

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #59:
THE BIBLICAL “WALKING DEAD”--A CURIOUS GOSPEL ACCOUNT
By John Temples

There is a strange and startling account in Matthew’s gospel (he is the only gospel writer who records it) connected with the death of Jesus and His resurrection. Here is the record:

“And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many. So when the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they feared greatly, saying, ‘Truly this was the Son of God!’” (Matthew 27:50-54)

There were six miraculous phenomena connected with the death of the Lord:

1. *Three hours of supernatural darkness.* “Now from the sixth hour [noon] until the ninth hour [3 pm] there was darkness over all the land” (Matthew 27:45).
2. *The death of Jesus at a precise time of His choosing.* At the ninth hour (3 pm), Jesus died (Matthew 27:46, 50). Literally, verse 50 says that Jesus “dismissed His spirit”--He chose the exact moment of His death, something no mere human being could do.
3. *The tearing of the veil of the temple by an unseen hand.* This also occurred at the moment of the Lord’s death (Matthew 27:51a).
4. *A miraculously timed earthquake* (Matthew 27:51b, 54).
5. *The opening of certain graves* (Matthew 27:52).
6. *The resurrection and appearances of certain saints in Jerusalem* (Matthew 27:52b-53).

In this article we are concerned only with the last two phenomena--the miraculous opening of the graves and the resurrection of certain saints. This account is

curious, to say the least. One Internet writer well expressed the usual reaction: “To the popular imagination, this tale might seem suggestive of a zombie horror: tombs crack open, the dead walk and march upon civilisation [sic]. Perhaps it's not meant to be scary, but it's jarring on many levels and it's not clear what we're meant to feel about this moment.”

Among the odd things about this account are these facts: (1) Only Matthew records it. (2) This resurrection of saints is never mentioned again in any of the gospels or the rest of the New Testament. (3) We are not told who these people were or what happened to them later.

It's been said that everybody loves a mystery. Well, this is certainly one! Let us see if we can at least partially solve it by asking and answering a series of questions:

1. Since only Matthew records this event, could verses 52 and 53 be a spurious part of the text, not part of the original genuine record--perhaps added by a later scribe?
2. Was this just a symbolic or figurative resurrection?
3. Who were the saints who were raised?
4. How many were raised?
5. When were they raised and when did they appear in Jerusalem?
6. Were the saints raised in their same mortal bodies only to die again as was Lazarus, or in glorious resurrection bodies?
7. What became of these saints after their appearance in the city?
8. What is the meaning of this resurrection vis a vis the resurrection of Jesus?

FIRST QUESTION: Since this account is only found in Matthew, could verses 52 and 53 be a spurious part of the text, not part of the original inspired record--perhaps added by a later scribe?

ANSWER: Although a few Bible texts are disputed as to their presence or absence in the original documents, Matthew 27:52-53 is not one of them. Biblical scholars are essentially unanimous in affirming the genuineness of verses 52 and 53. Here are some references (emphasis mine):

- “*There are no manuscripts of Matthew in Greek, Latin or Aramaic that omit these verses. All the textual families have the verse...The patristic literature¹ also contains these verses, indicating that they are either original or an early addition to the biblical text.*”
(<https://www.truthortradition.com/articles/what-about-matthew-2752-and-53>)
- “Plummer said, ‘There is no textual evidence that the passage is an interpolation.’” (Burton Coffman’s Commentary)
- “Since this incident seems so odd, and since it is not confirmed by Mark and Luke, the first response to it is to check that it has a reliable manuscript tradition. Yet *the passage is in all the earliest manuscripts of Matthew*. Textually the oddity of the passage means that it would be more likely to be omitted than added. *So that leads textual scholars unanimously to confirm it is part of the authentic text.*” (<http://bibleq.net/answer/6930/>)

SECOND QUESTION: Was this just a symbolic or figurative resurrection?

ANSWER: No; it was a real, historical raising of actual persons. We know this for at least three reasons: (1) A fundamental rule of Biblical interpretation says that we are to take statements as literal unless there is compelling evidence of figurative meaning. (2) This event is part of a series of real, historical events (the death of Christ, the earthquake, etc.) There is nothing to indicate that it is anything different. (3) Matthew is very specific about the real physical nature of this resurrection. He does not say, “Many saints who had fallen asleep were raised.” He says, “Many *bodies* of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.”

THIRD QUESTION: Who were the saints who were raised?

ANSWER: Whoever they were, they were buried in or near Jerusalem. Some believe that they were Old Testament saints of centuries past (such as Joshua, Abraham, Isaac, David, etc.); but very few if any of the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament were buried at Jerusalem. Furthermore, the record implies that

¹ A reference to the writings of the early “church fathers” of the second century.

those raised were recognizable and known to the current residents of Jerusalem. None of the historical persons of centuries before would be recognized by them. Speaking of David, we can be absolutely sure that he was not one of the risen saints, because on the Day of Pentecost, Peter assured the crowds that David was dead and buried, and his tomb was still known (Acts 2:29).

More likely, they were faithful Jewish disciples of Jesus² who had recently died. “[It] seems reasonable to assume Matthew is talking about some recently deceased saints, those with relatives still living, not the dead from centuries earlier. Simply because in the days before photographs and ID cards if a dead person from an earlier generation had been raised and entered the city he could not actually prove to anyone that he had been raised. The others raised in Old and New Testament were all immediately recognized by their relatives. A random person from an earlier generation entering the city and claiming to have been raised would simply have been dismissed as crazy.”

(<http://bibleq.net/answer/6930/>)

FOURTH QUESTION: How many were raised?

ANSWER: We simply cannot tell. If they were faithful disciples of Jesus (see previous question), they would have been residents of Jerusalem who died during the 3-½ years of Jesus’s ministry, so perhaps numbered at most in the tens (certainly not in the hundreds). One Internet writer noted that “in the context of such an odd occurrence even five or six would be ‘many.’”

FIFTH QUESTION: When were they raised and when did they appear in Jerusalem? (What was the time sequence of this event?)

ANSWER: It’s important to consider whether these people were raised BEFORE or AFTER Christ’s resurrection. Here is Matthew’s order of events:

1. Jesus dies on the cross (3 pm Friday).
2. At that instant, the veil of the temple is split, an earthquake occurs, causing certain graves to be opened.

² In the Gospels and Epistles, the word “saint” invariably refers to faithful followers of Jesus.

3. At some point after this, the saints are raised, come out of the graves, and go into Jerusalem.

It is certain from Matthew's account that the graves of the saints were opened on Friday by the earthquake. Scholars are divided, however, on whether their resurrection occurred immediately (on Friday) or on Sunday, some time after Christ's resurrection.

There is a difficulty associated with the idea that the saints were raised on Friday. It is certain from the text that they did not go into Jerusalem until after the Lord's resurrection; so if they were raised on Friday, what did they do for three days? Did they just remain in their tombs? (Some scholars actually think so.) Or did they come out of their graves and just sit around waiting for Sunday to walk into town?

A greater difficulty is that if the saints were resurrected on Friday, then they were raised before Jesus was; and Jesus could not be said to be the "firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20) or the "firstborn from the dead" (Colossians 1:18).

A far more reasonable assumption is that while the graves were opened on Friday, the saints remained dead until Sunday--they were not actually raised to life until Sunday, after the resurrection of Jesus. So this would be the timeline:

1. Jesus dies on the cross at 3 pm Friday.
2. At that instant, the earthquake occurs and some tombs are opened.
However, the people buried in them remain dead.
3. Early Sunday morning, Jesus rises from the dead.
4. Sometime after His resurrection, the saints are raised to life.

Some quotes from the scholars on this issue:

"Some of the tombs were shattered and laid open by the earthquake, and doubtless continued open all the sabbath, since the law would not allow of any attempt to close them on that day: but the dead bodies which were in them did not come to life till Christ's resurrection had taken place, as is implied in the next

clause, for he was the first-born from the dead, Colossians 1:18; and the first-fruits of them that slept, 1 Corinthians 15:20.” (Benson’s Commentary)

“Not BEFORE [Christ’s resurrection], as some have thought, for Christ was himself the FIRST FRUITS of them who slept, 1 Cor 15:20. The graves were opened at his death, by the earthquake, and the bodies came out at his resurrection.” (Adam Clarke's Commentary)

“The scripture also says that the resurrections themselves did not actually occur until after Jesus rose from the dead. This is very important to note. The tombs may have been opened by the quake, but the people themselves did not rise until later.”

(<https://answeringsceptics.wordpress.com/2013/10/24/answering-matthew-2752-53-resurrection-of-many/>)

SIXTH QUESTION: Were the saints raised in their same mortal body as was Lazarus, or in glorious resurrection bodies?

ANSWER: If someone was raised from the dead with a glorified and everlasting body before Jesus was, then that person would have been the “firstfruits from the dead,” and not Jesus. Several individuals have been raised from the dead to *human* life; but Christ is the only one ever yet resurrected to *immortal* life. The Bible reveals that we will not receive our immortal bodies until the resurrection at His second coming (I Thessalonians 4:13-17; I Corinthians 15:50-53).

“The man thrown in Elisha’s tomb, the other raisings in the Old Testament, the raisings performed by Jesus and afterwards in Acts by the Apostles – they all were raised as normal mortals.... None were raised as angels, zombies, spirits, nor elevated to heaven. We know that because 1 Corinthians 15:20-25 says so. Christ was firstborn from the dead, no other.” (<http://bibleq.net/answer/6930/>)

SEVENTH QUESTION: What became of these saints after their appearance in the city?

ANSWER: There are only two possibilities: either (1) they died again soon after, or (2) they died no more, but at the Ascension accompanied Christ into heaven. The Bible affirms that no one will receive their eternal glorious body until the general resurrection (1 Corinthians 15: 35-52). The Bible says nothing further about these people, and it is certainly silent as to their ascension with Christ; leaving us to conclude that they eventually died again. They were surely dead by the time Matthew wrote his gospel (about AD 50 or 60), because he describes them in the past tense. If they were still alive when he wrote, verse 53 would read something like “and they are still around and appearing to many” instead of “they appeared to many.” They must have died again even before Pentecost, which was fifty days after the Passover; otherwise surely Peter would have cited them as proof of resurrection.

“Matthew's wording clearly describes these saints as revived to normal, physical life. Like all humans before and after them who were resurrected, they all died again.”

(<https://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/bible.show/sVerseID/24182/eVerseID/24183>)

EIGHTH QUESTION: What is the meaning of this resurrection vis a vis the resurrection of Jesus?

ANSWER: I see two reasons for God's allowing this resurrection of the saints: (1) for the comfort of the disciples; (2) for the confounding of their enemies.

As to the first thought: after His resurrection, Jesus appeared only to a few select disciples (yet numbering in the hundreds, 1 Corinthians 15:3-8). Many who believed in Him might not have seen Him resurrected. Yet “many” saw their friends or loved ones raised by this gracious act of God. Those who believed in Jesus during His ministry, and whose loved ones had died, might have despaired that their dead would be shut out of the kingdom of Christ, having died before its establishment. “We have thus an adequate reason for their appearance, so that friends and kindred might not sorrow for them as others who had no hope.” (Ellicott's Commentary) These saints were a kind of “firstfruits” of the general resurrection yet to come.

Concerning the second thought, Jesus never appeared to His enemies after His resurrection--they had proven themselves unworthy of such an honor--but He did not leave them without witness and testimony of God's power to raise the dead. He sent them some of their own, known to them, whose resurrection they could not deny.

CONCLUSION

I think this quote from the Pulpit Commentary is a fitting conclusion to our study:

“The whole matter [of the resurrection of the saints] is mysterious and beyond human ken; but we may well believe that at this great crisis the Lord, who is the Resurrection and the Life, willed to exemplify his victory over death. and to make manifest the resurrection of the body, and this he did by releasing some saintly souls from Hades, and clothing them with the forms in which they had formerly lived, and permitting them to show themselves thus to those who knew and loved them. Of the future life of these resuscitated saints we know nothing, and will not presumptuously venture to inquire. When they have demonstrated that the sting was now taken from death, that the power of the grave was broken, that men shall rise again with their bodies and be known and recognized, they pass out of sight into the unseen world, and we can follow them no further.”

--John Temples