

MATTHEW 27:51–53: MEANING, GENRE, INTERTEXTUALITY, THEOLOGY, AND RECEPTION HISTORY

CHARLES L. QUARLES*

Abstract: *Matthew 27:51–53 is characterized by Matthean vocabulary, style, and theological themes that support viewing the passage as Matthew’s composition rather than an early scribal interpolation or pre-Matthean tradition which he adopted. The structure of the text presents the account as historical narrative rather than poetry. The earliest extant interpretations treated the passage as literal history rather than fiction. Matthew viewed the resurrection of the saints at the time of the crucifixion as a fulfillment of Ezekiel 37 which signaled that the era of the new covenant and new creation had arrived.*

Key Words: *Matthew 27:51–53, Ezekiel 37:12–13, genre, intertextuality, resurrection of the saints, history of interpretation.*

No Gospel text has been more hotly debated in recent years than Matthew’s account of the phenomena surrounding Jesus’s crucifixion in Matt 27:51–53. Modern scholars seem quite befuddled by the text. Many NT scholars, likely constituting a majority of the guild, hold that, despite its potential theological value, the text should not be regarded as historical but merely as poetic symbolism or apocalyptic imagery. Recently, highly respected evangelical scholars have proposed that the puzzling text may be best explained as a scribal interpolation¹ or an example of “special effects.”² Some recent proposals have not received the thoughtful response they deserve.

This essay will explore this much-disputed passage by analyzing its meaning, genre, OT allusions, related Matthean theological themes, and early reception by the church.

I. A BRIEF EXEGESIS OF THE TEXT

This section will offer a brief exegesis of the text based on an analysis of the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of the Greek text of the passage.

1. Καὶ ἰδοὺ τὸ καταπέτασμα τοῦ ναοῦ ἐσχίσθη ἀπ’ ἄνωθεν ἕως κάτω εἰς δύο. Matthew’s word order stresses that the direction of the tear in the temple veil was downward, from heaven to earth. Matthew likely saw the direction of the tear as

* Charles Quarles is professor of NT at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 120 S. Wingate St., Wake Forest, NC 27587.

¹ Craig A. Evans, *Matthew* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 466–67.

² Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 548–53.

verification that this was an act of God. This suggests that the passive verb ἐσχίσθη (“was split”) is a “divine passive” (*passivum divinum*), the use of the passive voice to describe divine acts, a feature that is very common in Matthew. This prepares the reader to recognize the other passive verbs in this text as “divine passives,” too. Thus *God* shook the earth, split the rocks, opened the tombs, and raised the dead.

The temple curtain may refer to the inner veil that concealed the ark of the covenant and divided the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place or the outer veil that covered the entrance to the Holy Place and separated it from the outer court.³ Scholars have interpreted the rending of the curtain either as an act of divine judgment that foreshadows the destruction of the temple in AD 70,⁴ as a gracious removal of the barrier that separated sinners from God,⁵ or as the rending of the curtain that separated the court of the Gentiles from the court of the Israelites thus signifying inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God.⁶ Of these views, the second is least likely since it is based on doubtful exegesis of Heb 10:19–22. Although the author of Hebrews refers to Christ opening a “new and living way” by which believers may enter the sanctuary “through the curtain,” the context clearly shows that the sanctuary is the heavenly sanctuary after which the earthly sanctuary is patterned (Heb 9:11, 23–26). Although commentators acknowledge a possible allusion to texts like Matt 27:51, they generally admit that the passage does not contain a clear and direct allusion to the rending of the curtain of the Jerusalem temple during Jesus’s passion.⁷ The third view would require Matthew’s readers to identify precisely which curtain of the temple he was describing. However, other than the fact that the curtain between the two courts would have been visible to more witnesses, Matthew offers no hints that he is referring to this specific (and possibly lesser-known) curtain. The first view is just as appropriate regardless of the precise identification of the veil. The rending of any of the temple curtains would have signified that the temple was now open and vulnerable to desecration. Its courts were no longer sacrosanct. The ripping of the veil may have even signified the departure of the divine glory from the temple (Ezek 10:18–19). The violent ripping of the curtain would thus confirm Jesus’s pronouncement in Matt 23:38, “Behold,

³ On this question, see especially Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 2:1109–13. For an extensive discussion of the rending of the veil, see D. M. Gurtner, *The Torn Veil: Matthew’s Exposition of the Death of Jesus* (SNTSMS 139; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 97–137.

⁴ Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 2:1099–1118; W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *Matthew 19–28* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 630–32; D. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28* (WBC 33B; Dallas: Word, 1995), 849; D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *Matthew-Luke* (EBC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 581.

⁵ L. Morris, *Matthew* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 724. Hagner sees this as a secondary implication.

⁶ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew* (NAC 22; Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 421.

⁷ See F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 244–49; G. Guthrie, *Hebrews* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 342–43; W. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13* (WBC 47B; Dallas: Word, 1991), 275; D. Hagner, *Hebrews* (NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 164. Bruce and Hagner suspect an allusion to the Gospel tradition but admit that this is not certain. If Jesus’s body is allegorized as the veil that had to be rent (James Moffatt, *Epistle to the Hebrews* [ICC; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1924], 143), then an allusion to the passion portents is highly unlikely.

your house is left to you desolate.” It would further fulfill the warning issued in the parable of the wicked tenants regarding those who murdered the vineyard owner’s son: “He will destroy those evil men and give the vineyard to other tenants who will pay back to him the fruits at the appropriate time” (Matt 21:41). This was the most prominent view of the rending of the veil in the church in the centuries immediately following Jesus’s death.⁸

2. *καὶ ἡ γῆ ἐσεισθη καὶ αἱ πέτραι ἐσχίσθησαν.* These two clauses describe a violent earthquake which likely accompanied the tearing of the temple curtain. It is likely that the first three clauses of our passage describe events that are simultaneous rather than consecutive. Matthew probably ordered the clauses as he did to avoid giving the impression that the rending of the veil was merely caused by a natural phenomenon. The passive voice portrays all three aspects of the event as acts of God. Ἡ γῆ (often translated “the earth”) refers to “the land,” that is, the land of Israel, rather than to the entire earth (cf. 2:6, 20, 21; 9:26; 23:35; 24:30). This appears to be the sense of the noun in 27:45 as well. Frequently in the OT, the shaking of the land or earth is a sign of God’s wrath and coming destruction (2 Sam 22:8 LXX; Joel 2:10; 3:16; Isa 13:13; 24:18, 20; Jer 8:16; 26:46; 28:29; and Dan 2:40). The localized catastrophe is a judgment on Israel and this supports the interpretation of verse 51 defended earlier.

The splitting of the rocks shows the fierce intensity of the earthquake. The rocks are not the “stones” (λίθοι; Matt 24:2) that compose the buildings of the temple, but the very bedrock on which wise builders constructed their homes (Matt 7:24–25) and the massive boulders scattered across the Judean countryside. This was an earthquake of catastrophic proportions that brought great destruction in its wake.

3. *καὶ τὰ μνημεῖα ἀνεώχθησαν.* Matthew 27:60 explains that the tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea was hewn in the rock. Such tombs resembled caves on the sides of the mountains of Judea. When the earthquake caused fissures in the bedrock, many of these tombs ruptured open exposing the dead who lay buried within them. Matthew used the definite article “the” with the noun “tombs” (τὰ μνημεῖα). Although this could be explained merely by the desire to maintain symmetry between the clauses in this succession, the definite article could also be the article of previous reference. If so, the article likely points back to Matt 23:29 which refers to the practice of the scribes and Pharisees decorating the tombs of important saints. The article may specify that these very tombs were broken open by the earthquake that accompanied Jesus’s death. This would identify the saints in the next clause as righteous people honored after death by the Jews.

4. *καὶ πολλὰ σώματα τῶν κεκοιμημένων ἁγίων ἠγέρθησαν.* Some of the exposed corpses were destined for resurrection. Matthew refers to the corpses as “bodies of the saints who have fallen asleep.” “Sleep” serves as a euphemism for

⁸ M. de Jonge, “Matthew 27:51 in Early Christian Exegesis,” *HTR* 79 (1986): 67–79; idem, “Two Interesting Interpretations of the Rending of the Temple-Veil in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs,” in *Jewish Eschatology, Early Christian Christology and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: Collected Essays of Marinus De Jonge* (NovTSup 63; Leiden: Brill, 1991), 220–32.

death and involves a wordplay with “raise” which may mean “wake up” or “raise from the dead.” The description of death as sleep anticipates this “waking.” Matthew does not specifically name the “saints” who were raised. The “saints” appear to be synonymous with the “righteous” and thus may refer to the innocent martyrs mentioned in Matt 23:35. Both 23:29 and 27:52 refer to the “tombs” (μνημεῖα) of the righteous/holy and “Matthew is likely to intend a cross-reference.”⁹ Jesus had warned that the penalty for the murder of the martyrs would befall that generation (23:36). The resurrection of the martyrs would serve as a dramatic vindication of these prophets and sages on the one hand, as well as a strong indictment against those who murdered them on the other.

5. καὶ ἐξεληθόντες ἐκ τῶν μνημείων μετὰ τὴν ἔγερσιν αὐτοῦ εἰσῆλθον εἰς τὴν ἁγίαν πόλιν καὶ ἐνεφανίσθησαν πολλοῖς. On the surface, this verse appears to be quite simple. The resurrected saints exit their tombs, enter the city of Jerusalem, and appear to many of the people who were in the city for the Passover celebration and Feast of Unleavened Bread. The verse is complicated, however, by the little phrase “after his resurrection.”¹⁰ R. Brown has rightly described these words as “the most difficult phrase in Matt 27:51–52.”¹¹ The phrase constitutes what many perceive as a chronological problem that raises doubts about the historical reliability of the text. Many scholars have interpreted the temporal phrase “after his resurrection” as implying that the saints were raised at the time of Jesus’s crucifixion and remained in the ruptured tombs patiently waiting until the resurrection of Jesus occurred on the third day. With only thinly veiled sarcasm, Brown refers to this as “an extraordinary courtesy!”¹² However, several simple solutions exist for this perceived chronological difficulty.

a. A period may replace the comma after the mention to the rupture of the tombs. Consequently, the phrase “after his resurrection” modifies the resurrection of the saints, the abandonment of the tombs, and the entrance into the holy city. Given this punctuation, the earthquake that occurred during Jesus’s crucifixion opened the tombs. However, those entombed remained dead until after Jesus’s resurrection.¹³ Modern readers must remember that the original manuscripts of the NT were written in a script called *scriptio continua*. This consisted of one Greek letter after another with no punctuation and no space between paragraphs, sentences, or words. Punctuation decisions must be made by modern editors of the Greek NT and modern translators. The decisions of these editors and translators are subject to challenge.

⁹ John Nolland, *Matthew* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1215.

¹⁰ A growing number of scholars argue that the phrase is an early scribal interpolation. However, this view is based on an incorrect assessment of ancient witnesses and internal evidence. See Charles L. Quarles, “META THN ΕΓΕΡΣΙΝ ΑΥΤΟΥ: A Scribal Interpolation in Matthew 27:53?” *TC* 20 (2015): 1–15.

¹¹ Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 2:1129 n. 78.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2:1130.

¹³ J. W. Wenham, “When Were the Saints Raised? A Note on the Punctuation of Matthew xxvii.51–53,” *JTS* 32 (1981): 150–52; Blomberg, *Matthew*, 421.

Although this revised punctuation is possible, it is improbable. First, this punctuation disrupts the unity of the series of five passive verbs in Greek linked with the coordinating conjunction *καί* (“and”). The punctuation suggested by J. W. Wenham wrecks this tight and carefully organized structure. The arrangement makes it difficult to believe that Matthew’s original readers would have read the text in this way. Furthermore, as will be demonstrated, the earliest interpreters associated this resurrection of the saints with Jesus’s death rather than his resurrection.

b. One may punctuate verse 53 so that the phrase “after his resurrection” modifies only the finite verbs “entered” and “appeared” resulting in a translation such as: “And after they came out of the tombs [on Friday], they entered the Holy City and appeared to many after his resurrection [on Sunday].” Consequently, the dead were raised and exited the tombs at the time of the crucifixion, but did not enter the city of Jerusalem until after Jesus’s resurrection. Nothing in the grammar or structure precludes this punctuation. The Greek participle that refers to coming out of the tombs is in the aorist tense. The action of the participle is temporally antecedent to that of the main verbs. In any interpretation the tombs had to be exited before the holy city could be entered. The participle gives no indication of how long one action preceded the other. Thus a number of scholars and some translations (NIV mg.; NIRV; Wycliffe Bible) have adopted this view¹⁴ and it has several advantages over the preceding view. Most importantly, normal Matthean style supports this view. In addition to 27:53, Matthew uses the preposition *μετά* with the accusative object to express temporal priority nine times (1:12; 17:1; 24:29; 25:19; 26:2, 32, 73; 27:62, 63). Except for Matt 27:62, in which the prepositional phrase functions as a predicate adjective with *εἰμί*, the prepositional phrase always precedes the verb or verbs which it modifies. Thus the word order mimics the temporal relationship between the actions or events referred to in the prepositional phrase and the main verb. This pattern supports the theory that the *μετά* phrase in 27:53 modifies the verb(s) that follow it rather than the preceding participle.¹⁵

c. The phrase “his resurrection” may refer to a resurrection performed by Jesus rather than a resurrection experienced by Jesus. A few Greek scribes and the interpreter behind the Ethiopic version evidently saw the text in this manner, since they render the text “their resurrection” rather than “his resurrection.” This would eliminate all chronological tensions by placing all of the events in 52–53 at the time of the crucifixion. This is grammatically possible if *αὐτοῦ* is a subjective genitive and if the noun “resurrection” is capable of a transitive meaning. Although the noun “resurrection” (*ἐγερσις*) is a *hapax legomenon*, the related verb “resurrect” (*ἐγείρω*) is often transitive and clearly is so in the preceding verse. The main hindrance to accepting this view is the fact that the agent who performed action of the divine passives in 51–52 is God (the Father). However, the antecedent to the pro-

¹⁴ Adolf Schlatter, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1947), 415; Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 2:1129–31; David Turner, *Matthew* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 670.

¹⁵ For a detailed argument, see Quarles, “ΜΕΤΑ ΤΗΝ ΕΓΕΡΣΙΝ ΑΥΤΟΥ,” 3–5.

noun *αὐτοῦ* (his) in the phrase “his resurrection” is clearly Jesus. Thus the interpretation could create tensions with other elements of the text.¹⁶ This suggests that “of him/his” is an objective genitive and that the phrase refers to the resurrection that Jesus experienced.

Overall, the best solution to the perceived chronological problem is to punctuate the text in such a way that the phrase “after his resurrection” refers only to the entrance of the saints into the holy city and/or their appearance to witnesses in the city. This view, of course, leaves unanswered the question as to where the resurrected saints went immediately after they exited the tombs. But such silence is preferable to the more difficult view that they sat in their tombs for at least one day.

The raised saints’ entrance into the holy city, Jerusalem, and their appearance to many of the city’s inhabitants implies that their resurrection was intended to serve as a kind of testimony to the Jerusalemites and those who were in the city for the festival. If the resurrected saints were martyrs who died at the hands of the people of Jerusalem like the prophets, sages, and scribes described in Matt 23:37, their appearance in the city would have been interpreted as a bad omen and terrified the people. The Jerusalemites might have concluded that just as God vindicated these saints by raising them, he would soon judge them for their murder. The ominous nature of the rending of the veil and the earthquake mentioned above helps cast the resurrection and testimony of the saints as a sign of Jerusalem’s judgment. If these saints announced Jesus’s identity as the Messiah and proclaimed his resurrection power, this too would likely have struck terror in the hearts of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. When Pilate had publicly washed his hands and refused to accept responsibility for Jesus’s death, they had screamed, “His blood be upon us and our children” (Matt 27:25). If these saints preached to the people of Jerusalem, it is likely that their message possessed the same condemning tone as that of the apostles in the early chapters of Acts (2:23, 36; 3:15) and was accompanied by a call to repentance (2:38; 3:19).¹⁷

II. THE GENRE OF THE TEXT

Numerous scholars pose that 27:51 marks a shift in genre in which Matthew transitions from historical narrative to poetry or apocalypse, genres that are not to be interpreted as literal history. Structural analysis of Matt 27:51–53 is important for determining the genre of the text. In particular, this section will consider whether the structure is poetic in nature. The transcription below seeks to display clearly the structure of the text.

¹⁶ However, if Jesus’s “breath” is viewed as the instrument by which this resurrection is performed, this would resolve much of the tension. See below.

¹⁷ See Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 849; U. Luz, *Matthew 21–28* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 567–68. Both emphasize that the appearance of the resurrected saints in Jerusalem would have been recognized as a sign of judgment. Luz gleans further evidence of this from 2 Bar. 50:3–4 and Luke 9:7–9.

Καὶ ἰδοὺ	τὸ καταπέτασμα τοῦ ναοῦ	ἐσχίσθη ἀπ’ ἄνωθεν ἕως κάτω εἰς δύο
καὶ	ἡ γῆ	ἐσεισθη
καὶ	αἱ πέτραι	ἐσχίσθησαν,
καὶ	τὰ μνημεῖα	ἀνεώχθησαν
καὶ πολλὰ	σώματα τῶν κεκοιμημένων ἁγίων	ἠγέρθησαν,
καὶ ἐξεληθόντες ἐκ τῶν μνημείων μετὰ τὴν ἔγερσιν αὐτοῦ εἰσῆλθον εἰς τὴν ἁγίαν πόλιν		
καὶ		ἐνεφανίσθησαν πολλοῖς.

In this arrangement, elements in **bold** are matched structurally in the first five lines of the passage. The conjunction “and,” the subject with the article (or in one case the adjective), and a passive verb are consistent in all five lines. Line 7 also has the conjunction *καί* and an aorist passive verb. However, the subject is missing and the verb is an example of the use of the passive for the active rather than a divine passive as in the first five lines so it is unlikely that Matthew intended line 7 to have symmetry with the first five lines.

The *italic font* is used to mark elements shared in common by lines 1 and 5 which are absent in the intervening lines (2, 3, 4). The similarities marked with italics might indicate that lines 1 and 5 were intended to match. This would be expected if Matthew intended a poetic structure. He has shown a fondness for similar structures elsewhere in his Gospel. Notice, for example, how he carefully matched the first and last of the Beatitudes in Matt 5:3 and 10. The elements in ~~strikethrough font~~ disrupt the symmetry of the lines. Line 6 is completely different from the preceding lines. This suggests that if Matthew intended to structure the first five lines as poetry, his poem ended with verse 52 and then verse 53 returns to prose. This poses huge problems for attempts to classify verse 53 as poetic and thus fictional, yet verse 53 is the very verse that most scholars view as problematic in a literal interpretation. The strikethrough font also marks elements of the two exterior lines that disrupt their symmetry. One may argue, of course, that the disruptive features of line 1 were necessitated by Matthew’s dependence on Mark. However, Matthew did not strictly follow Mark here. He (on the theory of Marcan priority) adjusted Mark’s word order and inserted the particle *ἰδοὺ* (“behold”). Furthermore, one can imagine a number of ways in which Matthew might have adjusted the content of line 5 in order to match line 1, even if he did not feel free to make adjustments to material borrowed from Mark (which he has often done elsewhere in his Gospel). Given Matthew’s careful attention to structure elsewhere, the disruptions in structure here raise serious doubts about the popular identification of these verses as poetic. Consequently, the argument that 27:51–53 is poetic is weak and the argument that the regular structure suggests the fictional or symbolic nature of these verses is even weaker.¹⁸

¹⁸ For the argument that the text is poetic and thus symbolic, see Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 2:1118–1134. For a defense of the historicity of the passage, see David Wenham, “The Resurrection Narratives in Matthew’s Gospel,” *TynBul* 24 (1973): 21–54, esp. 42–43; and Quarles’s comments in “A Roundtable Discussion with Michael Licona on the Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach,” *Southeastern Theological Review* 3/1 (2012): 71–98. Daniel Gurtner recently argued that Matt

III. INTERTEXTUALITY

Scholars have suggested that Matt 27:52–53 may contain allusions to a variety of OT texts such as Isa 2:19; 1 Kgs 19:11–13; Zech 14:4; Nah 1:5–6; Ezek 37:12–13; and extrabiblical texts such as *T. Levi* 4:1. The verbal and even thematic connections between Matthew’s text and most of these OT passages are rather weak and do not provide convincing evidence of a Matthean allusion. However, the Septuagintal form of Ezekiel 37 has a number of interesting connections with Matthew’s text which do suggest an allusion.

First, Ezekiel 37:7 has the phrase “Behold an earthquake!” (ἰδοὺ σεισμός). Admittedly, the Greek noun *σεισμός* may refer to any “shaking” and does not necessarily refer to an earthquake. The Hebrew text may refer merely to the rattling of the bones of the corpses as they began to assemble in preparation for resurrection. However, Matthew may have associated this *σεισμός* with that mentioned in Ezek 38:19, a great earthquake in the land of Israel that causes mountains, cliffs, and walls to come crashing down. Furthermore, rabbinic commentators interpreted the “shaking” of Ezek 37:7 as an earthquake.¹⁹ The depiction of the resurrection in the Ezekiel cycle of the synagogue of Dura Europos in Syria, which dates to c. AD 250, appears to interpret the “shaking” of Ezekiel 37 as an earthquake. The artwork depicts the resurrection of the dead, the splitting of a mountain that exposes the dead, and a house sliding down a mountain, evidently due to an earthquake.²⁰

The clearer echo of Ezekiel 37 is Matthew’s line: τὰ μνημεῖα ἀνεώχθησαν (“the tombs were opened”). Ezekiel 37:12 says: “Behold, I am opening your tombs” (Ἴδοὺ ἐγὼ ἀνοίγω ὑμῶν τὰ μνήματα). Ezekiel 37 is the only reference to the opening of tombs in the entire OT. Matthew used Ezekiel’s verb ἀνοίγω (“open”) but a slightly different noun for tomb than appears in the LXX, τὰ μνημεῖα rather than τὰ μνήματα. Luz is correct when he confidently asserts: “The formulation [in Matt 27:52] follows Ezekiel 37:12–13 LXX.”²¹

27:51–53 was symbolic on other grounds. He claimed that features such as καὶ ἰδοὺ, the presence of divine passives, and allusions to OT passages suggest that 27:51–53 describes a non-literal apocalyptic vision beheld by the Roman centurion and his subordinates. See Gurtner, *The Torn Veil: Matthew’s Exposition of the Death of Jesus* (SNTSMS 139; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 138–98. However, all three of these features are common throughout the Gospel and frequently appear in texts that are clearly non-apocalyptic. Perhaps the greatest difficulty with Gurtner’s interpretation is the failure to explain why the Roman soldiers experienced such a vision although they clearly lacked the necessary background to interpret the vision correctly. The appeal to Cornelius’s vision in Acts 10 is unpersuasive since that vision was straightforward and was not steeped in OT references that had to be understood to make sense of the vision. Furthermore, Matthew would likely have signaled such an abrupt shift from historical narrative to apocalyptic imagery in a visionary experience by referring to the seer being caught up into heaven or some similar device. The suggested equation of the veil of the temple with the firmament would not likely have been clear to Matthew’s original audience. The early church was unanimous in interpreting the phenomena of 27:51–53 literally. The spiritualization of the reference to the “holy city” was probably prompted by questions about what became of the resurrected saints that the church did not consistently answer rather than an assumption that all of the phenomena were non-literal.

¹⁹ *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* (trans. G. Friedlander, 1916; repr. New York, 1971), 249.

²⁰ Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 567–68; Harald Riesenfeld, *The Resurrection in Ezekiel xxxvii and in the Dura-Europos Paintings* (Upsala: Lundaquistilca Bokhandeln, 1948), 37–48.

²¹ Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 567.

The phrase that has posed so many problems for interpreters in 27:53, “after his resurrection,” could also be influenced by Ezekiel 37, since verse 12 emphasizes that Yahweh will “lead you into the land of Israel.” Perhaps Matthew envisioned the resurrected Jesus leading the resurrected saints into Jerusalem and thus emphasized that Jesus’s resurrection preceded the saints’ entrance into the city. Numerous early church fathers interpreted Matthew’s description in this fashion.²² OT commentators have also recognized this possibility. Block wrote: “The description of the resurrection scene after the death of Jesus in Matt. 27:51–54 suggests that this event may have been interpreted in the light of Ezek. 37:1–14.”²³ He further noted that entrance into the holy city may have been Matthew’s interpretation of the resurrected corpses reentering “their land” in Ezek 37:13–14. He seems to imply that Yahweh’s leading the resurrected ones into their land influenced Matthew’s insistence that Jesus’s resurrection preceded the saints’ entrance into Jerusalem: “In v. 51 [53?] the Lord himself goes before a band of folk who have risen from their tombs into the holy city.”²⁴ Brown confidently concluded that the resurrected saints’ entrance into the holy city was modeled upon Ezek 37:14.²⁵

I noted earlier that the phrase “many bodies of the saints who slept/died” disrupts the otherwise tight structure of this section. Apparently, this too was drawn, at least in part, from Ezekiel 37. Matthew’s “many bodies” (πολλὰ σώματα) may have been derived from Ezekiel’s πολλὰ σφόδρα (“very many [corpses]”; Ezek 37:2). Like the LXX, the Hebrew text uses the adjective “many” in Ezek 37:2 but no explicit noun. In both versions, the adjectives function substantively to refer to the many “bones” (תְּיִצָּעוּ; דֹּסְתֵינִי [skeletal remains]) in the preceding verse. Matthew’s phrase is a reasonable rendering for the construction in Ezek 37:2. The absence of a reference to corpses in the preceding context required that Matthew supply a noun for the sake of clarity.

Just as the allusions to Ezekiel 37 continue into Matt 27:54, they may precede Matt 27:51–53. Matthew 27:50 states that Jesus “released the spirit.” The statement is normally interpreted in light of the statement that immediately preceded Jesus’s death in Luke 23:46. However, Matthew himself makes no mention of the content of this statement. His phrase ἀφῆκεν τὸ πνεῦμα is a rewording of Mark’s expression ἐξέπνευσεν, “he breathed out [his last breath]” (Mark 15:37; cf. Luke 23:46). Although most English versions supply the pronoun “his” in Matt 27:51, the pronoun is absent in the Greek text, and this supports understanding τὸ πνεῦμα as “the (final) breath” or “the Spirit” rather than as his “spirit.” The LXX uses the expression “release the soul” (Gen 35:18; 1 Esdr. 4:21) to refer to death. That expression also appears in Josephus (*Ant.* 1.218; 5.147; 12:430; 14:369). However,

²² W. Neuss, *Das Buch Ezechiel in Theologie und Kunst bis zum Ende des XII. Jahrhunderts* (Beiträge zur Geschichte des Alten Mönchtums und des Benediktinerordens; Münster: Aschendorff, 1912), 25 (Justin Martyr), 26 (Irenaeus), 32 (Tertullian and Cyprian), 43 (Cyril of Jerusalem), 47 (Epiphanius of Constantine), 85 (Severus and John of Damascus), 89 (Ambrose). Augustine rejected this interpretation (89).

²³ Block, *Ezekiel 25–48* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 389.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 2:1140.

neither source uses the expression “release the spirit.”²⁶ One must not presume that Matthew’s phrase is identical in meaning to the better known expression.

If Matthew’s expression is equivalent to Mark’s, he may have chosen it in order to portray this breath/Spirit as the power that animated the corpses of the dead. In Ezek 37:5–6, Yahweh said, “I will cause breath to enter you, and you will live. . . . I will put breath in you so that you come to life.” Verse 8 adds that after God reassembled the bones of the dead and regenerated muscle and skin, still “there was not breath in them.” Thus Ezekiel prophesied at the Lord’s command: “Breath, come from the four winds and breathe into these slain so that they may live!” (Ezek 37:9). Then the “breath” entered them and they came to life (Ezek 37:10). Throughout this passage, the word consistently translated as “breath” is *πνεῦμα*, and the use of the term is reminiscent of Ezekiel’s promise of the giving of the Spirit in fulfillment of the new covenant in Ezek 36:26–27.²⁷ Given the multiple allusions to Ezekiel 37 in the three verses that follow, it is possible that Matthew intended an allusion here as well. He adapted Mark’s verb meaning “expire,” which (as in English) means to exhale one’s breath but also may refer to the final exhalation, that is, physical death. However, Matthew’s rewording permits the reader to associate this “breath/Spirit” with the breath/Spirit that resurrects the dead in Ezekiel 37 and makes clear that Jesus is the agent through whom the Father accomplished this resurrection.²⁸

In one of the most detailed studies of this text in recent times, R. A. Monasterio defended a similar view which he appears to have come to accept independently of Albright and Mann (who also support the view). Monasterio listed four considerations that suggest that Matthew intended to indicate that Jesus’s release of the breath/Spirit caused the resurrection that immediately followed:

²⁶ Albright and Mann found only two examples (Euripides and Aeschylus) of this construction in Classical Greek. However, they noted that in both examples the noun *πνεῦμα* was anarthrous. They suggest that the background of Matthew’s construction is Gen 35:18, Ps 103:30, and Ezekiel 37. See W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew* (AB 26; New York: Doubleday, 1971), 350–51. A search using TLG revealed that the expression is very rare in Greek texts prior to Matthew. Euripides *Hec.* 1. 571 uses the expression to describe Polyxena breathing her last breath when she was executed by Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles. Polyxena’s windpipe was severed by the sword and she “exhaled through the fatal gash” (*ἀφῆκε πνεῦμα θανάσιμωι σφαγῆι*). Hippocrates (*Morb.* 6.4.22) and Aristophanes the Grammarian (*historiae animalium epitome subjunctis Aeliani Timothei aliorumque eclogis* 2.15.2) used the combination of *ἀφίημι* and *πνεῦμα* to describe normal exhalation. Hippocrates regarded exhalation of chilled breath through the nose as a sign that death was imminent, but he did not use the construction to describe the moment that a patient died. Interestingly, in the usages of this construction to describe respiration prior to Matthew, the noun is generally anarthrous (unless modified by an attributive adjective). Matthew’s expression is thus unique and is not likely a mere equivalent to Mark’s expression.

²⁷ The LXX suggests a link between Ezek 37:1–14 by adding the pronoun “my (spirit)” in Ezek 37:6, 14 though it is absent in the MT.

²⁸ Albright and Mann see the release of the Spirit/breath as the Matthean equivalent of Luke’s Pentecost (Acts 2:1–36) and Jesus’s bestowal of the Spirit in John (John 20:22). They conclude that Matthew’s expression means that the gift of the Spirit is “bound up with the passion and the resurrection.” They later added that Jesus’s death marked the birth of a new community and the inauguration of the new covenant. See Albright and Mann, *Matthew*, 350–52; and Mann, “Pentecost, the Spirit, and John,” *Theol* 62 (1959): 188–90.

1. This phrase is an unusual expression for death unparalleled in biblical literature (which spoke of the release of the soul) or extrabiblical literature (in which the closest parallels omit the definite article).
2. Primitive Christianity used the articular expression “the Spirit” without further qualification to denote the Spirit of God.
3. The parallel expression in John 19:30 is interpreted by some scholars (e.g. R. Brown) as a proleptic and symbolic reference to the giving of the Spirit.
4. The reference fits nicely with the other obvious allusions to Ezekiel 37 since Ezekiel’s text describes bestowal of the Spirit/breath as the means of resurrection.

Monasterio concluded:

La referencia a Ez. 37 en Mt. 27, 51b–53 nos invita a ver expresada en el v. 50 la entrega del Espíritu de Dios. El Espíritu actúa en la irrupción del tiempo escatológico, que significa el fin de la vieja economía de salvación (51a) y supone la superación de la misma muerte (51b–53); y este Espíritu actúa también en la congregación del nuevo pueblo de Dios en la fe en Cristo (vv. 54–56) (23b).²⁹

In addition to the multiple allusions to Ezekiel 37, the phrase “many bodies of the saints who slept were raised” appears to have been influenced by another OT text. Daniel 12:2 states, “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will be raised.” The next verse in Daniel describes the resurrected ones as the “wise” and the “righteous.” Matthew’s description of the resurrected ones as “saints” is probably derived from Dan 12:3. Matthew alluded to Dan 12:2 in 25:46 and to Dan 12:3 in 13:43. Although 13:43 refers to the saints as “righteous ones” (δικαιοι) like Theodotian’s version of Dan 12:3, 27:53 identifies them as “holy ones” (ἁγίων). This is the only time in the entire Gospel that Matthew uses the adjective ἅγιος to describe human beings. Matthew may have made this change to show that the wise and holy ones in Dan 12:3 were the “saints (of the most High)” mentioned in Daniel 7:8, 18, 21, 22(2x), and 25.³⁰ It is also possible that he used the term “saints” due to influence from Zech 14:4–6.

Thus Osborne is correct that “this remarkable pericope is certainly a reflection on Ezek. 37” and “yet other passages provide background.”³¹ N. T. Wright independently reached an identical conclusion regarding the “biblical echoes” in Matthew’s text.³² OT commentators have recognized Matthew’s dependence on

²⁹ Monasterio, *Exegesis de Mateo, 27, 51b–53: para una teología de la muerte de Jesús en el Evangelio de Mateo* (Biblica Victoricensia 4; Vitoria: Eset, 1980), 183–85. See also Brown’s doubts regarding this position in *Death of the Messiah*, 2:1123 n. 64.

³⁰ W. G. Essame, W. K. Lowther-Clarke, and Albright and Mann view Matt 27:51–54 as a dramatization of the tradition preserved in John 5:25–29. See Essame, “Matthew xxvii 51–54 and John v 25–29,” *ExpTim* 76 (1964–65): 103; Albright and Mann, *Matthew*, 351. Although this view is unlikely since the only vocabulary shared by the two passages is *μνημείον* (tomb), Albright and Mann agree that Matthew’s text is “reminiscent of the triumph of the saints described in Dan 7.”

³¹ Grant Osborne, *Matthew* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 1046.

³² N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 3; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 633.

Ezekiel as well.³³ Matthew's readers would likely have understood the importance of these allusions. Although some rabbis, such as r. Judah, interpreted Ezekiel 37 as a parable about the restoration of Israel, others interpreted the text as a description of a literal historic resurrection.³⁴ Still others interpreted the text as a prophecy about a literal resurrection that would occur during the messianic age.³⁵

IV. THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE TEXT TO MAJOR MATTHEAN THEOLOGICAL THEMES

1. *Fulfillment of prophecy.* One of the most prominent themes of Matthew's Gospel is the affirmation that Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets. This theme surfaces in Jesus's own stark assertion: "Don't assume that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Matt 5:17). The theme is also evident in the ten fulfillment citations (1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9) sprinkled throughout the Gospel, Jesus's references to the fulfillment of prophecy (cf. 13:14; 26:54), and the total of nearly fifty quotations and allusions to the OT in this Gospel.

By incorporating expressions from Ezekiel 37, Daniel 12, and Isaiah 26 (and possibly other texts) into his description of the events surrounding Jesus's death and resurrection, Matthew brings this prominent theme to culmination in Matt 27:51–53. Jesus's death and resurrection are shown to fulfill these important OT texts and thus mark a transition to a new age or era marked by new life, a new people, and a new covenant.³⁶

2. *New creation.* Another of Matthew's key themes is the new creation. This theme is introduced in the very first four words of this Gospel: βίβλος γενέσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. The English versions have little variation here. Most translate the phrase: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ" (ESV; LEB; HCSB marg.) or something very similar to that. However, the word γενέσις is not used (in the sg.) in the Greek Bible to refer to a "genealogy." The word means "origin," not "genealogy." The phrase βίβλος γενέσεως appears only twice in the LXX. In both instances, the phrase introduces a creation account, first an account of the creation of the heaven and earth (Gen 2:4) and then an account of the creation of humanity (Gen 5:1). If Matthew's use of this phrase is influenced by the LXX, the phrase likely refers to a creation account here as well.

³³ Block, *Ezekiel 25–48*, 389.

³⁴ See the comments of r. Eliezer and r. Judah b. Bathyra in *b. Sanh.* 92b. See also the Haggadah of the Mahzor Vitry discussed in Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 25–48* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 264; and the Palestinian Targum fragment discussed in A. Díez-Macho, "Un segundo fragment del Targum Palestinense a los Profetas," *Bib* 39 (1958): 198–205, esp. 201.

³⁵ See Pirque de Eliezer, 245 in which r. Joshua ben Qorchah quoted Yahweh as saying to Ezekiel, "As I live, I will cause you to stand at the resurrection of the dead in the future that is to come, and I will gather you with all Israel to the land." Rabbinic commentaries such as *Gen. Rab.* 13.6; 14.5; *Deut. Rab.* 7.7; and *Lev. Rab.* 14.9 interpret Ezekiel's text literally and eschatologically.

³⁶ See the similar analysis in Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, 632–36.

Furthermore, the word *γένεσις* was used by Matthew's contemporaries as a title for the first book of the Bible in Greek, "Genesis" (Philo *Post.* 127; *Abr.* 1; *Aet.* 19). This title also appears in some of the oldest extant manuscripts of the Greek Bible (e.g. Vaticanus and Alexandrinus). Thus the phrase *βιβλος γενέσεως* would probably cause Matthew's readers to recall the book of Genesis and to expect Matthew's Gospel to be similar in some way to Genesis, an account of a creation of some kind.³⁷

The genitive *Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ* ("of Jesus Messiah") apparently identifies Jesus as the Creator who brings about this origin, the author of this "genesis."³⁸ Matthew will state that more explicitly in 19:28 by describing the reign of the Son of Man as a *παλιγγενεσία*, a "regeneration," a "beginning again," or a "new genesis." This new creation entailed the restoration of all that sin had ruined. In the new creation, God's people would enjoy an existence without sin, corruption, death, or tears. And so Matthew begins his Gospel with the stunning title "The Book of Genesis wrought by Jesus Christ."

The theme of new creation is prominent in Jesus's baptism. Church fathers recognized that the descent of the Spirit in the form of a dove over the baptismal waters was reminiscent of the brooding of the Spirit over the primordial waters in Genesis 1:1–2. Recent scholarship has done much to confirm this ancient interpretation.³⁹ However, Matt 27:52–53 is an even more powerful and explicit expression of this theme. For in his death and resurrection, the power of new creation is unleashed by breaking the hold that death had on OT saints. Turner writes,

For Matthew, the association of the saints' resurrection with that of Jesus marks the decisive turning of the ages. Jesus's resurrection means that the gates of hades cannot prevail against Jesus's church (Matt. 16:18) and that his enemies will answer to his authority (26:64).⁴⁰

3. *New covenant.* Matthew's Gospel also insists that Jesus's death initiated the new covenant. Jesus explicitly affirmed this in Matt 26:28: "For this is my blood that establishes the new covenant." This new covenant is none other than that promised by Moses (Deut 30:6), Jeremiah (31:31–34), and Ezekiel (36:24–30). Matthew hinted at Jesus's institution of the new covenant in his programmatic statement (Matt 1:21) which blends elements of Ezek 36:28–29 and 37:23. Matthew's quotation of Jer 31:15 in 2:17–18 recalls Jeremiah's promise of the new covenant in 31:31–34. When Matthew quotes an OT text, he typically calls to mind the entire original context of the passage and not merely the few words that he actually

³⁷ For a similar view, see W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *Matthew 1–7* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 149–56.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 156.

³⁹ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19–28*, 334.

⁴⁰ Turner, *Matthew*, 670. The idea that 27:52–53 fulfills 16:18 has been explored extensively in T. McKay, "Death, Descent and Deliverance in Matthew 27:51b–53," in *You Will Be My Witnesses* (F. S. A. A. Trites; ed. R. Glenn Wooden, Timothy R. Ashley, and Robert S. Wilson; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003), 81–93.

cites.⁴¹ Matthew probably cites Jer 31:15 to show that the era of the new covenant is dawning through the coming of the Messiah. John's statement regarding the baptism of the Spirit performed by the Messiah (Matt 3:11) likewise alludes to Ezek 36:26–27. Jesus's teaching later in the Gospel of Matthew regarding the amazing transformation that his disciples experience (e.g. 5:8, 16, 20, 48) is grounded in the conviction that the new covenant was initiated through the death of Jesus.

The promise of the new covenant in Ezek 36:24–30 and the promise of new life for God's people in Ezek 37:1–14 would be fulfilled through the reign of the Davidic Messiah whose coming was foretold in Ezek 34:23–24 and 37:24–25. The Davidic Shepherd would “make a covenant of peace” with God's people (Ezek 37:26). This covenant was the new covenant expressed in specific terms in the previous chapter in the echoes of Jeremiah's description of the new covenant. Ezekiel 36:24–30 and 37:1–14 are bracketed by the references to the covenant of peace (Ezek 34:25; 37:26) and the Davidic Messiah (Ezek 34:23–24; 37:24–25). The two sections are also closely associated by the prominence of the terms “breath”/“Spirit” in both the Hebrew and Greek texts of the two passages (Ezek 36:27; 37:5, 6, 8, 9, 10). Block noted in particular that the “forms of expression [in Ezek 37:14] also deliberately link this oracle with the preceding prophecy [36:26–27].”⁴²

Thus by borrowing the language of Ezekiel 37 to describe the phenomena accompanying Jesus's death, Matthew signals that Jesus is the Davidic Messiah (a prominent Matthean theme), that the era of the new covenant has arrived, and that the age of new creation has dawned.

4. *Judgment of Israel and particularly Jerusalem.* A number of scholars have argued that the rending of the veil, the earthquake, and the appearance of the resurrected dead in Jerusalem would have been interpreted as signs of judgment in a first-century Jewish context. Luz writes,

The readers of the Gospel of Matthew know that Jerusalem has always killed and stoned the prophets and God's representatives and that it is going to be punished by God (23:37–39). For them the holy city of Jerusalem is the city of the death of Jesus in which “all the people” have called down the blood of Jesus on themselves and their children (27:25). This memory resonates as they read. That the dead saints now appear in Jerusalem and appear to many is a sign of God's coming judgment. It portends nothing good for the people of Jerusalem.”⁴³

⁴¹ See the helpful discussions “Matthew the Interpreter,” in R. T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1989), 181–85; “Matthew's Use of the OT,” in Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* (WBC 33A; Dallas: Word, 1993), liii–lvii; and R. H. Gundry, *The Use of the OT in St. Matthew's Gospel, with Special Reference to the Messianic Hope* (NovTSup 18; Leiden: Brill, 1967).

⁴² Block, *Ezekiel 25–48*, 382.

⁴³ Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 567–68. Luz appeals to 2 Bar. 50:3–4 and Luke 9:7–9 to illustrate how the people of Jerusalem may have reacted at the reappearance of those who they killed. See also R. Schwandt, “Kein Heil ohne Gericht: Die Antwort Gottes auf Jesu Tod nach Mt 27,51–54,” *BN* 132 (2007): 87–104.

If the resurrected saints are primarily those martyred as described in 23:33–37, the element of judgment is even more pronounced. Thus, Matt 27:51–53 would emphasize the theme of God’s judgment on Jerusalem and her leaders that is prominent throughout the Gospel.⁴⁴

V. RECEPTION HISTORY OF THE TEXT

A number of ante-Nicene texts refer to Matt 27:52–53.⁴⁵ These include Ign. *Mgn.* 10 (middle recension; d. 117–38); *T. Levi* 4 (c. 150–200); Egerton Papyrus 3 (c. 225); Tertullian, *Adv. Jud.* 13 (c. 198–206); Pseudo-Clement, *Recognitions* 1.41 (4th cent.); Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 6.6 (c. 198–203); Julius Africanus, *Chronology* 18 (c. 225–250); numerous works by Origen including *Cels.* 2.33 (c. 248–249); *Comm. ser. Matt.* 12.43 (c. 248–249); *Cant.* 3.13; *Comm. Jo.* 19.16 §103); and a Syriac document containing the Agbar legend described in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 1.13 (before 325).

Although space does not permit a detailed discussion of each of these references, several important insights may be gleaned from the early history of interpretation. First, despite the modern inclination to interpret the passage as merely symbolic, poetic, or apocalyptic, early interpreters regarded the text as recording actual history. Tendencies toward spiritualization were restricted to the reference to the entrance into the holy city. Both Origen and Egerton Papyrus 3 identify this “holy city” as heaven. However, even Origen insisted that the resurrection of the saints described by Matthew was a literal bodily resurrection, not merely an ascent of the soul. Some appear to have believed that these resurrected saints later ascended with Jesus (Clement of Alexandria; Syriac Legend of Agbar).

Second, early interpreters saw the phenomena as an expression of Jesus’s deity, glory, and power (Origen and *T. Levi*), and/or an expression of judgment on the unrepentant Jews (Tertullian, *Recognitions*, and *T. Levi*).

Third, in his commentary on the Song of Solomon, Origen interpreted this resurrection of the saints as simultaneous with Jesus’s resurrection. This suggests that Origen may have interpreted the text in the manner suggested in modern times by Wenham. However, in his commentary on Matthew and in *Contra Celsum*, he indicates that this resurrection occurred at the time of Jesus’s passion. Julius Africanus, Tertullian, *Recognitions*, the Syriac document quoted by Eusebius, and the *Testament of Levi* likewise view this resurrection as concurrent with Jesus’s crucifixion. Thus these early interpreters generally support the punctuation and interpretation affirmed in this essay.

Fourth, Ignatius, and apparently Origen, believed that the resurrection of the saints involved the prophets of the OT era such as Moses and Elijah. Ignatius ap-

⁴⁴ See Quarles, *A Theology of Matthew* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 99–107.

⁴⁵ Although Evans (*Matthew*, 466) states that “the peculiar vv. 52–53 are not cited and evidently not alluded to in the writings of the church fathers prior to the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D.,” this section on reception of the text shows that external text-critical evidence strongly supports the authenticity of this passage.

pears to limit the resurrection to the prophets. Origen includes many others along with the prophets.

With the exception of the spiritualization of the “holy city” found in Origen and Egerton Papyrus 3, the major features of interpretation of Matt 27:51–52 prior to the Council of Nicaea fit well with the interpretation suggested above.

VI. CONCLUSION

Matthew 27:51–53 is an historical account of phenomena that actually accompanied Jesus’s death. These phenomena both warn of the judgment that will befall the unrepentant Jews and demonstrate that Jesus’s death fulfills Scripture, initiates the new covenant, and unleashes the power of new creation. The passage so masterfully summarizes some of the Gospel’s most important theological themes that one can hardly imagine someone other than the author of the Gospel composing it. Thus theories that the passage is a scribal interpolation or a preexisting Jewish text adapted by Matthew are highly doubtful. The text is integral to the Gospel and distills some of Matthew’s most important theological themes.