

Matthew And Daniel

The theme of Matthew's Gospel gives special significance to the account of the resurrection of the saints in Matt. 27:52–53. That there is a strong link between the book of Daniel and Matthew's Gospel has been acknowledged by scholars for many years. This link is especially strong in Matthew's accounts of the testing of Jesus and His transfiguration. A. D. A. Moses has closely examined the transfiguration pericope in relation especially to Daniel 7 (A. D. A. Moses, *Matthew's Transfiguration Story and Jewish-Christian Controversy* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 89–101.). As he says, "Since (1) Matthew shows considerable interest in Daniel 7 and Danielic motifs, and since (2) he brackets his transfiguration pericope with four Son of Man verses (16.27; 16.28–17.1–8–17.9; 17.12), we may reasonably infer that Matthew has been influenced by Daniel 7" (Ibid., 90–91.). Moses goes on to make a connection between the Danielic motifs and Jesus' resurrection:

The idea of resurrection is not seen in Daniel 7, but there is some evidence of *Matthew* applying Daniel 7 to Jesus' resurrection elsewhere, (a) in Jesus' saying anticipating resurrection (26.64) and (b) in his post-resurrection appearance and exaltation (28.19–20). The latter will be dealt with in Chapter 6. In 26.64 where Jesus' inquisitors are told that 'from now on' they will see the Son of Man coming..., the force of [*ap arti*, "from now on"] has often been missed. [*ap arti*, "from now on"] here, as in 23.39; 26.29, signifies a new period *beginning from now*; and it is arguable that this must in context include the immediately forthcoming events, including Jesus' death-resurrection (note also Matthew's distinctive 'saints-resurrection' motif in 27.52-53). Thus it is arguable that *theologically* Matthew has linked the resurrection with Daniel 7 (Ibid., 98.).

Unless the raising of the saints in Matt. 27:52–53 is taken literally, this association is lost and the significance of this event is completely missed. By not making the connection between Matthew's Gospel and the book of Daniel in terms of Danielic motifs Licona seems to have missed the significance of these events and consequently the evidence that these events actually occurred (Licona does indeed refer to the book of Daniel and many passages in Daniel, but he never makes the connection between these books the way A. D. A. Moses discusses them). An example of this lacuna by Licona is his discussion of the term 'the vision' [*to horama*] as this is used by Matthew in reference to the transfiguration (Licona deals specifically with this term on pages 330–33 of his book, *The Resurrection of Jesus*). Licona deals with this term by considering its use in the LXX and the New Testament. In his conclusions, he does not refer to Matthew's use as a characterization of the transfiguration. A. D. A. Moses, however, focuses on this word as important for understanding Matthew's depiction of the transfiguration: "Of the evangelists Matthew (alone) categorises the transfiguration as [*to horama*] This usage functions as a window into his unique understanding of the transfiguration, since he blends Moses-Sinai particularly with Danielic motifs. This blending in his transfiguration story also contributes to his understanding of the passage in terms of the 'coming of God'"

Moses devotes many pages to his discussion of the Matthew's depiction of the transfiguration and its connection with Daniel 7. He points out that it is not without significance that Daniel uses the same term, *horama*, in his depiction of the coming of the Son of Man in Dan. 7:13: "I kept looking in the night visions [*horamati*], and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him" (NASB). Moses points out the significance of the similarity of structure between Daniel 7 and Matthew's account of the transfiguration:

Dan. 7.13–28 is a passage that includes (1) a 'vision' (7.13–14), (2) the seer's reaction to the vision (7.15 also 28), (3) request for its explanation (7.16, also v. 19), and finally (4) interpretation of the vision (7.16–27, which also takes into consideration the vision in 7.2–12). Matthew's portrayal of the transfiguration is somewhat similar. For (1) the disciples see the 'vision' [*to horama*] of the transfiguration (Mt. 17.2–5). (2) They react to what they saw and heard (17.6–8). (3) They query Elijah's coming (Mt. 17.9–13), presumably prompted by his appearance at the transfiguration, and (4) receive an explanation from Jesus, with Matthew alone stressing that they 'understood'. Mt. 17.9–13, of course, parallels Mk 9.9–13, but Matthew alone describes the transfiguration as [*to horama*] (compare Dan. 7.13 LXX), and, given his use of apocalyptic language in 17.2 (to be compared with 13.34 and Dan. 12.3 etc.), the comparison with Dan. 7.13–18 is arresting (Moses, *Transfiguration*, 91).

The significance of the discussion, as we have alluded to already, is the connection that is made between the account of the transfiguration, with its Danielic motifs, and the resurrection, also in light of Danielic motifs. As A. D. A. Moses pointed out, although Daniel 7 does not refer to a resurrection, the connection with Daniel and Matthew's use of Danielic motifs strongly implies a connection between Danielic motifs and Matthew's account of the resurrection (see block quote above). A. D. A. Moses specifically argues that Matthew links Jesus' resurrection with Daniel 7. Also, he goes on to point out, "Another general but contributory argument is that the concept of 'resurrection' is found in Dan. 12.2–3. This Danielic description of resurrection is drawn on in the M passage Mt. 13.41–43, where it is applied to the final vindication of the 'righteous'" (Moses, *Transfiguration*, 98).

The Daniel passage reads, "Many of those who sleep in the dusty ground will awake – some to everlasting life, and others to shame and everlasting abhorrence. But the wise will shine like the brightness of the heavenly expanse. And those bringing many to righteousness will be like the stars forever and ever" (Dan. 12:2–3 NET).¹ The Greek of Daniel uses the expression "those who sleep," which in the NET Bible is a translation of the participial construction, *tōn katheudontōn*. The use of the concept of sleeping as a euphemism for death is not unusual. However, it is significant that of all the Gospels, only Matthew uses this expression in reference to a resurrection of saints. The following chart provides an interlinear arrangement of the Greek of Matt. 27:52: *kai ta mnemeia aneōchthesan kai polla sōmata tōn kekoimemenōn hagiōn egerthesan*. (I actually could not create an interlinear arrangement because I could not use my Greek font in the blog.)

Table #2: Uses of 'Fallen Asleep' in the Gospels

<p>“The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised” (Matt. 27:52).</p>
<p>“and said, ‘You are to say, “His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep”” (Matt. 28:13).</p>
<p>“When He rose from prayer, He came to the disciples and found them sleeping from sorrow” (Lk. 22:45).</p>
<p>“This He said, and after that He said to them, ‘Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep” (Jn. 11:11).</p>
<p>“The disciples then said to Him, ‘Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover” (Jn. 11:12).</p>

This connection between Daniel and Matthew indicates the necessity of taking the statement in Matt. 27:52 as an historical event. Also, this connection is used by Matthew as evidence that Jesus is the promised Messiah of Daniel’s prophecies. By taking references in Matthew’s Gospel, such as 27:52–53, as non-historical, Licona has inadvertently robbed the text of its witness to the Messiahship of Jesus.

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The Real Issue

It is amazing that so many people have so little understanding of the real issue in the Geisler/Licona debate. Having discussed this issue with both Mike Licona and Norman Geisler, I think I can clarify what is actually going on. In his book on the resurrection, Licona says that statements in Matt. 27:52-53 are apocalyptic and therefore do not refer to any actual historical events because, as apocalyptic, Matthew did not intend that they be taken as historical. Geisler argues that this is a denial of inerrancy while Licona claims that this is a matter of interpretation, not inerrancy.

First of all, it is unprecedented that an author, including Matthew, would stick a piece of apocalyptic literature in the midst of historical reports, but let us assume that this is the case. Licona and others have argued that, as apocalyptic literature, Matthew did not intend that this statement be taken as historical fact. Not only is it nearly impossible to know with any degree of certainty what the intent of an author was, it is even more difficult to prove one's suppositions about an author's intent. In a comical video designed to ridicule Norman Geisler, the ghost of Christmas past takes Geisler back to 1983 and the ETS controversy surrounding a member who was accused of denying inerrancy. At one point, the ghost asks Geisler something like this: "Isn't an author's intent part of understanding the text?" The maker of the video has Geisler answering yes to this question. Unfortunately, the makers of this video did not bother to try to understand either Geisler or his position on such an issue, and Geisler has written enough that it would take far less energy to discover his position than to produce a video. Geisler would never have answered yes to such a question. All it would have taken for the makers of the video to understand Geisler's position would have been actually read some of his writings, especially his article on "Does Purpose Determine Meaning."

The point of Geisler's article was to demonstrate that since it is nearly impossible to know an author's purpose/intent, an interpreter cannot use his suppositions about intent to determine the meaning of his text. That being the case, Licona and those who try to defend him on this point are utterly mistaken about resting their argument on suppositions about Matthew's intent. We cannot know Matthew's intent, and, consequently, we cannot use that supposition as a basis to tell us what Matthew's text means.

But, let us suppose that we can know Matthew's intent and that this intent is that these two verses are apocalyptic literature, this does not in fact eliminate the problem. In defense of Licona's claim, Licona and others have attempted to appeal to an analogy between statements in Revelation and the statements in Matthew's Gospel. For example, some have argued that if we take Matthew's statement literally, we would have to believe that Satan is a literal dragon. But this completely misses the point. In Revelation, although Satan is indeed not a literal dragon, the symbol of the dragon symbolizes a literal Satan, a being that actually exists. An analogy of Matthew's statements with Revelation is a faulty analogy. What Licona is saying is not that the raising of some of the bodies of the saints is an apocalyptic statement about a real event, but that such an event did not in fact occur. But this is not what biblical apocalyptic statements do. In

Revelation, if indeed it is apocalyptic literature, which is not at all backed by scholarly opinion, the apocalyptic statements are indeed symbolic, but they are always symbolic of some actual reality, and the events in Revelation, though symbolized, are nevertheless actual events; either events that have occurred or events that will yet occur. Licona is saying that Matthew did not intend that the reference to the raising of some bodies of the saints be understood as referring to actual events. This is a totally different matter. Secondly, Licona and others claim that Licona's position is a matter of interpretation, not a matter of inerrancy. The problem with this claim is that the word 'interpretation' is very ambiguous. If we use the term 'interpretation' to mean what the words and phrases say as linguistic and syntactical units, then Licona is simply wrong. Understanding the meaning of the words and statements as linguistic/syntactical units does not yet address the question of whether the statements refer to actual historical events. Everyone who reads these verses understands the same linguistic/syntactical meaning of the words: "And tombs were opened, and the bodies of many saints who had died were raised. (They came out of the tombs after his resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.)" (Matt. 27:52-53). The tombs were opened, the bodies were raised, etc. That is simply the linguistic/syntactical meaning of the words and phrases. Once we have established what the linguistic/syntactical meaning is, then we should go on to address the question of whether those events actually occurred. So, for Licona et al. to claim that Licona's claim is just a matter of interpretation are seriously misrepresenting the case, and, I think, seriously misunderstanding the case.

Now, if by the term 'interpretation' we mean inferences and/or implications from the text that we might draw, or whether the statements refer to actual events, or genre classifications, or other aspects that the term 'interpretation' has been used to mean over the years, Licona is certainly not wrong, but in this case his claim is certainly irrelevant to the issue. Although it may be interpretation in the latter sense, to say that Matthew's statement does not refer to any actual historical event(s) is simply not a matter of interpretation in the former sense. Rather, it is a matter of whether Matthew was telling the truth or not. As we have said, even apocalyptic statements are symbols of actual historical things or events, and, whether apocalyptic or not, there is nothing in the text that would lead one to think that Matthew is not referring to actual historical events. So, if the events did not actually occur, then Matthew's text is presenting these events as if they occurred when in fact they did not. This is clearly a matter of inerrancy.

An even more obvious instance is when Licona says certain statements in John's Gospel are candidates for embellishment. An embellishment is when an author puts something in the text which he knows did not occur, but he puts it in for effect or impact. In another place Licona says that John actually changed the hour of the day from what the other Gospel writers reported and that John purposely made this change when he knew it was not the actual time. Licona is saying John actually misrepresented the time. What can this be if not lying? And it is certainly not a matter of interpretation. Licona is denying inerrancy, unequivocally.

Licona is not saying that this is merely apocalyptic literature, but that, as apocalyptic literature, Matthew did not intend for these statements be taken as referring to historical

events. Even in the wildly fantastic statements in Enoch, one can only assume that Enoch believed that the events he describes actually occurred. Whether they occurred or not, Enoch presents them as actual events. Nowhere does Enoch say he did not believe his apocalyptic descriptions and symbols referred to actual historical events, so we can only grant that he in fact did believe this. Now, if it turns out that the events Enoch described did not actually occur, then we would be justified in saying his text was in error and Enoch was mistaken.

This is the same thing Geisler is saying about Licona's claims. Licona claims that the events in Matt. 27:52-53 did not actually occur because, as apocalyptic literature, Matthew did not intend them to be taken as referring to historical events. But Licona cannot know Matthew's intent, and even if he did, it does not follow that because a text is apocalyptic that it cannot or does not refer to historical events. To claim that the events in Matthew's text did not actually occur is simply not a matter of interpretation. Even if we take Matthew's text to be apocalyptic, which is by no means certain, Matthew presents the events as actual historical events or as symbols of actual historical events, but nevertheless as events that actually happened. If they did not occur, Matthew's Gospel is in error, and this is certainly a matter of inerrancy.

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