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Matthew 27:51-53 in the Theology of the Evangelist  
David Hill.

At the very moment of Jesus' death, when he yielded up his spirit with a great cry, Matthew in his passion narrative describes two apocalyptic signs or, more properly, apocalyptic events ( τὰ γενόμενα 27.54). The first - the rending of the curtain of the Temple - has been the subject of much discussion, but the second is no less worthy of investigation. It reads:

.....and the earth shook, and the rocks were split; the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.

(27:51b-53)

Of the many questions which this pericope raises we shall focus our attention, as best we may, on two: What interpretation of Jesus' death is implied in this apocalypse, and what does this passage suggest about the advent of God's kingdom in the theology of Matthew?

Before we enter upon our redaction-critical investigation some preliminary observations on the passage which are of a more general kind are in order. (i) The brief apocalypse is the vehicle of a theological (and eschatological) interpretation of Jesus' death: to inquire as to its historicity would involve us in a host of pseudo-problems and cause us to lose sight of the true meaning. (ii) The vocabulary and imagery of the passage owe so much to Old Testament and inter-testamental traditions that it is conceivable that the pericope existed as a pre-Matthean apocalyptic fragment to which the evangelist has added redactional details (μετὰ τὴν ἔγερσιν αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἐνεφανίσθησαν πολλοῖς).

For instance the earthquake was, in the Old Testament and later Jewish apocalyptic writings, a common theme of theophany, when God would judge his enemies in wrath and rescue his faithful people by establishing his rule on earth (cf. Judg.5:4, 2 Sam.22:8 and Ps.68:8) : the rending of the rocks, in conjunction with earthquake, recalls the Elijah episode narrated in 1 Kgs.19:11. The opening of the tombs and the resurrection of the righteous formed part of the seemingly popular eschatology evidenced in Dan.12:2, Isa.26:19 and Ezek.37:7, 12-14. The procession to the holy city may well have for long in tradition

been understood in terms of entry to the heavenly Jerusalem, an interpretation which seemed natural to many of the early Christian Fathers. Despite these parallels in content, little or nothing is gained by the hypothesis of an already existing apocalyptic fragment edited by Matthew: it is as likely, if not more so, that the evangelist himself brought together a number of well-known apocalyptic images in order to convey his own distinctive message. (iii) The signs or happenings which, according to these verses, follow upon Jesus' death and those associated with his resurrection (28:2-4) have obvious literary links. Both are introduced with the Matthean  $\kappa\alpha\iota\ \iota\delta\omicron\upsilon\theta\epsilon\iota$ , which draws attention to their special importance. Each passage tells of an earthquake - a divine, revelatory intervention. And the two passages use the motif of fear to contrasting effect: the fear of the Roman guards leads to a confession of faith, whereas the fear of the Jewish guards later leaves them like dead men. It would seem that Matthew quite deliberately wanted his readers to link the death and the resurrection of Jesus in terms of their effects. (iv) Of particular importance for the language and meaning of 27:51-53 is Ezek.37:7,12-14 in the Greek translation: "And it came to pass that, as I prophesied, behold, there was an earthquake...Thus says the Lord, 'Behold, I open your tombs and I shall lead you from your tombs and I shall lead you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord when I open your tombs to lead you, my people, from your tombs. And I shall give my spirit to you, and you shall live, and I shall place you in your own land, and you shall know that I the Lord have spoken and will do it'" In the Judaism of Matthew's day this great prophetic vision of Israel's spiritual renewal was interpreted as a type or symbol of the messianic salvation, of God's inbreaking at the eschaton. Therefore Matthew 29:51b-53 is affirming that Jesus' death is the moment of God's eschatological intervention, which includes the general resurrection of the dead. Whether the saintly dead of Israel's past who rise at the death of Israel's Messiah are all the devout Israelites who died before Jesus, or a specially pious few (the patriarchs, or the martyrs, or the prophets, as in Ign.Magn.9)

Hill, Matthew, IBS 7, April 1985.

is secondary to the striking declaration that the resurrection of the dead (prophesied by Ezekiel) has begun with the life-giving death of Jesus. But already we are anticipating the results of our investigation. (v) According to the text, the resurrected saints entered Jerusalem only after Jesus' resurrection (μετὰ τὴν ἔγερσιν αὐτοῦ) and so it is asked: did they come out of their tombs only after Jesus' resurrection, or did they come forth and wait around in the countryside till Jesus had risen? Apparently<sup>2</sup> exercised by the problem J. Wenham has suggested that a full-stop or other strong punctuation be placed after ἀνεψύχθησαν and the rest of the verse treated as parenthetical, thus absolving Matthew from the charge of depicting living saints cooped up for days in tombs around the city: but this, in my view, is to break an established, eschatological sequence for the sake of solving a modern logical or quasi-historical problem. We may legitimately see in μετὰ τὴν ἔγερσιν αὐτοῦ a Matthean accommodation to the basic Christological affirmation that Christ was the firstfruits of them that slept (1 Cor. 15:20), all the rest awaiting the general resurrection (1 Thess. 4:16): but to say that is not to imply that this resurrection of the saints should or once did form the sequel to the earthquake at Jesus' resurrection (28:2) and was mistakenly recorded at this point: Matthew's theological purpose would be misunderstood on that view.

### The Meaning of Matthew 27:51b-53

Mark had already invested the death of Jesus with apocalyptic overtones by mentioning the darkness at noon and the rending of the Temple veil. Matthew heightens the eschatological character of Jesus' death by the description of additional apocalyptic events. The rending of the Temple veil is accompanied by an earthquake, an apocalyptic motif Matthew adds to other passages in his gospel (8: 24 and 28:2). This "shattering of the foundations" of the old creation signifies God's definitive judgment—the passive voice indicates the agency of God — on

Hill, Matthew, IBS 7, April, 1985.

the old age (Amos 8:8-10,9:1) and the beginning of his restored cosmic rule. As E. Schweizer says, "God with his new world breaks into the old world, just as in 1 Kings 19:11 his appearance caused the earth to quake and the rocks of Horeb to split."<sup>3</sup> What is distinctively Matthean is that what is earth-shaking, in the truest sense of the word, is Jesus' death.

The earthquake, however, is not an isolated sign. It sets off a chain-reaction: the earthquake splits the rocks, the splitting of the rocks opens the tombs, and the opening of the tombs allows the dead to come forth. That these verses represent one of the earliest expressions of the belief that Jesus went to the underworld directly after his death and there set the Old Testament saints free to share in the resurrection (cf. 1 Pet. 3:19, 4:16) seems unlikely: the words μετὰ τὴν ἔγερσιν cannot mean "after he had raised them". What Matthew is daringly and dramatically symbolizing is the truth that the death of Jesus is life-giving: the dead rise, so to speak, at the cross, and the promises of Ezek. 37 are fulfilled. It is possible that Matthew's use of the unusual phrase ἀφῆκεν τὸ πνεῦμα (lit. "delivered over the spirit") to describe Jesus' act of dying is intentional: the eschatological, life-giving spirit promised in Ezekiel's vision is actually conferred in Jesus' death. Be that as it may, the resurrection of the dead, prophesied by Ezekiel, is actualized (proleptically) in the death of Jesus. Nothing could be clearer than that the death of Jesus is for Matthew the pivotal eschatological event which includes the general resurrection of the dead. But for Matthew the death of Jesus is very skilfully tied together with his resurrection, as we have noticed: therefore it is not reading into Matthew to speak of his presenting the death/resurrection of Jesus as one apocalyptic event, the eschatological turning of the ages which ushers in the Kingdom of God in decisive form. The relationship of 27:51b-53 and the words found in John 5:29, "...the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs (ἐν τοῖς μνημείοις) will hear his (i.e. the Son of Man's) voice and come forth" must remain a matter for speculation. That there are similarities cannot be

denied, but whether these can be accounted for by suggesting that they derive ultimately from an original saying of Jesus<sup>4</sup> is very problematic.

If indeed Matthew 27:51-53 proclaims the death/resurrection of Jesus as the moment of God's eschatological intervention into the world, then the Matthean theology of Jesus' death and resurrection poses the problem as to whether there is a definable theological interpretation of history in Matthew. To confront that question means that we have to look briefly at approaches to Matthew's "historical perspective", on the assumption that that terminology is appropriate to the work of the evangelist.

#### Matthew's Historical Perspective.

Scholars differ widely in their views about Matthew's historical perspective. For instance, G. Strecker<sup>5</sup> claims that the delay of the Parousia forced Matthew, as it did second-generation Christians in general, to rethink the problem of historical time—past and future. In response to this delay Matthew (in Strecker's view) composes a "life of Jesus" and orders it as "the way of righteousness" in the history of salvation which spans three epochs. The "time of Jesus" (including John the Baptist and the disciples), the time of the exclusive mission to Israel, is the central epoch. This age, which ends with the death of Jesus, is preceded by the period of the Old Testament, the "time of the fathers and the prophets", ending with the rejection of Israel, and is followed by the "time of the church" (extending to the Parousia), the opening of the gospel to the Gentiles.<sup>6</sup> The destruction of Jerusalem in A.D.70 is no more than the visible manifestation of a rejection already realised. Matthew's Gospel therefore explicitly regards the past (Jesus' life) as past and so should be read christologically, not ecclesiologically.

H. Frankemölle's position in Jahwebund und Kirche Christi<sup>7</sup> is radically different. Matthew's Gospel in his view has no real historical interest in past

events. What looks like history is actually narrative fiction designed solely to speak to the situation of Matthew's own day and his readers' interests. Being quite unconcerned with the bruta facta of the immediate past, Matthew consistently "dehistoricizes" his tradition (of narrative and discourse) and speaks, not of the Jesus of the past, but of his own Christian community and the exalted Lord of the present.<sup>8</sup> The interpretative key to the Gospel is ecclesiology, rather than Christology, though the two are really inseparable. Writing his "covenant theology" (Bundestheologie), Matthew sees salvation-history undifferentiatedly as a qualitative whole: in reality, all is present (the time of the evangelist).

An intermediate position is adopted by J.D. Kingsbury<sup>9</sup>. He concludes that salvation-history for Matthew consists of two epochs, "the time of Israel" which is preparatory to and prophetic of the coming of the Messiah, and "the time of Jesus (Messiah)" which, from Matthew's point of view, extends from the beginning of the ministry of John and of Jesus himself, through post-Easter times to the coming consummation of the age. Though "the time of Jesus" contains various stages (past, present, future) these should not be regarded as qualitatively different (Matthew's own age, for example, the time of the church, is an extension or sub-category of the time of Jesus), nor should they be ranged along a scale of increasing eschatological intensity. Frankemölle, according to Kingsbury, is wrong in contending that Matthew dissolves past history into present concerns. The evangelist does distinguish historical stages within the epoch of Jesus (e.g. the days of Jesus, the time following Easter, the consummation), but these do not differ in eschatological intensity: to claim that they do simply does not fit the relationship Matthew establishes between the days of Jesus and the time following Easter.

In approaching the question of historical perspective in Matthew's Gospel, it is helpful, in my view, to realise that the evangelist operates, as it were, with two levels of discourse. There is a level of narration, grounded in tradition and embodying an historical perspective on the

past, though it is seen through faith and hence idealized. But there is also in Matthew a second level which makes this past narrative relevant to the needs of the evangelist's own community. Although neither level of discourse is ever totally absent, in some contexts one level may take precedence over the other, and the Gospel will slip imperceptibly from one to the other (as in chapter 18). To canonize relevance, or in other words, to read Matthew from an exclusively ecclesiological viewpoint, is to fall into Frankemolle's exaggerated assessment of Matthew as narrative-fiction, with no interest in the past as past. On the other hand, those from whom the Gospel's overriding function is to give the reader a theological perspective on history can stress the christological to the neglect of the ecclesiological: for instance, Strecker claims that Matthew presents no explicit understanding of the church.

### Jesus' Death in Matthew's Theology of History

In my view, Kingsbury does not satisfactorily reckon with Matthew's historical perspective. By reason of his stress on Christology, he can say that "What is constitutive of Matthew's concept of the history of salvation....is the abiding presence of Jesus with his disciples both 'then' and 'now'".<sup>10</sup> But, in effect, that means that there are no longer, strictly speaking, periods within salvation-history, for God's kingdom becomes present with equal and unchanging intensity. However, if we are to do justice to Matthew's concern with ecclesiology, we shall see that the radical shift from Israel to the Christian community represents a new, more intense presence of the Kingdom. To J.P. Meier's claim that the death/resurrection of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel not only inaugurates the "time of the church" but marks "die Wende der Zeit..."<sup>11</sup> the earth-shaking beginning of the new aeon..."<sup>11</sup>, Kingsbury responds<sup>12</sup> by observing



that the difficulty with this view is that it places the days of Jesus, the period of the church and the consummation on a graduated scale of eschatological intensity, a schema which does not (in his opinion) fit the relationship Matthew establishes between the days of Jesus and the time following Easter. But the latter is no more than a hypothesis put forward by Kingsbury himself: failure to fit it does not make the schema of increasing eschatological intensity anything more than merely inconvenient, and 'inconvenient' does not mean 'wrong'. It would be surprising if the arrival of the new age was not a moment of greater eschatological intensity than any moment or period prior to it. (The trouble, of course, is with the word "eschatological", and its extremely wide-ranging use).

It is loyalty to his own hypothesis that makes Kingsbury mishandle the position of R. Kratz in his book Auferweckung als Befreiung.<sup>13</sup> Kratz argues that, by reason of the Matthean insertion concerning the raising of the saints (27:52-3), it is the death of Jesus in the first Gospel that inaugurates the "end-time". To this claim Kingsbury replies: "This position however, flies in the face of the eschatological implications of a passage such as 1:23 and also ignores the fact that already in 11:5 Matthew writes of Jesus that 'dead are raised'". Whatever may have to be admitted of "God with us"—and I suspect that in this connection the word "eschatological" is being used with a quite distinctive significance — the raising of the dead mentioned in 11:5 (although a pre-figurative sign) cannot be equated, in eschatological value, with 27:52: the former is mere resuscitation and entails dying again: the latter is "resurrection" as the sign of the new age Kingsbury has become a prisoner of his prejudice against there being any difference in eschatological intensity between the various stages within "the epoch of Jesus". But surely — and we are trying to view the matter from the standpoint of Matthew — the consummation of the age will have a greater eschatological intensity, a greater awareness of "end-ness", than the present?

It is often said that there is a vagueness in Matthew's Gospel as to the exact moment or event that brings about the turning-point of the age, the decisive shift in God's economy. O.H.Steck<sup>15</sup> locates the imprecision in Matthew's attempt to effect a joint between two disparate strands of tradition: a Palestinian tradition which maintains that Israel's exclusion is due to its opposition to Christian preachers, and a Hellenist tradition in which the exclusion results from opposition to the Son sent by God. Matthews, however, is no naive copyist of disparate elements. True, Matthew sees Israel's obduracy as a totality: John the Baptist, Jesus himself, the disciples, all preach the same Kingdom and all meet the same opposition. The three parables of Matt. 21:28-22:14 bring out this unrelenting obstinacy with clarity: yet even there the accent falls on the central parable (the wicked Tenants) and on the killing of the son. In assessing Matthew's theology we must reckon with the central importance of Jesus' death/resurrection. The same death that crowns the chosen people's rejection effects as well God's decisive in-breaking, the earthshaking beginning<sup>16</sup> of the new age. I am aware that Robert Gundry<sup>16</sup> takes an entirely different view of the significance of our pericope, 27:51-53. In his opinion, Matthew does not want to show that the end has come, or begun, with Jesus' death and resurrection: he wants only to show a preview of the end which will guarantee the hope of those who suffer in the way of righteousness: the apocalypse is a way of encouraging persecuted disciples. But, even if the encouragement of disciples is a feature of Matthew's passion narrative (as it is in Mark), the presence of that motif is utterly insufficient to account for the compilation and introduction of this highly-charged apocalyptic pericope.

#### Jesus' Death and the Advent of the Kingdom.

For Matthew "the kingdom of God" is central to Jesus' preaching, and for Matthew the concept

contains a two-fold internal tension: above/below and now/some day. God's sovereignty must be realised on earth as it is in heaven (Matt.6:10). Here the evangelist aligns himself with Jewish theology. But in union with the Synoptic tradition Matthew looked forward to the future - the completely new and unforeseeable - inbreaking of God's kingdom. That "kingdom" (or "experienced sovereignty") - always somehow present throughout salvation-history, and unifying both Testaments - admits to more intense degrees of realisation. Through his redaction, that is, through his adding the apocalypse of 27:51b-53, Matthew takes the theological position that the climactic moment in this in-breaking is Jesus' death/resurrection. "When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, 'Truly this was the Son of God'". The Gentile community has become believers and the universal mission commanded at the end of the Gospel by the risen Lord (28:16-20) is realised, proleptically, at the cross. Thus the union of death and resurrection as one event is again stressed, the one apocalyptic event which brings in the Kingdom decisively and in power.

### Notes

1. Whichever curtain is implied, that before the Holy Place or that before the Holy of Holies, the 'sign' is that the death of Jesus, in some way, puts an end to the sacrificial cult of the Temple.
2. J.W. Wenham, "When were the saints raised? A Note on the Punctuation of Matthew xxvii 51-53", JTS 32(1981) pp.150-152.
3. E. Schweizer, The Good News according to Matthew (ET; SPCK, London, 1976), p.515.
4. Cf. W.G. Essame in Expos. Times 76 (1964-65) p.103.
5. G. Strecker, Der Weg der Gerechtigkeit (FRLANT 82: Gottingen, 1971).

Hill, Matthew, IBS 7, April 1985.

6. Strecker, Der Weg, pp.45-49, 184-88. Other scholars who see Matthew as dividing the history of salvation into three epochs (the times of Israel, of Jesus, and of Matthew or of the church) are W. Trilling, Das wahre Israel (StANT 10: München, 1964, pp.95f., 162 and 213; R. Walker, Die Heilsgeschichte im ersten Evangelium (FRLANT 91: Göttingen, 1967), pp.114f., and W.G. Thomson, "An Historical Perspective in the Gospel of Matthew", JBL 93 (1974)
7. H. Frankemölle, Jahwebund und Kirche Christi (NTAbh 10: Münster, 1974).
8. Jahwebund, pp.143, 190, 203f., 257f., 268, 351, 377 and 398.
9. J.D. Kingsbury, Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom (SPCK: London, 1976), pp.25-39.
10. Matthew, pp.35-36.
11. J.P. Meier, "Salvation History in Matthew: In Search of a Starting Point", CBQ 37 (1975), pp. 203-215 (quotation from p.207): the view is repeated in Meier's The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church and Morality in the First Gospel (Paulist Press, New York, 1979), pp.204-205 and in Matthew (NT Message 3: Glazier, Wilmington, 1980), pp.351-352. Cf. also the similar approach of D. Senior, "The Death of Jesus and the Resurrection of the Holy Ones (Mt.27:51-53)", CBQ 38 (1976), pp.312-329.
12. Kingsbury, Matthew, p.34.
13. R. Kratz, Auferweckung als Befreiung (SBS 65: Stuttgart, 1973), pp.43-44. Cf. Kingsbury, Matthew, p.34 note 136.
14. Kingsbury, Matthew, p.35 (still in note 136)

Hill, Matthew, IBS 7, April 1985.

15. O.H. Steck. Israel und das gewaltsame Geschick der Propheten (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1967).

16. R.H. Gundry, Matthew: A Commentary on his Literary and Theological Art (Eerdmanns: Grand Rapids, 1981) ad. loc. (p.575)