

Matthew 27:51-54 Revisited: A Narratological Re-Appropriation

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INTRODUCTION

At the moment of Jesus' death on the cross, after crying out with an earth-rending voice and yielding his spirit (Matt 27:50), Matthew recounts several cataclysmic events for his readers. He includes five signs¹ that accompany Jesus' death: 1) the curtain of the temple is torn (v. 51a), 2) the earth shakes (v. 51b), 3) the rocks split (v. 51c), 4) the tombs open (v. 52a), and 5) lifeless people whom Matthew calls "*hagiōn*" are raised to life (v. 52b).² The most perplexing of these cosmic events is the resurrection of the dead saints. Their resurrection from the dead has confounded interpreters and led to many crucial interpretive questions: What kind of bodies did these "holy people" have? Did they die again? How public was their appearance and how many people saw them? Were they raised *before* or *after* Jesus' resurrection from the dead? If they were raised before, what did they do after they were raised but before Jesus was resurrected (did they just wait in their tombs)? Was their resurrection like that of

Lazarus in John 11 or like the resurrection described by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, i.e., glorified bodies? Is it possible that these “saints” were taken up to heaven like Enoch (Gen 5:24)? Was Matthew speaking of a historical event or merely using apocalyptic and metaphorical language here in his Gospel narrative?

Though these questions highlight the difficulty in ascertaining the meaning of this text, this Matthean pericope informs the way one understands the conclusion of Matthew’s Gospel, particularly the scenes surrounding these events (Matt 27:32-50 and 27:55-28:20), and has implications of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. The way Matthew constructs the narrative sets the stage in his Gospel storyline by means of the “lesser” resurrection of the saints since it anticipates the public vindication of Jesus before his enemies—he is not dead, he rose just as he said he would (Matt 28:6 cf. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19). For Matthew, the resurrection of the saints creates literary anticipation through narratological parallelism—the hero of the story, Jesus, dies and some other unidentified dead are made alive—and the vindicating resurrection of Jesus brings the plot of his Gospel to its literary resolution. Utilizing narratological parallelism—i.e., reading the biblical text with the type of literary sensibilities that enable interpreters to discern authorial devices such as contrast and irony and narrative progression or development in the midst of a narrative account, amid other literary devices—Matthew accentuates that Jesus’ “greater”³ resurrection is what the religious leaders were afraid of—it proved that they were wrong about him; he is actually God’s Son. So they propagate a lie and further prove themselves to be evil (Matt 28:12-15). His “greater” resurrection proves to his doubting disciples that he is truly alive and that he does indeed have “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Matt 28:18). His “greater” resurrection gives hope to all of his followers, for we know that the Lord is the resurrected Christ. He has conquered sin and death and hell; and now he is both God with us as we go about proclaiming and offering a gospel of repentance and forgiveness of sins (28:20 cf. 1:23) and he is God in us, empowering us by the Holy Spirit that he and the Father have sent to us (John 20:19-23; Acts 1:8, 2:4; 1 Cor 6:19; Eph 1:13-14).

It is not surprising, then, that interpreters have labored to apply this pivotal text across the span of interpretive history in their respective hermeneutical and homiletical endeavors. The interpretive confusion results from a false

assumption that the resurrection of the saints is either a glorified resurrection and, therefore, displaced in the Matthean Gospel narrative, or is ahistorical and merely apocalyptically flavors the narrative scene. It is for this reason that further study of the Matthean pericope is required. Utilizing the tools of narratology, this article aims to assist interpreters in bridging the text's interpretive chasm. Further, this work intends to show that a narratological reading of Matthew 27:51-54 needs to be adopted; such a reading will deepen one's understanding of this Matthean passage, revealing that its meaning is about more than its canonical relationship with 1 Corinthians 15:20, Colossians 1:18, and Revelation 1:5.

A SOLUTION FOR THE DILEMMA

I suggest that the answer to the hermeneutical dilemma presented in this Matthean pericope can be answered by 1) reading the conclusion to Matthew's Gospel narrative narratologically,⁴ 2) understanding the resurrection of the saints in Matthew 27:52-53 as both historical and Lazarus-like, 3) understanding the five signs along with the resulting confession of the centurion as connoting the Christological and missiological significance of Jesus' life-giving cross-death, and 4) noticing that Matthew has used the scene in 27:51-54 to set up the scene of Jesus' resurrection from the dead recorded in 28:1-10 to accentuate the aforementioned significances. In this article I intend to show that Matthew parallels the resurrection pericopes in 27:51-54 and 28:1-10 to accentuate the Christological and missiological implications of Jesus' life-giving cross-death and death-defying vindication from the grave.

Some of the missiological implications are manifested in how the Pharisees challenged Jesus' divine Sonship (27:40, 43), and it is precisely the signs surrounding his horrific death that testify so loudly that even the Gentiles believe (27:54). Thus, the "lesser" resurrection of the saints anticipates the future "greater" resurrection of Jesus in his Gospel narrative and it visibly manifests Jesus' identity as the Son of God; the "lesser" resurrection of the saints anticipates the future gospel mission to the ends of the earth (Matt 28:16-20).

A thorough perusal of the Matthean passion narrative manifests the narratological parallelism used by the Gospel author to accentuate these theological

motifs—namely, Christological impact of the scene and a missiological agenda for the world. This can be seen in the chart that follows:

Matthew 27:45-66	Matthew 27:62-28:15
darkness (27:45)	dawn (28:1)
earth shook (27:51)	earthquake (28:2)
raised (27:52)	risen (28:6)
tomb (27:52-53)	tomb (28:1)
the holy city (27:53) ⁵	the city (28:11)
	those guarding (28:4)
centurion (27:54)	the guards (28:11)
	soldiers (28:12)
fear (27:54)	fear (28:4,5,8,10)
genuine profession (27:54)	false profession (28:13-15)
Mary Magdalene and Mary (27:56)	Mary Magdalene ... Mary (28:1)
Joseph of Arimathea before Pilate (27:57)	the chief priests before Pilate (27:62)
great stone (27:60)	the stone (28:2)
attempt to guard the tomb (27:62-66)	unable to guard (28:4)

Chart 1. Narratological Parallelism in Matthew 27-28

While interpreters may be able to recall a number of proposed literary readings that have overextended themselves hermeneutically, Matthew’s narratological intentionality in the conclusion of his Gospel narrative is evident. As he has at other points in his Gospel, Matthew utilizes narratological parallelism to emphasize theological truth as well as Jesus’ identity. Two character examples from the Gospel narrative’s introduction along with one example from the scenes surrounding Jesus’ birth and death as well as one macro-structural example of the Gospel will suffice to manifest his intentionality in the use of this literary device.⁶ Firstly, Herod the King (Matt 2:1) is paralleled in the narrative with Jesus, the newborn King of the Jews (Matt 2:2). The archetype of the longed for Davidic King has arrived in Jesus; unlike Herod, “rival” rulers do not frustrate his Kingdom. Secondly, the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry is paralleled in the narrative with the beginning of John the Baptist’s earthly ministry—both have wilderness experiences (Matt 3:1; 4:1); both begin their homiletical endeavors by heralding the same message, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt

3:2; 4:17). The prophet like Moses has come in the person of Jesus (Deut 18:15-22; John 6:14)—he is greater than John; he leads righteously through the wilderness without succumbing to temptation as did his Adamic and Mosaic forefathers (Gen 3:6; Num 20:10-13). Thirdly, scenes surrounding Jesus' birth are paralleled in the narrative with scenes surrounding Jesus' death. Thus, when Jesus was born, children were slaughtered (Matt 2:16); when Jesus died, the dead were raised to life (Matt 27:52). Fourthly, not only has Matthew employed narratological parallelism by contrasting characters and scenes within his Gospel narrative, he has employed this parallelism in the structure of his work as a whole:

	1-4	Introduction: Birth and Beginnings of Jesus' Earthly Ministry
	5-7	Sermonic-Discourse: Sermon on the Mount/Entering the Kingdom
	8-9	Narrative-Discourse: The Authority of Jesus to Heal
	10	Sermonic-Discourse: Missiological Sermon to the Community
	11-12	Narrative-Discourse: Rejection of Jesus as the Christ by this generation
	13	Sermonic-Discourse: Parabolic Sermon on the Kingdom
	14-17	Narrative-Discourse: Recognition of Jesus as the Christ by the Disciples
	18	Sermonic-Discourse: Ecclesiological Sermon to the Community
	19-23	Narrative-Discourse: The Authority of Jesus Challenged
	24-25	Sermonic-Discourse: Eschatological Discourse/Coming of the Kingdom
	26-28	Conclusion: Death and End of Jesus' Earthly Ministry

Chart 2: Macro-Chiastic Structure of Matthew's Gospel⁷

The question, then, is “*why* did Matthew employ this intentionality in Matthew 27:45-28:15?” It seems that his narratological parallelism is intended to accentuate Jesus' identity—the earth he created mourns (Matt 27:45) and breaks (Matt 27:51) at his death, giving back the dead as a testimony to his dominion as the Son of God (Matt 28:18). Further, Matthew's intentional parallelism is intended to accentuate the mission Jesus' death necessitates—his death is life-giving and ultimately salvific for persons from every nation who profess faith in his name (28:16-20; cf. 27:54). In his death and burial, Jesus bears much fruit just as the seed of wheat that bears much fruit by falling to the earth (John 12:24).⁸ Matthew concludes his Gospel with an *inclusio* that has missiological implications—Jesus “bears fruit” through the disciples with whom he promises to be with until the end of the age as they are on mission for the renown of the triune name (Matt 28:20; cf. 1:23).

The main idea here is that despite the variety of ways exegetes have read this controversial Matthean pericope, the hermeneutical key to 27:51-54 is

1) reading the conclusion to Matthew's Gospel narratologically, 2) understanding the resurrection of the saints in 27:52-53 as both historical and Lazarus-like, 3) understanding the five signs and the resulting confession of the centurion as connoting the Christological and missiological significance of Jesus' life-giving cross-death, and 4) noticing that Matthew uses the scene in 27:51-54 to set up the scene of Jesus' resurrection from the dead recorded in 28:1-10 to accentuate the aforementioned significances. Further, Matthew parallels the resurrection pericopes in 27:51-54 and 28:1-10 to accentuate the Christological and missiological implications of Jesus' life-giving death and death-defying vindication from the grave.

MATTHEW 27:51-54 IN RECENT HISTORY OF RESEARCH

Matthew 27:51-54 in Biblical Studies

Scholars have produced massive tomes on resurrection in the New Testament as well as major exegetical works on Matthew's Gospel. As a result, the pericope under consideration has received a great deal of attention, as will be seen below. There is, however, a significant gap in the amount of attention given specifically to the narratological aspects of the pericope as they relate to Matthew 28 as well as the pericope's Christological and missiological implications when contending for Lazarus-like resurrection. Below I will briefly examine noteworthy scholars who have postulated translation issues, apocalyptic resurrection theses, narrative interpretations, and varying historical claims in their appropriation of this Matthean pericope.⁹

Delvin D. Hutton

Delvin Hutton's work, *The Resurrection of the Holy Ones (MT 27:51b-53): A Study of the Theology of the Matthean Passion Narrative*, is a redaction-critical analysis of the Matthean pericope that begins by briefly summarizing three ways Matthew 27:51-54 has been appropriated hermeneutically—to advocate *descensus Christi ad infernos* ("the descent of Christ into hell or the dead"), to advocate the death of a Hellenistic "divine man," and to advocate cosmic participation in the death of a cosmic deity.¹⁰ He contends that these are "hermeneutically inadequate"¹¹ and seeks to show that the pericopal scene has been both reshaped and replaced in the narrative by Matthew for theological purposes. Further, he clearly states, "It will be noted at no time

does the writer concern himself with the question, ‘Did it really happen; is it empirically verifiable?’”¹² Rather, the question he concerned himself with throughout his thesis is, “What was the meaning of the tradition expressed in Mt 27:51b-53 for the individual evangelist and for the community in which and for whom he composed his Gospel?”¹³

Hutton concludes that the scene Matthew crafted in his Gospel is a combination of the Markan material and oral epiphanic or “manifestation” traditions.¹⁴ He contends that the placement of the redacted material belonged originally with the scene Matthew portrays in the following chapter, Matthew 28:2-4.¹⁵ He suggests, then, that Matthew’s rearrangement of the material is to accentuate a new eschatological reality.¹⁶ More specifically, he contends that Matthew has crafted a scene with the resurrection of “*tōn kekoimēmenōn hagiōn*”¹⁷ as he relied on apocalyptic traditions in order to emphasize the eschatological nature of Jesus’ death on the cross.¹⁸ The portents surrounding Jesus’ cross-death connote that something decisive in salvation-history has occurred in the death of Jesus.

Delvin Hutton helpfully notes that the pericope under consideration is eschatologically oriented and marked with apocalyptic imagery. Further, he rightly asserts that Matthew’s work is “theologically arranged.”¹⁹ Yet, his redaction-critical work ultimately places the resurrection of “*tōn kekoimēmenōn hagiōn*” after Jesus’ resurrection from the dead and misreads the narratology manifest in the scene.

John W. Wenham²⁰

In 1981, John Wenham published his article, “When Were the Saints Raised: A Note on the Punctuation of Matthew xxvii. 51-53,” that argued for a full stop punctuation (i.e., a period) in the middle of Matthew 27:52.²¹ He suggested that it was inappropriate for translators to translate *aneōchthēsan* without punctuation because it wrongly ties the resurrection of “*tōn... hagiōn*” to events that occurred on Good Friday after Jesus yielded up his spirit on the Cross (Matt 27:50). To substantiate his thesis, he argues that “*kai exelthontes...pollois*” forms a partial parenthesis. That is, the words “*kai exelthontes...pollois*” are parenthetical, but they lack a subject within the versification in which they are currently found. Rather, Wenham argues, the subject is found in the previous verse, Matthew 27:52—*polla sōmata*. Consequently, he contends that this places the resurrection of the saints

with the events that follow instead of the events that precede—namely, he claims that the saints are both resurrected *and* come out of the tombs *after* Jesus’ resurrection from the dead.²² According to Wenham, then, the translation of Matthew 27:51-53 would read as follows: “And the earth quaked, and the rocks split, and the tombs were opened. And, many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised and came out of the tombs after [Jesus’] resurrection and they went into the holy city and appeared to many.”

Wenham’s concerns are twofold. First, the temporal lapse between the opening of the tombs caused by the earthquake in Matthew 27:51 and the subsequent resurrection of the many sleeping saints neatly places the events after Jesus’ resurrection and maintains his title as the firstborn from the dead (*aparchē tōn kekoimēmenōn*) (1 Cor 15:20; cf. Col 1:18; Rev. 1:5). Second, he wants to tie the resurrection of the saints with Jesus’ vindicating resurrection from the dead in Matthew 28:1-10. For Wenham, their resurrection is caused by Jesus’ resurrection; this causal relationship accentuates the power of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, a resurrecting power accessible to “all who fall asleep in Jesus.”²³ Therefore, he connects the resurrection of the saints with the resurrection of Jesus to emphasize his “defeating the powers of evil.”²⁴

John Wenham’s interpretive instinct to connect the resurrection of “*tōn kekoimēmenōn hagiōn*” (Matt 27:52-53) with Jesus’ resurrection (Matt 28:6) is correct. Close examination of the narrative manifests that Matthew has placed the pericopes parallel to each other in order to make clear the Christological and missiological implications of the passage. Wenham, however, incorrectly assumes that the raising of “*tōn kekoimēmenōn hagiōn*” threatens Jesus’ right as “*aparchē tōn kekoimēmenōn*” (1 Cor 15:20). Rather, Matthew intends for his readers to interpret the raising of the sleeping saints as Lazarus-like and testimonial. As his power was demonstrated and naysayers’ mocking comments were overturned when he restored the life of the sleeping-dead-girl (Matt 9:24-25), so now through the cosmic portents once again his divine power is on display as the dead are raised to life as a testimony (Matt 27:52-53). As his fame was heralded for overturning death previously (Matt 9:26), so now Matthew recounts that his fame is heralded in *tēn hagian polin* and, ultimately, to the ends of the earth (Matt 28:16-20).

Jack Dean Kingsbury

Jack Kingsbury argues for a literary approach to reading the Bible by means of narrative criticism. In his work, *Matthew as Story*, he describes his interpretive approach as a literary-critical approach to reading the gospel narrative. His project consciously moves away from “the historical-biographical, the form-critical, and the redaction-critical” approaches to the interpretation of Matthew’s Gospel.²⁵ Following Chatman, he analyzes the final form of Matthew as a unified narrative by arguing that the Gospel, like all other narratives, has two parts—the Gospel’s story and the Gospel’s discourse.²⁶ The story, according to Kingsbury, is composed of the events that comprise Jesus’ life from his birth to his death-defying resurrection; the discourse, then, is the medium by which this story is told to Matthew’s readers.²⁷ Throughout this work, he accentuates literary elements in his reading of the divine story—arrangement and development of theological themes in the narrative, irony, contrast, and character development—that Matthew recounts.²⁸ Kingsbury’s narrative-critical reading is further developed in his work, *Gospel Interpretation*, where he contends that discernment of the narrative’s arrangement is central to interpretation. The “arrangement” of the narrative is intended by the author to solicit a desired response from the readers; discernment of the “arrangement” of events or time or place or topic gives meaning to the plot of the story. Discerning the plot, for Kingsbury, enables the exegete to interpret the “positioning of each episode within the story and the literary role this episode plays within the story as a whole.”²⁹ In relation to Matthew 27:51-54, Kingsbury contends that Matthew used the recounting of the supernatural portents in his narrative to 1) substantiate Jesus’ claim to be the Son of God through “the counter-assertion, elicited by God himself” through the cosmic events surrounding Jesus’ death,³⁰ and 2) to bring the third part of his Gospel story to its initial narrative climax.³¹

Another of Kingsbury’s contributions in *Matthew as Story* is utilizing his literary-critical approach to interpret the actions of the antagonists in Matthew’s narrative. For Kingsbury, next to the Gospel’s protagonist, Jesus, no group represented in the story influences the events narrated in Matthew’s Gospel more than the antagonists, the religious leaders.³² Their hostile actions toward Jesus stem from their assumption that they are protecting the Jewish people from a pseudo-messiah. The narrative, however, describes their actions as positively moving the Gospel’s story toward its resolution.

Further, their actions not only repeatedly fulfill Jesus' mission and move the narrative forward, but they also fulfill Scriptures that prophesied his redeeming mission.³³ Kingsbury's analysis, then, enables one to see more clearly how the actions of Jesus' antagonists achieve the salvation for the world (Matt 28:16-20; cf. 27:54). Their God-rejecting actions preceding the scene of Matthew 27:51-54 accentuate the tension created by the narrative when the Gentile centurion confesses Jesus to be "*theou huios ên houtos*" (Matt 27:54). His confession manifests that the cosmic portents are not only Christological, in that they demonstrate that Jesus' cross-death is a life-giving death, but they are also missiological as both resurrected Jewish saints and a Roman Gentile testify to his identity as God the Father's Son.³⁴

Jack Kingsbury's narratological emphasis enables readers to discern more keenly theologically arranged literary structure, through which the Gospel writers obviously intended to communicate truth. In relation to Matthew 27:51-54, Kingsbury's analysis fails to note the narratological parallelism as well as the connection between Jesus' divine identity and gospel mission, both of which are conveyed in Matthew 27:51-54 and 28:1-10.

Ronald D. Witherup

Under Kingsbury's tutelage Kingsbury, Ronald Witherup wrote his dissertation: "The Cross of Jesus: A Literary-Critical Study of Matthew 27."³⁵ His thesis is that "Matthew 27 is the central and most important section in the passion/resurrection complex which concludes Matthew's Gospel (26-28)."³⁶ Further, he contends that the events surrounding Jesus' cross-death in Matthew 27 bring together four central themes that are prominent in Matthew's Gospel: "salvation-history, prophecy and fulfillment, discipleship, and most importantly, the theme of Jesus' identity as the royal, obedient and faithful Son of God."³⁷ Commenting on the pericope, he notes that it "is the climax of the entire chapter" since it should be read as "portraying the consequences of Jesus' death."³⁸ For Witherup, the silence of the historical scene is broken by means of the divine portents through which God speaks.³⁹ His final conclusion is that the pericope is "displaced." That is, Matthew has a literary proclivity of completing a story line that he interjects into the main thought.⁴⁰ For Witherup, this solves the interpretive conundrum created by the phrase "*meta tēn ergersin autou*" (27:53). Their resurrection further accentuates Jesus' resurrection as a climactic event; Matthew's intention in

recording it in Matthew 27:52-53 is to proleptically prepare the reader for the events of Matthew 28:1-10.

Though his literary interpretation of Matthew 27 helpfully accentuates the care with which Matthew crafted the passion narrative that concludes his Gospel, Ronald Witherup's reading falls short by displacing a historical event from the historical scene in which it occurs. If Matthew intended for the resurrection of the saints to read as a result of Jesus' resurrection, it seems odd that his placement of it is interjected into the midst of other cosmic portents that narrate events occurring as a result of his death, not his resurrection.

Ulrich Luz

After a redaction-critical analysis of the structure of Matthew 27:51-54 along with the sources utilized by Matthew to compose the passage, Luz offers an overview of the pericope's reception history and notes that interpretations of the passage are divided into five categories, broadly—salvation-history interpretation, Christological interpretation, Christ's descent into hell, allegorical interpretation, and eschatological interpretation.⁴¹ This is the prolegomena for Luz's own interpretation, which accentuates God's intervention in the narrative scene.⁴² He notes that Matthew is laboring to convey the events surrounding Jesus' cross-death as "acts of God" or "supernatural interventions" intended for self-revelatory purposes.⁴³ When it comes to the resurrection of the saints, he contends that, though their resurrection does not belong to the general eschatological resurrection, the "saints" could have been any of the "righteous" throughout redemptive-history.⁴⁴ Their presence in the narrative is a sign of God's coming judgment on the people of Israel and the city of Jerusalem.⁴⁵

Ultimately, though, Luz admits the interpretive difficulty of the passage and suggests that it has "multiple levels of meaning."⁴⁶ He accentuates two levels of meaning in particular—the Christological and the salvation-history dimensions of the text. Concerning the former, Luz suggests that the events recorded in Matthew 27:51-53 are "victory signs."⁴⁷ The self-revelation of God reaches its climax through these victory signs in the resurrection of the saints. Regarding the latter category, Luz accentuates God's revelation of the impending judgment upon Jerusalem. The temple is rendered obsolete and the future faith of the redeemed will no longer be ethnically or geographically confined, rather it will go with Jesus and those who place their faith in him.⁴⁸

Ulrich Luz helpfully notes that Matthew is communicating multiple truths simultaneously in his Gospel narrative by means of the pericope under discussion. Yet, he fails to show narratologically how Matthew has employed the passage broadly in Matthew 27:45-28:15. Further, he admits that he has no satisfactory explanation for the phrase, “*meta tēn ergersin autou*.”⁴⁹

R. T. France

R. T. France notes in his commentary that Matthew 27:52-53 is “special material”⁵⁰ in that it has no parallel in the other Gospel accounts.⁵¹ Further, he contends that Matthew’s lack of concern with “explaining” the meaning of the resurrection of the saints in his Gospel narrative is due to the fact that he is concerned with its symbolic significance.⁵² Matthew’s placement of the scene within the narrative connects Jesus’ death with his resurrection as the “key to new life which is now made available to God’s people.”⁵³ Contrary to John Wenham, France asserts that Matthew’s series of paratactic clauses with aorist verbs should not be broken up in order to interpret the resurrection of the saints as happening after Jesus’ resurrection. However, like Wenham, he argues that they did not come out of their tombs until after Jesus’ resurrection because their resurrection was the “consequence” of his resurrection from the dead.”⁵⁴

Though R. T. France rightly contends that Wenham’s reading of the Matthean pericope unnaturally breaks up the paratactic clauses, he too fails to note that Matthew’s placement of the scene in his Gospel is not “out-of-order.” Rather, having already been “resurrected” on the day of his death, they leave the area of the tombs to enter the holy city after his resurrection.

Michael Licona

Licona’s work, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* is a defense of the historicity of Jesus’ bodily resurrection from the dead. He challenges the assumptions of post-Enlightenment biblical interpreters who contend that historical evidence of Jesus’ resurrection is inaccessible to the modern historian.⁵⁵ He contends that the best evaluation of the evidence, for those who do have a *priori* commitments to the impossibility of the resurrection, supports belief in Jesus’ bodily, historical resurrection from the dead. In fact, he asserts that “there is no indication that the early Christians interpreted Jesus’ resurrection in a metaphorical or poetic sense

to the exclusion of it being a literal event that had occurred to his corpse. Indeed, that a bodily resurrection was the primary intended interpretation seems clear.”⁵⁶

Licona does not merely assert the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection; he also states “that the canonical Evangelists and Paul intended their statements regarding Jesus’ *death* by crucifixion to be interpreted literally.”⁵⁷ It is strange, then, when Licona writes “that the data surrounding what happened to Jesus is fragmentary and could possibly be mixed with legend” in reference to the scene of the resurrected saints in Matthew 27:51-54.⁵⁸ Further, considering his adamancy that Jesus’ death and resurrection are historical, it is inconsistent for Licona to suggest that the narrative scene surrounding Jesus’ cross-death is “theologically adorned” with conceivably ahistorical events—such as the darkness (Matt 27:45), the tearing of the veil (Matt 27:51), and the resurrection of the saints (27:52-53). The latter, he suggests, is metaphorical⁵⁹ and connotes eschatological imagery.⁶⁰ After surveying both Jewish and Roman literature in relation to resurrection as well as the death of an emperor/king, in his final assessment of the pericope he suggests the following:

Given the presence of phenomenological language in a symbolic manner in both Jewish and Roman literature related to a major event such as the death of an emperor or the end of a reigning king or even a kingdom, the presence of ambiguity in the relevant text of Ignatius, and that so very little can be known about Thallus’ comment on the darkness (including whether he was even referring to the darkness at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion or, if so, if he was merely speculating pertaining to a natural cause of the darkness claimed by early Christians), it seems to me that an understanding of the language in Matthew 27:52-53 as “special effects” with eschatological Jewish texts and thought in mind is most plausible. There is further support for this interpretation. If the tombs opened and the saints being raised upon Jesus’ death was not strange enough, Matthew adds that they did not come out of their tombs until after Jesus’ resurrection.⁶¹

Thus, Licona contends that the phenomena surrounding Jesus’ cross-death should be interpreted as “poetic device[s]” and eschatologically flavored “special effect” used by Matthew to communicate to his readers that Jesus died as the Son of God and that there is an impending judgment awaiting

Israel.⁶² Licona adopts this position as a rebuttal to Crossan's metaphorical interpretation of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Licona argues that it is the idea of "the harrowing of hell" which "most strongly persuades Crossan to go with a metaphorical understanding of Jesus' resurrection."⁶³ It is, therefore, because he rejects the way this text has been appropriated to argue for harrowing of hell and against Jesus' bodily, historical resurrection that Licona finds himself denying the historicity of these cosmic portents.⁶⁴

Michael Licona's work is magisterial in the breadth of its analysis. Unfortunately, in relation to Matthew 27:51-54, he is unable to reconcile how Matthew's work is both historical *and* eschatologically flavored. The events surrounding Jesus' cross-death have an apocalyptic "feel" as they accentuate cosmic impact of the occasion and manifest the end of temple as the mediator of God's soteriological blessings to the Jewish people and the foreign nations.⁶⁵ Yet, Matthew records historical events.

Summary

This brief survey of contemporary interpretative options demonstrates a variety of ways current exegetes have read this controversial Matthean pericope. Though the majority of conversation has revolved around displacement in the Matthean narrative due to the phrase, "*meta tēn ergersin autou*" in Matthew 27:53, or the pericope's apocalyptic/eschatological overtones due to the cosmological imagery, it has not been uncommon for interpreters to see other levels of meaning in this resurrection pericope. However, no interpreter appears to have connected the pericope with the theological motifs of Christology *and* missiology.

CONCLUSION: HOW NARRATOLOGY IMPROVES OUR READING OF MATTHEW 27:51-54

Hermeneutically, narratology can both accentuate and crystalize theological motifs that critical forms of interpretation often fail to observe. The article suggests, then, that a robust reading of Scripture is simultaneously exegetical, narratological, hermeneutical, and theological instead of merely grammatical-historical. Thus, one of the keys to reading the Gospels well is to read them with the literary features of a narrative in mind. This is especially true when reading the carefully crafted literary masterpiece known as the Gospel

of Matthew. A narratological reading of Matthew 27:51-54 improves our reading of Scripture by demonstrating that Matthew 27:51-54 is more than a perplexing text relating to Jesus' descent into hell. Rather, a narratological reading of the end of Matthew's Gospel reminds his readers that Jesus' death is primarily about the mercy of God that is manifested by the forgiveness of sins (John 20:23) and reconciliation with God (Rom 5:11; 2Cor 5:18; cf. Gen 3). Thus, this pericope is primarily about two theological motifs—Christology and missiology.

Moreover, and refreshingly, a narratological reading is not merely concerned with reconciling Matthew 27:51-54 with texts like 1 Corinthians 15:20, Colossians 1:18, and Revelation 1:5. Nor is a narratological reading of Matthew's pericope concerned with text-critical questions that present a stark dichotomy between historicity and the resurrection of the saints. Therefore, a narratological reading does not relegate this mysterious text to the realm of un-interpretable or un-preachable. Narratology's lack of attention to these relationships, however, does not mean that there is no significance in exploring them. Rather, it demonstrates that this text is primarily about Jesus' identity (Christology) and the mission his death necessitates (missiology).

The question, then, is "Why did Matthew intentionally employ this resurrection imagery in his Gospel-narrative?" The narrative structure is intended to accentuate Jesus' identity—at his birth, wise men are confounded as a star guides them to the Lord of heaven and earth (Matt 2:1-12); now at his death, the heavens, which he created, mourn in darkness (Matt 27:45) and the earth, which he created, breaks (Matt 27:51), giving back the dead as a testimony to his dominion as the Son of God (Matt 28:18). Again, when Jesus was born, children were slaughtered (Matt 2:16); when Jesus died, the dead were raised to life (Matt 27:52). Reading with the literary features of a narrative in mind accentuates Matthew's point—Jesus is one uniquely born; Jesus is one who uniquely dies. The uniqueness surrounding his life teaches us something about his identity.

Further, the uniqueness surrounding Jesus' life teaches us something about the mission his life and death necessitate. As the Son of God, Matthew tells us, Jesus saves people from their sins (Matt 1:21). Thus, Matthew's intentionality in his narrative structure is intended to accentuate the mission Jesus' death necessitates—his death is life-giving and ultimately salvific for persons from every nation who profess faith in his name (Matt 28:16-20;

cf. 27:54). Since Jesus is the Son of God and his life is unlike any other life, his death is a life-giving death (Matt 27:52); since Jesus is the Son of God and his life is unlike any other life, his death has meaning for the nations (Matt 27:54; 28:16-20).

Matthew concludes his Gospel with a reference to the beginning of his Gospel emphasizing the missional implications of Jesus' life, for Jesus "bears fruit" through the disciples he promises to be with until the end of the age as they are on mission for the renown of the triune God (Matt 28:20; cf. 1:23).

Matthew 27:51-54 is surrounded by mystery. Among other things, when composing his gospel, Matthew did not seek to answer all of the "crucial" questions that would arise from this periscope—questions like, "How will this pericope be reconciled with 1 Corinthians 15:20, Colossians 1:18, and Revelation 1:5?" This article has argued that contemporary readers of Matthew 27:51-54 have much to gain from a narratological re-appropriation of Matthew's Gospel narrative because it will inform our reading of Matthew 27:51-54 in the twenty-first century.

¹ I use "sign" instead of "symbol" since it more helpfully connotes a referent that points the reader both backward to the historical event as well as forward to a greater referent—for Matt 27:51-54 that is the resurrection in 28:1-10. That is, "sign" connotes more than a past historical referent. Like the rainbow in the Noahic Covenant, these "signs" function as proclamatory covenantal revelation (Gen 8:20-22; Matt 27:51-54) not only of what God has done in the past, but of what he will no longer do again in the future—he will never again crush his Son as a substitute for sinners. Further, it will be argued below that Matthew prepares his readers for the events in 28:1-10 and 28:16-20 by proleptically foreshadowing them through the "signs" in 27:51-54. Additionally, by "signs" I mean cosmic portents that manifest divine approval of Jesus' work as a penal substitute—these are divine portents that testify to the legitimacy of Jesus' claim to be the Son of God. For a recent argument on interpreting the symbolism in Matthew 27:51-54 see Daniel M. Gurtner, "Interpreting Apocalyptic Symbolism in the Gospel of Matthew," Unpublished paper delivered at the *Evangelical Theological Society*, New Orleans, 2009, 1-38.

² Strauss contends that there are only four events which accompany Jesus' death: 1) the curtain of the temple is torn, 2) an earthquake occurs, 3) the tombs are opened and the "holy ones" are resurrected, and 4) the centurion and those with him exclaim, 'Surely he was the Son of God!' See Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: An Introduction to Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 238. Others, however, include the centurion's confession as a sixth sign; however, it seems that the centurion's confession is a positive result of the five signs that happen after Jesus yields up his spirit rather than a result of Jesus' death on the cross. The cosmic signs overcome his Gentile-unbelief. This is in contrast to Sim who contends that the events surrounding Jesus' death on the Cross were not a sufficient basis for a faith-profession from the centurion in Matthew 27:54. See David C. Sim, "The 'Confession' of the Soldiers in Matthew 27:54," *The Heythrop Journal* 34 (1993): 416. For a thorough treatment of the tearing of the temple veil, see Daniel M. Gurtner, *The Torn Veil: Matthew's Exposition of the Death of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Gurtner argues that the rending of the veil is cosmological imagery signifying the rending of the heavens.

³ For reasons specified below, I will argue that Matthew structured this section of his Gospel with a "lesser" resurrection (i.e., that of the "saints") and a "greater" resurrection (i.e., that of Jesus) in order to 1) accentuate

Christological and missiological motifs and 2) to climatically bring his Gospel plotline to resolution. Additionally, it is crucial to note that by “lesser resurrection” I mean, “not glorified,” and by “greater resurrection” I mean, “glorified.”

- 4 By “narratologically” I do not mean “fictitious” or “non-historical” or “imaginative” in the sense that the events presented by Matthew are “non-real” invention. Rather, I mean reading with the type of literary sensibilities that enables one to discern authorial devices such as contrast and irony and narrative progression/development in the midst of a narrative account and amid other literary devices. For example, Leithart argues for a chiasmic literary structure of Matt 27-28, specifically 27:55-28:20, as he notes the repetition of the same characters and other literary themes in the Gospel’s conclusion. See Peter J. Leithart, “Structure of Matthew 27-28,” *First Things*, March 15, 2010, accessed January 23, 2014, <http://www.leithart.com/2010/03/15/structure-of-matthew-27-28/>. See also, Peter J. Leithart, *The Four: A Survey of the Gospels* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2010) and Peter J. Leithart, *Deep Exegesis: The Mystery of Reading Scripture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009). Following Tannehill, Combrink argues that greater awareness to stories and how they are told is necessary to the interpretation of Matthew’s Gospel in H. J. Bernard Combrink, “The Structure of the Gospel of Matthew as Narrative,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 34 (1983): 63.
- 5 Note the *inclusio* with Matt 4:5—*eis tēn hagian polin*. Previously, after the baptismal scene in which God the Father identifies Jesus as the beloved Son with whom he is pleased (3:17), Satan challenged Jesus, attempting to incite him to take the initiative to identify himself as “the Son of God”—*ei huios ei tou theou*—but, Jesus refused (4:6-7). Similarly, the scene prior to the pericope under consideration reads like an anti-baptismal scene—reversing the scene that precedes Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. Formerly, Jesus had spoken (3:15), the Spirit descended upon him (3:16), and the Father audibly testified from heaven to his identify (3:17); now, after crying out with a loud voice twice (27:46, 50) an unnerving silence pervades the scene before Jesus yields the Spirit and dies (27:50). It is only after Jesus’ death that Matthew notes how the Father testified to Jesus’ identity as the “the Son of God” by means of the cosmological and apocalyptic imagery which dominates this historical scene.
- 6 For more on narrative design as well as narratological intentionality in the Gospels, see Timothy Wiarda, *Interpreting Gospel Narratives: Scenes, People, and Theology* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2010).
- 7 Lohr argues for a similar structure of Matthew’s Gospel in Charles H. Lohr, “Oral Techniques in the Gospel of Matthew,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 23 (1961): 427. He wrongly, however, places Matt 23 in the eschatological sermon-discourse. For a critique of Lohr’s position, see Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, “The Structure of Matthew XIV-XVIII,” *Revue Biblique* 82 (1975): 369-371. Murphy-O’Connor’s strongest contention is that placing Matt 23 with Matt 19-22 accentuates the correspondence between the first sermon-discourse, Matt 5-7, and the last sermon-discourse, Matt 24-25. In this case, both sermon-discourses would be addressed to Jesus’ disciples; his disciples would be, according to Murphy-O’Connor, distinguished from the crowds within Matthew’s Gospel. Additionally, Murphy-O’Connor contends that this makes obvious the deliberate intention of Matthew to make the five sermon-discourses one of the major components of his gospel. Murphy-O’Connor argues that this is indisputable by the phrase, *kai egeneto hote etelesen ho Iēsous*, which is only used five times throughout the gospel. Pennington also notes that chapter 13 forms the chiasmic center of Matthew. For Pennington, this accentuates “the centrality of the message of the coming of the Kingdom of God.” See Jonathan T. Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 280-281. Further, via Pennington, the chart above manifests a “sermon” then “narrative” structure throughout the Gospel rather than “narrative” then “sermon.” Though interpreters preceding me have noted that the discourses were either sermons or material collected from several of Jesus’ sermons, the phrase “sermonic-discourse” is my own. I am using the phrase intentionally to emphasize the homiletical nature of the Matthean discourses. This is significant both for our interpretation of the discourse—they are sermons/sermonic—as well as for our proclamation of the text—Matthew’s Gospel was intended to model for us one aspect of *how* to preach about the Kingdom of Heaven (KOH) now that it has been “*plērōsai*” in Christ (Matt 5:17). It seems, then, that the homiletical goals of Matthew informed his composition of the sermon-discourse in that he crafted his gospel 1) to solicit a certain type of response to the KOH and 2) to model for his readers how to preach authoritatively, like Jesus, about the KOH—*ēn gar didaskōn autous hōs exousian echōn* (Matt 7:29). Though referring to the Sermon on the Mount, Pelikan notes that homileticians can take their sermon cues from Jesus, who perfectly wed form with content. This model is seen in the sermon-discourses crafted by Matthew in his gospel. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Divine Rhetoric: The Sermon on the Mount as Message and Model in Augustine, Chrysostom, and Luther* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000), 48.

- ⁸ Matthew is clear, though, that it is only a life-giving death for those who love God instead of mammon (Matt 28:11-15; cf. 6:24)
- ⁹ This survey of the Matthean literature focuses on recent contributions to this pericope rather than those spanning the history of reception.
- ¹⁰ Delvin D. Hutton, "The Resurrection of the Holy Ones (Matt 27:51b-53): A Study of the Theology of the Matthean Passion Narrative" (Th.D. diss., Harvard University, 1970), 14. His analysis of interpretive history is short. Further, it is not entirely clear the significance of the distinction between his second and third appropriations of the text. I would argue that the divinely caused cosmic portents testify to the "deity" of Jesus. Thus, there appears to be 1) categorical overlap and 2) other interpretive appropriations of the text to explore.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 15.
- ¹² Ibid. Unlike Licona (see below), he is not concerned with questions of historicity in his work on the resurrection.
- ¹³ Ibid., 16.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 109.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 108.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 117, 119, 126, 172-176.
- ¹⁷ Hutton speculates to the identify of "tōn kekoimēmenōn hagiōn" in his work. He suggests that they are "the patriarchs, prophets, and martyrs, who, having joined their brethren in the sleep of death were set apart for vindication and blessing in the resurrection." Ibid., 142, cf. 137-143.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 145.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 115.
- ²⁰ Though Wenham's article is short, his contribution is significant because his thesis persuades D. A. Carson, *Matthew 13-28* (Expositor's Bible Commentary; ed. Frank E. Gaebelein; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 581-582. See also, Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew* (The New American Commentary, vol. 22; Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 421.
- ²¹ See J. W. Wenham, "When Were the Saints Raised?," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 32:1 (1981): 150-152.
- ²² Wenham is concerned with alleviating Matthew from the erroneous assumption that the saints were resurrected for three days while remaining around the tombs until Jesus is raised from the dead in Matt 28:1-10—"Then the succession of events on Good Friday is clearly delineated, and the whole episode of the resurrected saints is placed after the resurrection of Jesus, thus absolving the evangelist from the charge of depicting living saints cooped up for days in tombs around the city." Ibid., 151.
- ²³ Ibid., 152.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 151.
- ²⁵ Jack D. Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (2nd ed.; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1988), 2.
- ²⁶ Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 3. Chatman's work is a structural analysis of narratology. He defines "story" as "the what of narrative" and "discourse" as "the way of narrative." Further, he seeks to explicate the elements of storytelling and explain their connection with the structure of narrative. That is, he seeks to provide a comprehensive approach to the general theory of interpreting narrative. His work, *Story and Discourse*, though not a theological work can aid the interpreter who rightly understands the care with which Matthew as an author has crafted his gospel narrative so that the elements of the story, which are historical, are theologically arranged in this discourse to convey truth. See Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (London: Cornell University Press, 1978). Jonathan Pennington has recently advocated a narratological analysis akin to Chatman's for gospel interpretation. See Jonathan Pennington, *Reading the Gospel's Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), 169-182.
- ²⁷ Thus, "story-time" reflects the chronological order in which all the events cited in the gospel's narrative occur; "discourse-time," however, is the order in which the readers of the gospel are told about the events that comprise the story. Ibid., 40-41.
- ²⁸ Jack D. Kingsbury, ed., *Gospel Interpretation: Narrative-Critical & Social Scientific Approaches* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 1-5.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 3.
- ³⁰ Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 89. Earlier in his academic career, in *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* Kingsbury contended that the climax of Matthew's Gospel is intended primarily to convey that Jesus is the Son of God. As Jesus' resisting of Satan's temptations proved that he was the Son of God (Matt 4:3, 6), so now staying on the Cross and resisting the temptation of the Pharisaic naysayers to come down from it proves that he is indeed the Son of God. See Jack D. Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975), 74-77.

- 31 Kingsbury adds a third (for him it is the second of the three) significance of the portents surrounding Jesus' death. He contends that the centurion's confession calls attention to the fact that the Cross signifies the end of Jesus' earthly ministry and the end of the temple cult as the "place" of salvation. See Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 89-90. Though Jesus' death on the Cross does indicate the end of his earthly life, it seems more accurate to argue that the tearing of the veil, not the confession of the centurion, marks the end of the temple as the mediator of salvation's blessings. Thus, the centurion's confession is a result of the portents and a proleptic narratival indicator that the gospel will be taken to the Gentiles (Matt 28:16-20; cf. 27:54).
- 32 Ibid., 126; see also 115. From the beginning of his gospel, Matthew has indicated that "evil" characterizes the religious "*gennēmata echidnōn*" (Matt 3:7). Thus, Kingsbury argues that conflict is a central motif throughout the plot of Matthew's story.
- 33 Among some of the more explicit fulfillment texts scattered throughout the gospel narrative are: Matt 1:23; 2:6, 18; 3:1; 4:14; 12:18-21; 13:14-15, 35; 15:8-9; 21:5, 16, 42; 26:56.
- 34 Kingsbury contends that the presence of these two groups together in the narrative is a prefiguring of the post-Easter church. See Jack D. Kingsbury, *Matthew* (2nd ed.; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986), 57.
- 35 Ronald D. Witherup, "The Cross of Jesus: A Literary-Critical Study of Matthew 27" (Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1985).
- 36 Ibid., xi.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Witherup is inconsistent in this argumentation, though. He later contends that the resurrection of the sleeping saints was caused by the resurrection of Jesus. Ibid., 277, 285.
- 39 Ibid., 280.
- 40 Ibid., 284.
- 41 Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28* (Hermeneia; trans. James E. Crouch; ed. Helmut Koester; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 560-65.
- 42 Ibid., 566-70.
- 43 Ibid., 566. Later, he connects the self-revelatory events with the centurion's profession. Based on God's revelation of Jesus' identity, the centurion confesses Jesus to be the Son of God as the disciples had done previously.
- 44 Ibid., 567.
- 45 Ibid., 568.
- 46 Ibid., 570.
- 47 Ibid., 571.
- 48 Ibid., 571.
- 49 Ibid., 568-569.
- 50 Gurtner is one among many scholars who refer to Matt 27:51b-53 as Matthew's "special material" since several of these portents are unique to his Gospel. See Gurtner, *The Torn Veil*, 144-152.
- 51 R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 1081.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Ibid., 1082.
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 Two leading well-known advocates who deny Jesus' resurrection from the dead that he responds to are Bart Ehrman and John Dominic Crossan.
- 56 Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 553.
- 57 Ibid., 545. Emphasis original.
- 58 Ibid., 185.
- 59 He refers to Matt 27:52-53 as "that strange little text in Matthew 27:52-53, where upon Jesus' death the dead saints are raised and walk into the city of Jerusalem." Ibid., 545-546. Further, he notes that Mark and Luke record some of the phenomena surrounding Jesus' death—the darkness covering the land and the rending of the temple's inner veil—but it is Matthew alone who records the earthquake, the rocks splitting, the tombs opening, the raising of the dead saints, and their subsequent entrance into Jerusalem.
- 60 Ibid., 550.
- 61 Ibid., 552.
- 62 Ibid., 553. Though he understands some of the events surrounding his death to be poetic device, he contends that "interpreting the phenomena at Jesus' death as poetry does not lend support to interpreting Jesus' bodily resurrection as nothing more than a poetic or symbolic device."

⁶³ Ibid., 546.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 546-548, 552.

⁶⁵ Though his work is highly acclaimed, Licona's interpretation of this Matthean pericope resulted in interpretive-evangelical tumult from two leading figures in particular—Norman L. Geisler and R. Albert Mohler, Jr. Mohler's assessment of Licona's work can be found: R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "The Devil is in the Details: Biblical Inerrancy and the Licona Controversy," *AlbertMohler.com*, September 14, 2011, accessed September 14, 2011, <http://www.albertmohler.com/2011/09/14/the-devil-is-in-the-details-biblical-inerrancy-and-the-licona-controversy/>. For Geisler's numerous interactions with Licona and his work, see: "'Licona Controversy'Articles," *Dr. Norman L. Geisler*, last modified February 11, 2014, accessed February 11, 2014, <http://www.normangeisler.net/articles/Bible/Inspiration-Inerrancy/Licona/default.htm>. Even though Licona adamantly affirms the historicity of both Jesus' cross-death as well as Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead, their concern is with the implication(s) of denying the historicity of events occurring within a scene that is historical—namely, Matt 27:45-54. Since the aftermath of this interpretive argument was so public, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary devoted an entire journal to the assessment of the theme of resurrection, Licona's work, and the implications of Licona's arguments. See *Southeastern Theological Review* 3:1 (2012). Since the thesis of this paper affirms the historicity of these portents and is not an analysis of the relationship between interpretation and inerrancy, it is unnecessary for this argument to be explicated here.