The Rending of the Veil (Matt.27:51a par): A Look Back and a Way Forward

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The narrative flow of Jesus’ Passion account in Matthew 27, in particular, shifts abruptly at the point when Jesus ‘gave up his spirit’. Up to this point, the reader has followed Jesus as he is interrogated by Pilate in Jerusalem (27:11–26), taken to the Praetorium to be beaten and mocked (27:27–31a), and led away to Golgotha for crucifixion (27:31b–44). The narrative continues by recounting the darkness (27:45), Jesus’ recitation of a portion of Psalm 22 (27:46), and the responses of ‘those standing there’ (27:47–49). From here the narrative presents Jesus crying out in a loud voice and giving up his spirit (27:50). At this point in the text the reader is propelled from the narrative sequence and scene at Golgotha into a metanarrative (51–53) where, among other extraordinary events, the veil of the temple is torn in two. Noteworthy of the Matthean account (as well as those of Mark and Luke) is the lack of explanation for this event.² One scholar has rightly said a ‘remarkable symbolism is involved, which none of the evangelists stop to explain’.³ The lack of explanation on the part of the evangelists, it seems, has contributed to the great variety of interpretations of this event offered through the history of Christendom.

Discussion of the rending of the temple veil begins with Ephraim the Syrian,⁴ whose own interpretations represent an early trend in scholarship that endures to the present day. In his Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron (written c. 363–373), he illustrates the ambiguity of the rending of the veil commenting that the rending shows ‘that [the Lord] had taken the kingdom away from (the Jews?) and had given it to others who would bear fruit’.⁵ He then provides a diverse and lengthy list of ‘alternative’ interpretations: including the destruction of the temple because God’s Spirit had departed from it, the

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² D.A. Hagner says, ‘The evangelist can leave this unexplained because it was so familiar to the early church’. Matthew 14–28 (Dallas: Word, 1995), 849. R. Brown (The Death of the Messiah [New York: Doubleday, 1994]) argues that neither the author nor his readers understood the symbolism.
³ Hagner, Matthew 14–28, 849.
⁵ 41.4–6 (trans. T.C. Oden and C.A. Hall, eds; Mark [Ancient Christian Commentary Series: New Testament 2; London: Dearborn, 1998], ad loc. Cf. Matt. 21:43). While we appreciate pre-critical scholarship’s desire to recognise a plurality of meanings to enrich interpretation, we will see below that such plurality is not necessarily warranted by the compositional whole of Matthew’s Gospel.
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Spirit rending the veil in mourning as the High Priest tore his robe at the wrongful accusations against Jesus, God throwing down the curtain of the temple as Judas threw down the silver he received for his betrayal, moving ‘freely from one interpretation to another ... without really choosing one of them’. As we shall see, prior to Ephraim and since, scholars have been occupied with interpreting the rending of the veil, regardless of its synoptic context, by a variety of means which often, though not always, relate to which veil is in view (inner, outer, both, or neither) and what the implications of its rending were for the (Herodian) temple. This variety, surveyed below, includes arguing for a particular view based on lexical discussions of the use of ‘veil’ (katapetasma); the necessity of the veil being visible to the centurion who subsequently professes faith; an apologetic interpretation which includes vindication of Jesus based on his prior predictions of the temple’s destruction; Christological arguments based largely on the relationship between Christ’s death and the three veil texts in Hebrews; and finally a group of miscellaneous interpretations, largely historical in nature, which seem to fit into none of these categories. While the survey is by no means complete, it is perhaps sufficient to illustrate both the complexity of the issues involved and the lack of substantial agreement among scholars when evaluating precisely the same evidence. Finally we will glean from the work of these scholars and propose our own method of approaching the problem.

Lexical argument

The most obvious, though least fruitful, argument upon which an interpretation is based is lexical in orientation. The text of Matthew 27:51a reads, ‘And behold, the veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom in two’. The question is to which (if any) of the two (or more) ‘veils’, described first in Exodus 26:4–5, 9–10, 12, 31, 33, (to which Matthew presumably alludes), does the use of the word ‘veil’ (to katapetasma) refer? A problem is that Matthew’s phrase ‘veil of the temple’ (katapetasma tou naou) occurs nowhere else in Greek literature prior to or roughly contemporaneous with the writing of the synoptics. Moreover, in the LXX there are three different curtains in the tabernacle called a katapetasma. Where most scholars draw attention to the ambiguity of the lexical evidence, a small handful of scholars have based a significant portion of their interpretation of the rending of the veil upon the lexical evidence of katapetasma.

Some scholars have looked to the LXX, where ‘veil’ (katapetasma) mostly refers to the inner veil, or to Philo (Mos. 2.101), who suggests the term is used for just the inner veil (though he himself uses it for others!) to insist the inner veil before the Holy of Holies is in view for the evangelists. While those who argue from a lexical standpoint are unanimously in favour of the inner veil, their subsequent interpretations are less

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coherent. W. Grundmann interprets the rending of the veil as among other 'cosmic-apocalyptic' events at Jesus' death, which is a reference to the 'fullness of time' in which Jesus 'opened the entrance to God'. C.F. Keil took such an argument a step further to contend the temple and the temple-cult are thus no longer necessary. F. Bleek concludes that the evangelists record a 'poetic exposition' with a 'symbolic meaning', namely that Jesus' death provides redemption by means of which believers enter into the Holy of Holies. There seem to be no controls on interpretations even among those who agree on which curtain is in view, and how scholars arrive at such interpretations solely on the basis of a dubious evaluation of lexical evidence is often not clarified. C.E.B. Cranfield, to name but one such scholar, is tentative in his identification of the veil because of the lexical inconclusiveness of katapetasma in the LXX. Even C. Schneider, in his lexical work exclusively on katapetasma, favours the inner veil for its 'cultic significance' rather than lexical evidence. Most scholars agree with Cranfield's assessment and refrain from basing an interpretation on it alone.

Visibility argument

Another way to interpret the rending of the veil is by the centurion's apparent response to it. All three synoptic references to the event (Matt. 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45) place the centurion's confession, 'truly this was the son of God' (Matt. 27:54; Mark 15:39; Luke 23:47), after the rending of the veil. The veil's rending is taken as being among the 'events' (ta gegomena) he beheld. The (Gentile) centurion, it is argued, would only be permitted to see the outer veil and Josephus' description of the outer veil as being 55 cubits high (Jewish Wars 5.5.4 §§211–12), not only allows the centurion to see the veil from that distance but also conceals the inner veil from his view. This view, most recently defended by H.M. Jackson, who argues that the rending of the veil was probably 'public' as were other 'signs associated with Jesus' death'. Scholars of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have argued that if the inner veil were in

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10 C.F. Keil, Kommentar über das Evangelium des Matthäus (Leipzig: Döllinger und Franke, 1877), 590.

11 Bleek, Synoptische Erklärung, 476.

12 Though see L.C. Fillion and M.A. Bayle, Evangile selon S. Matthieu (Paris: Lethielleux, 1878), 554.


15 For our purposes, the differences of word order and precisely what is 'confessed' by the centurion is immaterial.

16 D.L. Bock, Luke (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1860. Bock's conclusion, however, is cautious, and he first highlights the lexical difficulties with any decision. More specifically, W.L. Lane states, 'The rending of the veil is a public sign that the rejection of the Messiah by the leaders of the people discloses a failure in sensitivity to the divine purpose' The Gospel of Mark (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 575.
view only the priests, who would be present at that hour for the evening sacrifices, could see it and would by no means disclose their testimony. Others insist that the priests who were later converted (Acts 6:7) could have made such information known; their sacrifices for sins are no longer necessary.

Origen proposed, among other things, 'a moral interpretation' which brings one to the 'fear of God' and 'bear witness that he who has suffered these things is the Son of God'. T.E. Schmidt suggests that the 'rendering may foreshadow God's judgement on the Temple; but, at a deeper level, it signifies the departure of God's Spirit from the Jews'. Marshall sees the outer veil in view for Luke, while for Mark it may represent 'the new way into the presence of God opened up by Jesus'.

As interesting as this option is, it seems to fail to acknowledge the distinctly apocalyptic language in which the evangelist places this event. Surely Matthew, placing the rending of the veil between the death of Christ and the explicitly apocalyptic 'events' of the splitting of rocks, opening of tombs, and raising of the holy ones, intends the rending of the veil to in some way relate to this worldview within the gospel narrative.

As argued, this approach makes no provision for any apocalyptic motif. Indeed, L. Sabourin rightly comments 'the interpretation of history lies in the centre of apocalyptic thought'. Moreover, it is most likely that from Golgotha even the outer veil would not have been visible, as the temple was not facing either of the traditional sites.

**Apologetic arguments**

Scholars from the third century onwards have suggested a variety of what can broadly be called 'apologetic' interpretations of the rending of the veil, in which the line between symbol and interpretation is blurry. Taking careful notice of Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple (Matt. 23:38), some presume the rending of the veil is a symbol of temple destruction either vindicating OT prophecies or Jesus' prediction. Others see a combination of this vindication with judgement or retaliation on the part

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of God,27 or simply pure judgement in response to the unjust execution of his Son.28 Still others suggest that the rendering of the veil is a sort of ‘authentication’; that is, a divine ‘sign’ affirming that though he was crucified as a felon, God is ‘speaking’ through the rending of the veil to affirm that Jesus is in fact who he claimed to be, God’s (divine) Son.

These views are carefully summarised by Davies and Allison, who themselves argue that the veil relates to the destruction of the temple in AD 70.29 In addition to Matthew 23:38, they look to Matthew 27:40 where passers-by speak of Jesus’ alleged claim of destroying the temple and rebuilding it in three days.30 They conclude that ‘it is most appropriate that, immediately after people mock Jesus for his prophecy about the temple (v. 40), his words should be vindicated’.31 Support is often found in Tacitus (Histories 5.13), who records that during the AD 70 siege of Jerusalem, ‘the doors of the shrine (temple) opened and a superhuman voice cried: “The gods are departing”: at the same moment a mighty stir of their going was heard’.32 Ancient Christians have associated this legend with the veil to argue that a divine being, normally an angel but also the Holy Spirit or Yahweh, abandoned its protective presence with Israel.33 The rent veil was seen as a miraculous event of divine origin, and therefore a witness or declaration of the divinity of Christ34 which is itself sufficient grounds for faith.35

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Ezek. 37:12; Cf. also Eusebius, Demonstration of the Gospel 6.18.41.3; Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures, 13.32.19–33.1; Cyril of Alexandria, Fragments, 315, On Matthew 27:51.


28 Georgios Cedrenus, Historiarum Compendium, 1.482.19; R.T. France, The Gospel of Mark (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 656–57; Apostolic Constitutions 6.5.26; Eusebius, Demonstration of the Gospel 8.2.116.4; Catena on Mark, 440.26; 441.8; Chrysostom, Homilies on John 59.361.41; De cruc e et latine homiliae II, 10.15; Pseudo–Macarius, Spiritual Homilies 50.4.331.


30 Yet the accusations in 27:40 are explicitly said to be false. In addition, Davies and Allison suggest that the phrase ‘from top to bottom into two’ is more meaningful if it refers to the (taller) outer curtain (Matthew, 3:631). But surely Matthew is not interested in the physical difficulty, but the metaphorical significance and resulting theological implications that are indeed miraculous.

31 Davies and Allison, Matthew 3:630. The texts they cite for support, however, (2:630, n. 100; Tertullian, Against Marcion 4.42, Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew 88.2) say nothing about the identity of the veil but rather allude to the concept of judgement only.

32 Tacitus, Histories 5.13 (Loeb Classical Library).

33 Tertullian, Against Marcion, 4.42; Hilary, Commentary on Matthew 33.7; Tractate on the Psalms. 57.10; Melito of Sardis, The Pascha 98. Tertullian, Against the Jews, 13.15; Apostolic Constitutions, 6.5.26; Clement of Alexandria, Christ the Educator 3.2; Chrysostom, De cruc e et latine homiliae II, 10.15; Epaphra the Syrian, Sermon on the Passion, 36.2 (presumably his reference to the departure of a dove is symbolic of the Holy Spirit).

34 Origen, Against Celsus, 2.33; Commentary on John 19, 16; 8103; Arnobius, Against the Heathen 53; Chrysostom, Oratio de hypnotatae 66.1; Prayer 64.1065.26; Athanasius, Homily on the Passion 28.249.18; K. Stendahl, ‘Matthew’, in Peake’s Commentary on the Bible (ed.)
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Christological argument

By far the most common interpretation of the rending of the veil, at least since John Calvin, associates this event with the veil tradition discussed at three locations in Hebrews. Here, the believer’s hope lies ‘behind the veil’ (6:19); in the Holy of Holies, where Christ offered himself as a sacrifice (9:3) and has opened for believers a ‘new and living’ way to God through the veil, which, the author says, is Christ’s body (10:20). The use of these references, the only other uses in the NT of katapetasma save the three synoptic rending texts, is thought by some to add unwarranted and foreign interpretations to the rending of the veil in the synoptic texts.36 Yet Calvin relies heavily on the Hebrews texts, noting the importance of the veil being rent, ‘at the completion of the sacrifice of expiation’ because it was then that Christ ‘opened for us the way to the celestial Sanctuary, that we should no longer stand away in the courtyard, but freely advance into the sight of God’.37 For Calvin the destruction of the Jerusalem temple was a product of its cultic ineffectiveness vis-à-vis Christ’s sacrifice of himself.

Christ, blotting out the handwriting that was against us (Col. 2:14), tore away every obstacle, that we might be all one royal priesthood dependent on him as sole Mediator. The rending of the veil not only abrogated the ceremonies that flourished under the law but also opened heaven, that God might now, intimately, welcome the members of his Son to himself.38

Similarly Kingsbury declares ‘Jesus himself supplants the temple as the “place” where God mediates salvation to people’.39 The torn veil reveals ‘hidden things',


Jerome (from Aquinas, Catena Aurea 1.963). G. Lindeskog argues that in other references to the destruction of the temple there is no mention of a veil (‘The Veil of the Temple’, in In honorem A. Fridrichsen sexagenarii [Coniectanea neotestamentica New Testament Series 11; Lund: Gleerup, 1947], 132–37). Though the word ‘veil’ need not be present for the meaning to be intended, the assumption that ‘rent veil = temple destruction’ is speculation that to date has not been substantiated. M. de Jonge sees the rent veil as ‘the counterpart of the salvation’. ‘Matthew 27:51’, 71.


presumably referring to the Gentiles' (centurion's) salvation. Moving freely between Hebrews and Matthew 27:51a has become a common approach, yet it presumes the inner veil of the epistle to the Hebrews is in view for the evangelist as well and makes no use of the respective synoptic contexts except for the death of Christ.

Though one need not consider the accounts in Hebrews to hold to the inner veil view, such is often the case. Bonnard emphasises the access of Gentiles to God and the abolition of the priestly regulations, while adding this as a figure for the destruction of the temple itself. L. Morris says the curtain 'no longer functioned to keep what lay on the other side of it a secret from those outside'; Riches insists it 'strongly suggests that the presence of God which was previously associated with the Temple has now passed to Jesus himself'. For Hagner, 'the death of Jesus establishes the priesthood of all believers'. W. Kelly sees the rending as a necessity, because 'Unrent, it had been the symbol that man could not draw near to God'. T.H. Weir relates his discussion of the temple veil to women's face veils and spiritual blindness, while Origen likewise refers to the removal of the 'veil' of unbelief. Noteworthy of nearly all of these scholars is their lack of attention to the Matthean context, OT cultic function of the veil, or, in most cases, both. Yet scholarship's need to look to incorporate the use of the word katapetasma in Hebrews, since it only occurs six times in the NT, three in Hebrew and three the synoptic passion accounts, may press the Hebrews' reading into the synoptic accounts without giving precedence to its function in the narrative whole of each of the synoptic accounts.

Miscellaneous

To a final category belongs a lengthy list of various methods and still more various interpretations. Jerome, in his Epistle 120,8 refers to a gospel in 'Hebrew letters' (Hebraics litteris), from which he sees the 'lintel' (superiminaire), not the veil, of the temple destroyed by an earthquake at Christ's death (cf. also Comm. Matt. 27:51; Comm. Isa. 3). T. Zahn takes this to mean that the rending of the veil was a natural

40 Origen, Libri x in Canticum canticorum, 2.8.25; Commentary on Matthew 27:50–54; Fragments on Luke, 151, 251; Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on John 2.143; Commentary on Matthew 27:51, Fragments 315.266–67; Augustine, The Spirit and the Letter, 27 [15]; Gregory of Nazianzus, Orations 29, 'On the Son', 20; Clement of Alexandria, Strom. 5.6; Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Corinthians 61.203.44; Exposition of the Psalms 55.272.52; Commentary on Hebrews, 15.4 says veil is his body that hides the Godhead; F.I. Matera, The Kingship of Jesus: Composition and Theology in Mark 15 (Chico: Scholars Press, 1982), 139. M. Luther, Lectures on Titus, Philemon, and Hebrews (Luther's Works 29; ed. J. Pelikan, St. Louis: Concordia, 1968), 203, sees the rending as a sign of the end of the 'synagogue' and the appearance or revelation of the Church.

43 J. Riches, Matthew (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1997), 98.
44 Hagner, Matthew 14–28, 848–49.

result of the breaking of the lintels to which it was attached.\textsuperscript{50} Mostly early Christians have argued that the rending of the veil is an act of mourning, as was the rending of garments was in various biblical texts.\textsuperscript{51} Among modern scholars this view is most clearly developed by D. Daube,\textsuperscript{52} for whom, ‘the action of Elisha on Elijah’s ascension’ (2 Kgs 2:12) is a ‘prototype’ for the veil event, which was a sign of lament for the death of Jesus.\textsuperscript{53} M’Neile poetically summarises this view: ‘The very temple rent its veil in mourning, as the earth had clothed itself in darkness’.\textsuperscript{54} Among the most creative, as well as ancient, interpretations of the rending of the veil is one which highlights the close proximity of veil to the statement of Mark 15:37: ‘with a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last’ (cf. Matt. 27:50). From this Evans argues that Jesus’ loud shout on the cross was the agent of the rending. Moreover, drawing largely from Lives of the Prophets 12.11–12 and Testament of Levi 10.3, he concludes that the symbolism is one primarily of vindication of Jesus’ prediction for the destruction of the temple (Mark 13:2) and the judgement of Jesus’ ‘priestly judges’ (Mark 14:62).\textsuperscript{55} Rather than Christ’s breath, G.R. Driver insists that violent winds, common in Palestine, tore the veil.\textsuperscript{56} S. Motyer, looking at Mark’s narrative structure, sees an ‘inclusio’ with the rending of the veil in 15:38 and the rending of the heavens in 1:9–11. Therefore for him the rending of the veil is ‘a Markan Pentecost, a proleptic bestowal of the Spirit analogous to the proleptic destruction of the temple’.\textsuperscript{57}

In an imaginative interpretation of the rending of the veil in Luke, D. Sylva highlights the close proximity of Jesus’ death at the ‘ninth hour’, the Jewish time of prayer.\textsuperscript{58} He concludes that:

Jesus’ commitment of his spirit is an address to the God revealed to him by the tearing of the temple curtain, as Stephen’s commitment of his spirit is an address to the Lord revealed by the opening of the heavens.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{50} He dismisses the accounts in Hebrews as pure dogmatisations of the more likely historical accounts of Jerome, the Talmud, and Josephus, citing the closeness in dating between the gospel record and that of Josephus. Zahn, ‘Der zerrissene Tempelvorhang’, 730. Cf. E. Nestle, ‘Matthew 27:51 und Parallelen’, Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älten Kirche 3 (1902), 167–69.

\textsuperscript{51} Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions 1.41.3; Origen, Fragments on Luke, 250; Fragments on Matthew, 560; Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew 26:39 51.32.40.


\textsuperscript{53} Daube, New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism, 23–24. Cf. also Clementine Recognitions, 1:41; M’Neile, Matthew, 423.

\textsuperscript{54} M’Neile, Matthew, 423.

\textsuperscript{55} C.A. Evans, Mark 8:27 – 16:20 (Word Biblical Commentary 34b; Nashville: Nelson, 2001), 509–10. So also Catena on Matthew, 237 30–31, Catena on Mark, 440.26; 441.1; Catena on Acts, 36.4; Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, 88.2. Others suggest what was breathed out and subsequently rent the veil was the Holy Spirit, departing in judgement. Cf. Jackson, ‘The Death of Jesus in Mark’, 27. This ‘punitive’ use of his breath, France regards as ‘bizarre’ (Mark, 657).

\textsuperscript{56} G.R. Driver, ‘Two Problems in the New Testament’, Journal of Theological Studies 16 (1965), 337. His reason: ‘No one, certainly no educated man, can have supposed such a portent possible’.


\textsuperscript{59} Sylva, The Temple Curtain’, 245. For an excellent critique of this view, which has found no support prior to 1986 and very little since, cf. J.B. Green, ‘The Death of Jesus and the Rending
From a Markan perspective, S.G.F. Brandon has put forth an interesting proposal for gentile reading of the event. He looks to the historical record of the 'Flavian triumph' when, according to Josephus (Jewish Wars 6.5.3 §§288–309; cf. Tacitus, Histories 5.13), the ornate veil was part of the loot pillaged from Jerusalem and taken to the imperial palace in Rome.60 Suggesting the Romans would have flaunted their spoils, he concludes the tradition of the rending of the veil was likely conflagrated and appropriated to Jesus' death to respond to the Jewish notion of its acceptance by God as symbolised by his presence in the temple.61

Among the most promising studies from a methodological standpoint is proposed by J.B. Green, particularly in a Luke-Acts context. The differing order of the account by Luke coupled with the largely positive view of the Temple itself in Luke-Acts leads Green to argue that the rending of the veil symbolises 'the obliteration of the barriers between those peoples previously divided by status and ethnicity'.62 The attractiveness of this view is that Green has very carefully drawn a distinctively Lukian picture of the temple as a key hermeneutical element, a method which will similarly be proposed for Matthew.63

A Way Forward?

Here it is appropriate to examine the single work published to date, apart from commentaries and monographs on other topics, that purports to speak solely of the rending of the veil in Matthew.64 In his 1986 article M. de Jonge suggests that many approaches to date used to interpret the account are unsatisfactory, criticising modern approaches for insufficient methodological considerations:

"It is very unlikely that 'the' meaning of Matthew 27:51a will ever be established beyond doubt. Perhaps, however, the scrutiny of the early Christian material will induce modern exegetes to review their own interpretations critically and to present them with utmost modesty. Many of them are not all that new, and all of them are tenuous."65


61 This view is not without its serious difficulties and assumptions. For a helpful, though brief, critique cf. Yates, Spirit and the Kingdom, 232–37.


63 While this is critical, it fails to give credence to a number of vital factors, not least of which is Luke's view of Christ's death, for it is in the context of the death of Christ that Luke places this event. Surely the subject of the crucifixion narrative is the death of Christ rather than the temple.

64 Though compare with the piece in Italian by D. Andreoli: 'Il velo squarciato nel Vangelo di Matteo,' Biblical Studies on the Web 1 (1998), 20–42.

65 De Jonge, 'Matthew 27:51'; 79. Unfortunately, he offers none of his own and particularly fails to address the specifically Matthean context of the event.
Particularly in light of the complexity of the issues surveyed above, a great deal of respect must be afforded to de Jonge’s caution. However, it seems the methods outlined above can be instructive for pushing a new way forward which assimilates the methodological approaches to the subject of three key scholars: Eta Linnemann, J.B. Green, and J.E. Yates.

The veil, a most Jewish symbol, is often interpreted from Mark’s (Gentile?) gospel rather than Matthew’s which R.T. France calls ‘at the same time the most Jewish and the most anti-Jewish of the gospels’. Consideration of the ‘Jewish’ origin of the veil is then perhaps both the most essential and overlooked element to interpreting the veil, particularly in Matthew. H. Alford’s statement: ‘A right and deep view of the OT symbolism is required to furnish the key to it’, 67 has been largely overlooked. In 1970, Eta Linnemann articulated what is curiously perhaps the most unusual methodological statement on interpreting the rending of the veil when she simply suggested that one must examine the function of the curtain in order to understand what its rending meant for its original audience. 68 Though her work gives only brief attention to the function of the veil in the OT and none to its role in the Matthean Passion Narrative, her comment is an important place to begin. For whatever else may be said of the event, synoptics scholars are largely agreed that the rending of the veil expresses the cessation of its function. The function of the veil, then, as articulated in the OT and Second Temple texts, is an essential element to be factored into any interpretation of its rending in the synoptic passion accounts. 69

This is an important place to begin, for if we can presume, with most scholars, that the rending of the veil depicts the cessation of its function, and we look to the OT to discern its function, it will prove decisive in determining which veil is in view and provide some indication as to the significance of its rending. Indeed, though, as we have seen, Matthew’s katapetasma can refer to any of three curtains in the tabernacle/temple structures of the OT, only that which refers to the inner veil before the Holy of Holies is designated any explicit function. Surely, as is commonly presumed, its function includes keeping people out of the Holy of Holies. Yet it also served to ‘separate’ the holy from the unholy, and possibly reminded the priest presenting the sin offering (Lev. 4:6, 17) that his sacrifice was incomplete and pointed to its completion on the Day of Atonement. By virtue of the cherubim woven into the inner veil, it could serve to ‘guard’ the Holy of Holies from sinful people entering in, just as the cherubim were stationed at the edge of the Garden of Eden to keep fallen humanity from entering the pristine garden. Indeed, Second Temple Jewish texts liken the garden as the ‘Holy of Holies’ (cf. Jubilees 8.19). The rending of the veil could depict the cessation of these functions: no longer are people prohibited from the presence of God, 70 no longer is there ‘separation’ of the holy from the unholy, no longer is atonement impeded, and no longer are there cherubim blocking the Garden of Eden (a noted soteriological expression, cf. Testament Levi 18.11). 71 Indeed, for one to share such communion with God as possibly depicted

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68 Linnemann, Studien, 160. Our emphasis.
70 Rather than the explicit depiction in Hebrews of the believer entering into God’s presence, Matthew could be particularly alluding to his incarnational Christology (‘God with us’).
71 These functions and the implications of their cessation are explored in some detail in Gurtner, ‘Functionality, Identity, and Interpretation: The Tearing of the Temple Curtain (Matt. 27:51 par) in Light of Pentateuchal Tabernacle Texts’. 

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by these images, Mathew surely presumes atonement to have occurred and inextricably links it with the death of Christ (Matt. 27:51).

In addition, whether in Matthew or Mark, most scholars rightly see the rendering of the temple veil as some sort of comment on the death of Christ. With an argument exclusively based on the Marcan context, J.E. Yates provides an innovative approach to the relationship of the death of Christ and the rending of the veil. He recognises the centrality of Christ’s death to the pericope and then traces Mark’s portrayal of Jesus’ death throughout the gospel to highlight the ‘positive significance of the death of Jesus’.72 Similarly, an interpretation of the rending of the veil in Matthew must explore that evangelist’s theology of the death of Christ as a hermeneutical key to interpreting the veil. The atoning theme would be even more pronounced in Matthew, who clearly portrays Jesus’ death as rescuing people from sin from the start (Matt. 1:21) and in other key places in his narrative (Matt. 20:28; 26:28).

Similarly, in a method not unlike that of J.B. Green, discussed above, one must account for Matthew’s attitude toward the Jerusalem temple in general and its relationship to Christ in particular to try to define, as much as possible, the relationship between Christ and the temple and explore possible implications for the relationship between the death of Christ and the rending of its veil. It seems that Matthew’s choice of language for the temple both expresses his authority vis-à-vis that of the religious leaders (hieron) as well as judgement to be carried out in the destruction of the temple because of the mismanagement of the temple (naos).73 The latter term is used with respect to the veil of the temple (naos) and therefore Matthew’s consistent thematic use of that term should be used to inform an interpretation of the tearing of the veil.

Finally, a ‘way forward’ in solving the riddle of this text must include a more careful use of Second Temple and Rabbinic Jewish sources. As was noted earlier, scholars are quick to look to Philo and Josephus for help identifying the veil, but are just as quick to leave these sources and overlook others. As early as Josephus (Jewish Wars 5.5.4 §211), Jewish authors have made a connection between the veil of the temple and the heavenly firmaments (Gen. 1:6; cf. Targum of Job 26.9; 3 Enoch 228.6; b. Yoma 77a).74 Just as the veil conceals God’s abode in heaven, so the veil conceals his heavenly abode in the Holy of Holies. The rending of the veil, then, could depict the rending of the heavens or at least relate to the opening of heavenly doors, etc. (cf. Rev. 3.7–8; 4:1; 11:19; 15:5; 19:11), which clearly locate the synoptic rending texts in an apocalyptic milieu.

Perhaps we have raised more questions here than we have answered. Yet, while the methods proposed here may not provide a singular or even decisive interpretation of Matthew’s account, they may serve to prompt scholars to rearrange the pieces of this puzzle in a different yet coherent manner. Incorporating elements of the cessation of the veil’s function, the evangelists’ portrayal of the death of Christ and the Jerusalem temple, and a careful use of Jewish sources could combine to be a way forward for understanding this historically enigmatic passage in its particular Matthean context.75

Dedicated to Dr J. Bibza, with gratitude.

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72 Yates, Spirit and the Kingdom, 232.
74 Cf. Pelletier, ‘La tradition synoptique’, 174–75
75 Comprehensive treatment of the issues raised is being addressed by the author in his PhD thesis currently being written at the University of St Andrews, Scotland.