

The four evangelists differ in their accounts of Jesus' crucifixion and so it is with the events which followed His death. All four accounts have some unique content, though the Synoptists generally follow each other fairly closely. John, on the other hand, had his own distinct emphasis and his material has almost no overlap with his three counterparts. The only thing all four gospels have in common is their mention of Joseph of Arimathea's role in the preparation and entombment of Jesus' body. Even then, John's account is unique in that he alone noted Nicodemus' assistance in that work (19:39-40).

With respect to the post-death occurrences, John focused on Jesus Himself and the things pertaining to Him. In particular, he wanted to highlight that these events – matters in which Jesus played no active role – also fulfilled messianic prophecy (19:31-37). Even after He'd drawn His last breath and His spirit departed from this world (19:30; cf. Luke 23:46), Jesus continued to demonstrate that He was Israel's Messiah. But there were other significant attesting phenomena that John didn't record, phenomena which occurred immediately upon Jesus' death. Because these things preceded the occurrences in John's account, it is appropriate to consider them first. They include the tearing of the temple veil at the moment Jesus died and an earthquake which resulted in resurrected people emerging from their opened tombs and entering Jerusalem (Matthew 27:52-53).

- f. John didn't mention the rending of the temple veil, but all three of the Synoptic writers did (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:46). All three mentioned it, but none elaborated or provided any explanation or interpretation. They obviously believed their readers would understand the significance of this phenomenon; they gave no explanation because they felt none was needed. But this can't be said for the contemporary reader who is two millennia removed from the original setting, and even less for those Christians who have little knowledge of the Old Testament scriptures which provide the backdrop of this event.

When it comes to unusual phenomena, the modern mind typically attempts to understand and explain it in natural terms. So here many dwell on the phenomenon of the veil's tearing and the earthquake as its explanation. Matthew's account does give the impression that these two phenomena occurred at the same time (27:51) and the earthquake could possibly explain the torn veil. But the gospel writers weren't concerned with the mechanism, but the *meaning* in relation to Jesus' death. They saw in these phenomena a powerful, divinely orchestrated commentary on the crucifixion and what it meant for Israel and the world.

The place to begin in considering the veil event is the temple itself. Every temple, including the Jerusalem temple, represents a physical location where the divine and natural converge; a place where human beings can encounter and interact with deity or divine powers. For Israel, the Jerusalem temple (and tabernacle before it) was the place where heaven and earth came together. It was the place where Yahweh, the Creator-Lord, was present in the world He made and from which He presided over it. Hence the Israelite imagery of Yahweh being enthroned above the cherubim (Psalm 80:1, 99:1) with the ark as the footstool of His throne (cf. Psalm 99:5, 113:5, 123:1, 132:7; Isaiah 66:1).

More narrowly, the tabernacle (and temple) fulfilled God's covenant promise to Abraham to dwell with him and his descendants as their God (Genesis 17:1-8; Exodus 25:1-8). Yahweh's presence in the midst of His people was the great evidence of their status as "sons" and His covenant commitment and faithfulness. Nevertheless, this intimate presence was *at a distance*, a truth highlighted by the Lord's prescription for the sanctuary and Israel's interaction with it.

- The very form of the tabernacle (later replicated in the temple) indicated Yahweh's separation from Israel. The Lord prescribed its form, down to the smallest detail, with a view to it expressing to the Israelite people distinct levels of nearness to Him defined by diminishing access.

Beyond its geometric features, the tabernacle structure was obscured with multiple coverings and surrounded by a high curtain fence. The twelve tribes camped outside this barrier at a distance with the priests and Levites forming an inner perimeter separating the people from Yahweh's dwelling. Only the priests, Levites and compliant worshippers were permitted to enter into the court inside the curtain fence, while the priests alone entered the outer room of the tabernacle ("holy place") to perform the work involving the altar of incense, showbread table and lampstand.

The inner room – the "most holy place" or *Holy of Holies* containing the ark of the covenant – was a cubic space separated from the outer room by a floor-to-ceiling veil. That room was most holy because Yahweh's Shekinah (His radiant glory-presence) resided there (cf. Exodus 40:1-35; 1 Kings 7:51-8:11). Israel viewed their God as enthroned above the wings of the cherubim extending over the ark, and so regarded the Holy of Holies as His earthly throne room – the place where heaven and earth came together and from which Yahweh executed His rule over His creation.

The tabernacle's inner sanctuary, radiant with divine glory, was most holy and therefore most remote and inaccessible to the covenant nation. Only the high priest could pass through the veil into the Holy of Holies, and then only on one designated day each year (Yom Kippur). Most importantly, the high priest was required to enter Yahweh's presence with the blood of the prescribed sin offering – one offering for himself and his household and then a second one for the unfaithful covenant nation and the sanctuary defiled by its transgression and uncleanness (Leviticus 16).

If the tabernacle's structure and ministration pointed to the separation between God and His "son," the annual ritual of Yom Kippur underscored the covenant violation and defilement that caused it. Yom Kippur was a solemn and fearful episode in which the people were directed to abase themselves (Leviticus 16:29-30) as their designated mediator approached Yahweh on their behalf. Perhaps he'd fulfill his mission; perhaps all would go silent and they'd have to drag him from the Lord's presence.

- The same holiness (consecration) principles of proximity and exclusion governed all contact with the tabernacle materials and furnishings when it was moved from one place to another. Only the priests and Levites could handle those materials and God prescribed every facet of that process and the nature and scope of each group's involvement (Numbers 4:1-49). Here as well the priests (Aaron and his sons) had the closest approach to Yahweh, being charged with handling and packing the tabernacle's sacred articles and furnishings. No one else was permitted to have any contact with them, whether with their hands or their eyes (Numbers 4:1-20).

In all of these things Israel was continually reminded that Yahweh's dwelling place was an alien habitation and He remained distant from them. Though He honored His pledge to dwell in their midst, transgression and uncleanness estranged the relationship between covenant Father and son. This alienation defined the entire Israelite history and reached its apex with the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Yahweh abandoned His sanctuary and then destroyed it, driving His unfaithful "son" far from the place He'd determined to put His name.

At the appointed time a remnant returned to Judea and rebuilt the temple and then the city of Jerusalem (cf. Isaiah 44:24-28; Ezra 1-6; Nehemiah 1-6). Yahweh's dwelling was restored on Mount Zion, but *He* didn't return to it. This theme, with its promise of a future return, was the central concern of the post-exile prophets. They spoke of Yahweh returning in connection with His messianic king-priest – indeed returning *in the person* of the anticipated "messenger of the covenant." But He was coming to bring judgment which none could withstand; Yahweh's return to His sanctuary would involve its judgment and purging (Malachi 3:1-5). The temple, like the exiled nation, would have to be restored and the prophets set the Messiah at the center of this project (ref. Zechariah 3-4, 6:9-15; cf. also Isaiah 44:24-45:4 and 48:12-49:13 which presents King Cyrus, who ordered the temple's rebuilding, as a messianic figure and type of Yahweh's Servant-Ruler).

Jesus acted out this return to Zion and judgment of the temple by His "triumphal entry" (Matthew 21:1-13). Yahweh would again take His place in His sanctuary as the prophets pledged, but after it had been purged and prepared for Him. No doubt Jesus' generation expected some sort of physical and ceremonial cleansing as occurred after the Maccabean victory, but the rendering of the veil at the moment of His death revealed a different kind of restoration: Yahweh's sanctuary – the conjunction of heaven and earth and the place where all people (and all creation) encounter Him (1 Kings 8:12-43; Isaiah 2:1-4, 56:1-7) – was becoming that which the physical sanctuary signified. *Restoration didn't involve the earthly temple, but a new sanctuary paradigm in the Messiah*; the former order of things was passing away because it had fulfilled its purpose (Hebrews 8-10, esp. 10:19-25). Thus the torn veil signified more than atonement for sin and open access to God; it heralded the end of the alienation and exile of the old Adamic order (Genesis 3:24) and the inauguration of the new order of Yahweh's intimate and everlasting presence centered in Jesus, the true sanctuary (Revelation 21:1-5).