10:19 ESV), and this is accomplished by the blood of Jesus. This is the “new and living way” (v. 20) that Christ opened for us through the veil, which, the author says, is through his flesh. This means that the breaking of Jesus’s body at the crucifixion is the *unprecedented* means by which believers have access to the presence of God. This, coupled with the priesthood of Christ (v. 21), forms the basis of the author’s exhortation to believers: draw near to God (v. 22), hold unwaveringly to our confession of faith (v. 23), stir one another up to love and good works (v. 24), and continually meet together to encourage one

another in the faith (v. 25). As we approach Easter, we recall and celebrate what Christ has done for us on the cross, and heed the exhortation to meet habitually in church for corporate worship and exhortation to hold fast to “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).