

- g. The second occurrence which followed immediately after Jesus' death was recorded only by Matthew. It involved an earthquake which resulted in tombs being opened and their inhabitants emerging, resurrected from the dead (27:51-53). Matthew identified these persons as "holy ones" and noted that they subsequently entered Jerusalem ("the holy city") and appeared to many.

This is one of the most mysterious and baffling episodes in the Scripture, not least because Matthew provided only the barest account of it without any elaboration or explanation. In many ways, he raised more questions than he answered and scholars continue to this day to debate this event and its significance. Obviously Matthew believed his readers wouldn't be perplexed and this is an important interpretive clue. Matthew's gospel is clearly oriented toward a Jewish audience and this suggests that this resurrection episode had a Jewish significance that would have been obvious to a first-century Jew. And if this was the case, it follows that this episode spoke to an understanding that was part of Israel's national psyche and not limited to the scholarly elite. So also the close connection between this resurrection and Jesus' death suggests that this Jewish understanding was somehow related to Israel's messianic doctrine. While relatively few Jews embraced Jesus as the Messiah, all were aware of that claim concerning Him and the fact that He was crucified under that banner. No Jew could help but view the events surrounding Jesus' death through a messianic lens.

The episode began with an earthquake which Matthew indicated occurred just as Jesus died. He closely connected this earthquake with both the rending of the temple veil and the opening of the tombs, leading many to conclude that it was the effective cause of both phenomena. That may have been the case, but Matthew clearly wanted his readers to associate those two strange occurrences with God's intent and hand and not a natural event. So some have viewed the earthquake as divinely caused, but only for the purpose of tearing the temple veil and opening tombs in the vicinity of Jerusalem. It seems, though, that God intended the earthquake to be a sign in itself. From the beginning of His interaction with Israel, God used powerful physical phenomena to communicate His presence and activity (cf. Exodus 13:21, 14:1-16, 19-20, 19:1-19, 40:33-38) and the prophets later drew upon that dynamic to express and depict God's future actions, both in judgment and restoration (cf. Isaiah 2:1-23, 13:9-10, 29:1-6, 30:19-28; Ezekiel 32:1-8, 38:1-19; Joel 2:1-11, 3:1-19; Haggai 2:1-7, 20-21; Zechariah 14:1-7; etc.).

Throughout Israel's history Yahweh chose to express Himself in terms of powerful natural events and that seems to be the case here. Certainly the Jews experiencing the mid-day darkness and earthquake at the moment of Jesus' death would have seen God's hand and commentary and not merely coincidental natural occurrences. Whatever they believed their God was saying in these phenomena, they surely believed He was taking note of the crucifixion and death of Jesus of Nazareth. The hardened pagan Roman soldiers made this sort of connection (Matthew 27:54); how much more their Jewish counterparts (Luke 23:47-48).

Matthew recorded that the earthquake was sufficiently strong to fracture and dislodge rock formations and the result was that tombs were broken open. As they did with Jesus, the Jews typically buried their dead in caves or suitable recesses in rock formations rather than underground. These tombs were then sealed with a removable stone or other closure allowing for repeated access. (Jewish burials had several stages (ref. Luke 23:55-24:1) and the same site was used for multiple bodies, often other family members.) Thus the earthquake opened tombs, not by splitting the ground, but by dislodging the coverings over the tomb entrances and perhaps even breaking apart the rock structures surrounding them.

There is nothing unusual about an earthquake opening such tombs, but this one was shown to be a divine act by the fact that it served a supernatural purpose: *God was preparing an egress for people He was raising from the dead*. It's notable that Matthew only identified them as "holy ones"; he neither named them nor numbered them, highlighting that the issue in this resurrection wasn't the individual identities of these persons but the sort of people they were. Matthew's term is often rendered *saints*, but it simply designates a holy person – a person characterized by consecration to God. The circumstances of their burial and their action after being raised indicates that these individuals were Jewish and so it would be wrong to identify them as "Christians" or "saved" in the Christian sense.

They weren't believers in Jesus, but part of the Old Testament community of faithful Israelites – Jews who had been steadfast in living out their faith in Yahweh and His promises given through the prophets and recorded in His Torah. These "holy ones" were among the faithful celebrated by the Hebrews writer: the faithful children of Abraham who died in hope, not having received what was promised but believing that one day they would (Hebrews 11:1-13, 39-40).

By raising them from the dead, Yahweh was testifying that the day these faithful Jews hoped in had at last arrived. They had died in the confidence that their God would fulfill His promise to bring life out of death – not just for individual Israelites, but the covenant household as such (Ezekiel 37:1-14). Life out of death meant that Israel's long night of alienation and exile had come to an end and that, now at last, Israel could fulfill its Abrahamic calling as Yahweh's "son" on behalf of the world. The resurrection of these "holy ones" spoke of life out of death for the nations and the entire creation as well as Israel; their circumstance had creation-wide significance. Matthew understood this and that is why he didn't identify them as individuals. What mattered wasn't that *these* specific persons were raised, but that the promised day of resurrection had dawned.

This is also why Matthew didn't address the issues that typically are in the forefront of contemporary readers' minds, issues such as the nature of this resurrection (did these persons go on to die again like Lazarus?), what these resurrected Jews did in Jerusalem and what happened to them after their appearances ceased. Matthew's concern was *God's* concern, which focused on the significance of this resurrection in relation to Jesus' death and resurrection.

In that regard, one issue does stand out, namely the timing between this episode and Jesus' resurrection. Matthew's record allows for two possibilities. The first is that the resurrection of these Jews occurred at the time of Jesus' death, but their appearance in Jerusalem followed after His resurrection; the second is that both events (their resurrection and public appearance) occurred after Jesus was raised. Matthew's syntax and grammar equally allow both possibilities, but the second option finds compelling support in the idea that Jesus' resurrection must precede all others since a person's resurrection involves participation in *His* (cf. John 14:9 with Romans 6:1-11; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 2:4-6; Colossians 3:1-4; also 1 Corinthians 15:42-49). Of course, this constraint disappears if these Jews were raised only to die again as appears to have been the case with Lazarus.

But this doesn't seem to be the point. Matthew's account suggests that God raised these individuals as poignant, tangible evidence of the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection. The house of Israel – represented by the “holy city” of Jerusalem – needed to understand, not merely that they'd rejected and crucified their Messiah, but that their actions had secured the outcome for which Yahweh sent Him into the world. The death Israel imposed on Jesus was preordained to bring *life* – not only to Himself as the victorious King of Israel, but to Abraham's covenant house and ultimately Adam's race and the whole creation subjected to the curse of death through him (cf. Acts 3:12-4:2; Romans 8:1-23).

The resurrection of these “holy ones” was tightly connected with Jesus' resurrection, which reinforces the conclusion that they were resurrected *after* He was raised from the dead. And because their resurrection was grounded in His, it follows that they were raised never to die again. Jesus was the “first fruits from the dead” and these faithful Jews were the first sharers in His resurrection life. Moreover, Matthew's emphasis on their *bodily* resurrection suggests that they were unique in that, like Jesus, they experienced bodily and spiritual resurrection at the same time. All other people who share in Jesus' resurrection life experience it in two phases – first their *spirits* (Romans 8:9-10) and then their *bodies* at His Parousia (Romans 8:11; also 1 Corinthians 15:20-23; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-18).

Matthew's final observation was that the immediate goal of this resurrection was *witness*. He notably said nothing about what happened to these Jews after their appearances in Jerusalem and so readers shouldn't ask that question. What matters is their mission of testifying to the fact and significance of Jesus' resurrection. Their living presence in Jerusalem was a shocking reality that demanded explanation and they doubtless provided it. Matthew's account is also silent in that respect, but the news of these astonishing appearances must have spread like wildfire, leaving everyone in Jerusalem stunned and forced to rethink what they thought they knew about the Messiah and the messianic mission. The resurrection of these “holy ones” substantiated the claim already on the lips of some that Jesus was raised from the dead and soon multitudes would see that for themselves (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). But their resurrected presence also served a unique function; it testified that Israel's day of resurrection had come, *but not as expected*.

Again, God intended this resurrection of Israelite “holy ones” to serve as a powerful testimony to the covenant house of Israel and Matthew likewise recorded it with Jewish readers in mind. This event had profound significance for the Israelite people, especially in view of their eschatological vision of Messiah, the messianic age and the resurrection of the dead. With the exception of the Sadducees (who were the dominant ruling party in Jesus’ day), all Israelite sects – and Jesus Himself – held out the hope of a final resurrection (Luke 20:27-38).

Daniel’s prophecy was a major source of this hope (12:1-3) and the predominant view was that God would resurrect the “righteous” in Israel (including the Messiah himself) at the end of the age after Messiah had accomplished His mission and established His kingdom. It was believed that Messiah, the Son of David, would bring life to “dead” Israel by liberating her from the subjugating powers, restoring her to God and resurrecting David’s kingdom with Yahweh again enthroned in Zion (Ezekiel 37). And somehow this resurrection of the covenant house would see the bodily resurrection of the righteous in Israel – those children of Abraham who were faithful to the covenant and Yahweh’s Torah.

Matthew’s identification of these resurrected individuals as “holy ones” links them with this Israelite vision of the future; in effect, Matthew was affirming that Daniel’s prophecy of the resurrection of the righteous was being fulfilled, but not in the expected way. It had come, not at the end of the present world order, but right in the middle of it. This was true of the Messiah, but also of Yahweh’s “holy ones.” Thus the appearance of these resurrected Israelites served a larger purpose than corroborating Jesus’ resurrection; *it confronted Israel with the need to rethink its eschatological vision, and so the person and work of the Messiah.*

- The former age had passed away and the messianic age had dawned, but in the midst of the old order and with that former order still operating and appearing to have sway. Yahweh had exalted the messianic Son of David and was establishing His dominion over all the earth (Psalm 2; Matthew 28:18; Ephesians 1:18-22), but other kings and rulers – most notably Caesar himself – would continue to exercise their power and authority.
- So the messianic age is indeed characterized by resurrection – life out of death – as the prophets spoke, but with God’s “holy ones” participating in Messiah’s resurrection rather than having their own. In a way that couldn’t have been anticipated, *the resurrection of the righteous is the resurrection of those in the Righteous One* (cf. Acts 3:1-16; Hebrews 10:32-39). Equally unforeseen is the fact that this resurrection occurs in two distinct stages. Like every other aspect of Messiah’s kingdom, it is a matter of *already but not yet*: Already, in the Messiah, Yahweh’s righteous ones have been raised out of death into life (cf. John 5:24; Ephesians 2:1-6; Colossians 3:1-4), but as the resurrection of the *inner man* which is the sure pledge of the resurrection of the *body* on the last day (cf. John 5:25-29; Romans 8:9-25; 2 Corinthians 4:1-5:4; also 1 Corinthians 15:20-24).