Interpreting Apocalyptic Symbolism in the Gospel of Matthew

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The appearance of apocalyptic symbols is common in NT narratives, including in the Gospel of Matthew. But the identification and interpretation of such symbols is frequently allusive, indeterminate, and even contradictory in scholarly discussion. The purpose of this article is to offer some methodological controls for interpreting these texts. Drawing on seminal work done on apocalypses as a genre and their constituent features, this article posits that the employment of symbols is a defining element of apocalypses that provides an important point of entry for the identification and interpretation of apocalyptic symbols in the Gospel of Matthew. These symbols can be interpreted in a manner similar to that employed for formal apocalypses, in which interpreters seek to determine the referent of the symbol employed. Yet the distinction in genre between an apocalypse and a bios warrants careful attention to the function of the apocalyptic symbol in the Gospel narrative. This method is demonstrated on a text frequently described as “apocalyptic” (Matt 27:51–54).

Key Words: Matthew, interpretation, apocalyptic, symbolism, Revelation, veil

INTRODUCTION

Interpreting apocalyptic symbolism in Matthew seems to be a contradiction in terms. And, ironically, it is precisely this confusion in terminology that has led to confusion in interpretation. Matthew is not an apocalypse.

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but a *bios*, an ancient biography of Greco-Roman form. So how can we speak of “apocalyptic” with respect to Matthew’s Gospel? The subject has been variously understood. While many works touch on apocalyptic elements in various places within the Gospel, only a few studies discuss the subject of apocalypticism in Matthew in its own right. P. Hadfield calls Matthew the “Apocalyptic Editor.” Leopold Sabourin dubs Matthew “the most apocalyptic of the evangelists” and recognizes what he calls apocalyptic “traits.” Don Hagner says that Matthew uses “apocalyptic motifs” and suggests Matthew is “the apocalyptic Gospel. Nearly every major section of the Gospel bears the stamp of apocalyptic in one way or another.” C. Rowland sidesteps the issue by referring in his 1994 *JTS* article simply to “Apocalyptic.”

David C. Sim gives extensive treatment to the subject in terms of *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew*, the title of his 1996 monograph. But what these and other authors mean by their terms is neither clear nor uniform. It is also unclear if and how significant advances in scholarly discourse on apocalypticism may have a role in interpreting apocalyptic features in narratives such as Matthew’s Gospel. My objective here is to demonstrate the need for greater clarity in the use of terminology and glean from advances in the study of apocalypses as a genre for our discussion. I will argue that analysis of interpreting symbolism within apocalypses proper can provide helpful heuristic tools for identifying and interpreting apocalyptic symbols in the Gospel of Matthew. I will then demonstrate the utility of these tools to provide a methodologically controlled foundation for interpreting an apocalyptic symbol in Matthew. Let me begin our discussion by mapping where scholars have gone in this discussion, after which I will attempt to sort through the material with some critique and analysis and then move the discussion forward with a hermeneutical method that can be taken to the first Gospel.

8. Another pertinent article is by A. G. van Aarde, “Matthew and Apocalypticism as the ‘Mother of Christian Theology’: Ernst Käsemann Revisited,” *HvTSI* 58 (2002) 118–42. Here the author looks to reevaluate Käsemann’s presumption that conflict arose between charismatic law-free Jesus followers (Paul) and apocalyptically oriented Jesus followers. The discussion is not immediately relevant to ours.
SURVEY OF SCHOLARSHIP

In a very short article appearing in 1959, P. Hadfield observes the presence of apocalyptic material in Matthean redaction. 9 Though he does not identify his understanding of the term *apocalyptic*, Hadfield underscores the presence of angels, final judgment, rewards for the righteous, and the end of the world in Matthean redaction in a manner that resonates with documents such as *1 Enoch*, *Testament of Joseph*, and some Iranian “sacred books” (of which I am not familiar) to show how the editor of the first Gospel, “by his additions and modifications of his sources, emphasized apocalyptic teaching.” 10 More explicit is the work of Leopold Sabourin, who contends that at the heart of apocalyptic thought in general, and apocalypses in particular, lies the interpretation of history in which God reveals what course history will follow. 11 Such a revelation is “made through images and symbols, which is appropriate for *visions* and suits the supernatural and mysterious character of the message to be transmitted.” 12 This perspective is then taken to Matthew, where Sabourin trolls through a list of verses from that Gospel, offering comments to demonstrate the “apocalyptic interest of Matthew.” 13

Don Hagner’s important article addresses “Apocalyptic Motifs in the Gospel of Matthew.” To define his terminology, Hagner starts with Paul Hanson, who looks to the social contexts in which apocalyptic movements emerge, specifically in terms of alienation and disintegration of traditional beliefs, to which an apocalyptic motif responds. Hagner then draws some conclusions about the social setting of the gospel, but that is not his focus (as it will be for Sim). Instead, for Hagner, Matthew couches his outlook in an “apocalyptic eschatology,” a “viewpoint,” really, not only about end things, but also of a “radical transformation of the present order by supernatural agency in the future.” 14 Christopher Rowland 15 approaches the narrative of Matthew in light of his important book, *The Open Heaven*. 16 Rowland’s work is important for at least two reasons: first, he shows that apocalypses themselves are not “solely concerned with the end of the world,” 17 an important corrective that we will revisit soon. Second, Rowland shows that the features that are commonly found in apocalypses are also present in other genres. This is not new, of course, but Rowland’s articulation of how this works seems quite unique and, in my estimation,

10. Ibid., 132.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 32.
16. The full title is *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1982). The thrust of the essay is to overturn the growing consensus that apocalyptic was not foundational to Christian origins as proposed by A. Schweitzer.
helpful. From this latter point, one can see that the task of an apocalypse can be accomplished through other genres. Specifically, I suggest, the task of an apocalypse “to reveal truths about God and the universe” can also be accomplished where particular features of apocalypses are present in other genres. These are important observations to which we will return shortly.

The most comprehensive treatment of apocalyptic with respect to Matthew is in the work of David C. Sim. In his 1996 monograph, Sim is careful to attend to “apocalyptic eschatology” in the First Gospel as a hermeneutical tool for exploring Christian origins, specifically the so-called “Matthean community.” This is a common practice among scholars working in apocalyptic literature. That is, since the work of Hanson (and likely earlier), scholars have attempted to profile the sociological conditions in place that gave rise to apocalyptic literature. Sim takes the apocalyptic eschatology of Matthew’s Gospel as a means to sketching a similar profile for the origins of Matthew’s Gospel. His results are rather bleak: He posits that Matthew’s “community” stood in opposition to pharisaic-led formative Judaism. Relations were marked by bitterness and hostility and Matthew’s church experienced some persecution from other Jews in the community. Matthew’s community was also a victim of post-war persecution of Jews by Gentiles. Subsequently, Matthew advocated a policy of avoiding the Gentile world as much as possible. Matthew’s community also separated itself from the law-free aspects of the church, which it viewed as little better than the Pharisees and no closer to God than the Gentiles.

This brief survey illustrates the diversity with which scholars engage apocalypticism in Matthew’s Gospel and the need for careful analysis.

**Analysis of Nomenclature: Origins of Apocalyptic and the Origins of Matthew?**

What I find refreshing in Hagner are at least two things: first, he sets to define his terminology based on established, working definitions within scholarship. Second, he is careful to note that even when using loaded terms such as apocalyptic eschatology, one need not think exclusively in terms of future events. But I think we need to part company with Hagner and Sim when they take the next step toward reconstructing a sociological setting for “Matthew’s community.” Sim, building on the work of others, contends that, because apocalypticism arose from crises, and this apocalyptic eschatology is present in Matthew, Matthew must reflect a community that arose from a crisis. Indeed, Sim provides an extensive portrait of sociological features of Matthew’s “community.”

The problems here are


numerous, but let me mention just two: first, it is not at all apparent that, because Matthew has “apocalyptic traits,” we must analyze its origins on a sociological level the same way we would an apocalypse. That it bears traits similar to those of apocalypses by no means requires that we trace its origins identically to how many have traced the origins of an apocalypse. To put it differently, because Hanson has argued that apocalypses arise from settings of crises and community formations,20 must we conclude that “apocalyptic traits” found in the narrative of Matthew’s Gospel suggest the origins of Matthew’s community? I am less convinced that Hanson’s sociological profile of apocalyptic works from antiquity is as prescriptive as it is descriptive. Can we make socioreligious conclusions about readership based on apocalyptic features in a narrative? This seems to step unquestioningly into speculation.21

The second problem I see with this approach is that it seems to presume the Formgeschichtliche approach of determining a Sitz im Leben behind respective Gospel pericopes. I raise this issue because using Hanson’s method of speculating on the origins of a community behind an apocalypse to apply to the Gospel of Matthew seems to presume the so-called “community hypothesis.” This view, a long-standing consensus among a wide range of scholars, assumes that each of the Gospels was written for a specific church or group of churches. Of course, the seminal rebuttal is that of Richard Bauckham, whose 1998 edited volume The Gospel for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences22 provides compelling evidence from six scholars that the Gospels were intended for general circulation around the early Christian churches and so envisaged a very general Christian audience. Nevertheless, Formgeschichtliche assumptions still permeate Gospels scholarship, often in an unquestioning manner.23 Using a theory of the origin of an apocalypse to apply to a Gospel is problematic enough; using


23. I have in mind A. Yarbro Collins’ commentary (Mark [Herm; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007]) which, however, is anything but unthinking in its use of form criticism. The articles by A.-J. Levine and R. S. Ascough in David E. Aune’s The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) are good examples of how form critical assumptions are still being used for sociological reconstructions of the so-called “Matthean community.”
it to sketch a sociological profile of the so-called Matthean community presumes without question that such a community existed.

“Eschatological” and “Apocalyptic”

A common occurrence in the discussion of apocalyptic in Matthew pertains to the confusion of overlapping but distinct terms. By “apocalyptic,” many scholars seem to mean either eschatological or symbolic (nonliteral), or both. As was suggested above, scholars such as Sabourin and Sim move quickly from apocalyptic to discussing the “end of the world” in terms of Matthew’s apocalyptic outlook, when in fact this is more properly an eschatological feature that is sometimes couched in apocalyptic symbols. Hagner requires that apocalyptic involves “the near future” of end-time blessings and judgment. This is unnecessarily restricting and problematic in the sense that it conflates two overlapping and related-but-distinct concepts: apocalyptic and eschatology. The point is taken up at greater length by Sim, who similarly begins by defining apocalyptic in conventional terms but then moves to “apocalyptic eschatology.” For this, he looks to Collins’s definition, which he says is an end-time “scheme which looks to retribution or judgment beyond the realm of history.” Yet it is not clear that this is what Collins intends. Instead, Collins wisely discusses apocalyptic eschatology as an eschatology that is found within apocalypses. For him, a presumption that “apocalyptic” must be equated with the end of history is based only on a narrow selection of ancient apocalypses. Furthermore, some of the elements that are typically attributed to “apocalyptic eschatology,” such as the judgment of the dead or even a scenario of the end of history, are not at all particular to apocalypses. Finally, Collins posits that, while there are many common features found in apocalypses, it is difficult to define a distinctive apocalyptic eschatology.

The difficult task of distinguishing between apocalyptic and eschatology is taken up by Christopher Rowland. He is among a handful of scholars (along with J. Carmignac and H. Stegemann) who want to remove eschatology from definition of an apocalypse. Collins is right that this removal would cover a wider corpus of literature, which would of course include all apocalypses but also some other texts, such as Matthew. This point is important, for Rowland’s work observes that features of apocalyptic are found not only in an apocalypse proper but also in features employed in

28. Ibid., 12.
29. Ibid., citing Rowland, Open Heaven, 29–37, 71.
30. See Collins, Apocalyptic Imagination, 10 n. 25.
other genres. This, I think, is precisely what we find in Matthew. Yet how does one discern the features of apocalyptic in genres that are not themselves apocalypses? Where does one take the discussion of apocalyptic from apocalypses themselves to other genres? The point of entry, it seems, is the most obvious feature involved, which is the symbolism that is so characteristic of apocalyptic.

PROPOSING A NEW METHOD:
APOCYALPSTIC AND ITS USE OF SYMBOLS

What becomes apparent to me as Sabourin strings along his texts with a paragraph or two of comment on each is that the thought world or “elements” commonly attributed to apocalyptic literature permeate the first Gospel and are woven into both narrative and discourse materials of a variety of literary forms: pronouncement stories, miracle stories, words of discipleship, controversy sayings, and so on. Similarly, Rowland’s work shows that features of apocalypses may be present in a narrative such as Matthew and that these features serve a similar function in narratives to their apocalyptic counterparts. Specifically, they “reveal truths about God and the universe.” In such instances, Rowland claims, “The language that Jewish tradition uses to speak of God’s mysteries in the apocalypses enables the reader to understand the meaning of history more profoundly than would be possible from a straightforward narrative.” In other words, apocalyptic provides some explanation or commentary on narrative events where a simple narrative description does not suffice. Surely, we see this in narratives, where a Gospel author such as Matthew propels readers from a narrative scene by using apocalyptic symbols to grant readers an other-worldly perspective on something in his narrative. I will quote Rowland again at length:

in Matthew’s gospel we have a narrative in which another dimension to ordinary life is revealed, a strategy typical of the apocalyptic . . . tradition. It gives us another perspective, a divine dimension of which apocalyptic enables us to catch a glimpse. It is impossible to understand human existence or the hidden nature of individuals unless one is also aware of another, hidden story. The apocalyptic dimension to ordinary life is especially pronounced in Matthew.32

In this manner, Rowland seems to suggest Matthew adopts the role of an apocalypticist. Yet the challenge here is discerning by what means the evangelist has tipped his apocalyptic hand and in what manner it is evident that he has done so. Considerable work has been done in scholarly discussion of apocalypses in general that indicate the use of symbols is a defining element. But here also we must take care regarding our use of terminology,

31. Rowland, Open Heaven, 505.
32. Ibid., 517.
for language such as Rowland’s “apocalyptic tradition” and “apocalyptic dimension” require distinction from other, related terms.

When using language of apocalyptic, we must be careful to distinguish between apocalypse as a genre, a social movement, and an eschatological outlook.\(^{33}\) That is, some distinction must be made between three related terms: *apocalypses, apocalyptic,* and *apocalypticism.*\(^{34}\) Apocalypticism is a world view, ideology, or theology merging the eschatological aims of particular groups into a cosmic and political arena.\(^{35}\) Apocalyptic can either be the literary genre in particular or the world view often espoused in this literature in general. Apocalypse proper is the literary genre dating from ca. 200 B.C. to A.D. 200.\(^{36}\) John J. Collins has defined the term in his seminal work as follows:

“Apocalypse” is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.\(^{37}\)

With this important definition in mind, the function of apocalypse, as articulated by A. Y. Collins, D. Hellholm, and David Aune, is “to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence the understanding and behavior of the audience by means of divine authority.”\(^{38}\) These important statements clarify for us that any discussion of “apocalyptic” in general is saturated with a wide variety of symbolic language. Such language may use symbols as metaphors for the purpose of referring to concrete objects or events as well as abstract ideas. This seems to be what David Aune has in view for what he terms “apocalyptic imagery”: the language and conceptions of apocalyptic eschatology found in bits and pieces in a variety of ancient literary settings.\(^{39}\) Apocalyptic imagery is the means by which that world view is conveyed.\(^{40}\) That is, when apocalyptic is conveyed in literary form, it characteristically employs images and symbols, often expressed in specific, nonliteral lan-

guage typically, but not always, found in literature categorized within the “apocalyptic” genre proper. Apocalyptic imagery is employed to convey a “revelation of a supernatural world and the activity of supernatural beings.” It is used to provide a “cosmic perspective” on a particular situation. The imagery is drawn from a set of recognizable symbols that were often understood to represent things beyond themselves. Identifying the referentiality of those symbols is crucial to understanding the meaning of a text that employs them.

What if one of these recognizable symbols appears not only in an apocalypse proper but also in an ancient literary work of a different genre altogether, such as a Gospel? That is, if a symbol that appears in apocalypses appears also in a Gospel, the manner in which it is interpreted within an apocalypse could be instructive for its interpretation in a Gospel. So, I suggest, we are not discussing the interpretation of “apocalyptic eschatology” in Matthew, for this is a collapse of categories that, while frequently appearing hand-in-hand, are neither synonymous nor necessarily concurrent. Nor are we employing terms such as “apocalyptic motifs” (Hagner) or “apocalyptic traits” (Sabourin), because “traits” or “motifs” lack the specificity required for a methodologically sound and controlled interpretation of its features. Instead, I think we can speak with more clarity about the interpretation of apocalyptic symbols in Matthew. For it is precisely the symbolic nature of Hagner’s “motifs” and Sabourin's “traits” that leads them and others to describe certain elements as apocalyptic in the first place. Of course, apocalyptic literature is not limited to symbolism. There are other features, such as motifs and literary forms. But because the use of symbolism is a defining element or feature of apocalyptic literature in general, whether a formal apocalypse proper in the genre sense or an apocalyptic feature found within another genre, symbolism seems to be an important point of entry for discussion of apocalyptic in the Gospel of Matthew.

If apocalyptic symbolism is the point at which to interpret apocalyptic features in Matthew, we must first discern how one identifies and interprets these symbols. For this we can turn to extensive work done by interpreters of Revelation, an apocalypse proper, for guidance. Interpreters of that book of course must come to terms with some methodological rubric for interpreting its vast symbolism. At the same time, however, we must also be aware of the likelihood that though an apocalypse and a Gospel

41. Collins (Apocalyptic Imagination, 282) insists that “the language of the apocalypses is not descriptive, referential, newspaper language, but the expressive language of poetry, which uses symbols and imagery to articulate a sense or feeling about the world. Their abiding value does not lie in the pseudoinformation they provide about cosmology or future history, but in their affirmation of a transcendent world.”

42. Ibid., 6. Sacchi’s approach starts with the Book of Watchers and the problem of evil, but Collins doubts it can be traced to a single motif or theme (Collins, Apocalyptic Imagination, 11). Cf. Hagner, “Apocalyptic Motifs,” 57.


may employ similar or even identical symbols, the distinction in genre may well require a distinction in interpretations as warranted by their respective genres. So we will need to consider what features there are about the narrative of a Gospel that may require us to interpret its use of apocalyptic symbols in a manner distinct from its use in an apocalypse.

In discussing the symbolic nature of Revelation and the interpretation of symbols, G. K. Beale looks to Rev 1:1 where John is having a vision to “make known” (σημαίνω) God’s purposes in the book. Beale reads this expression as an indication of a pictorial disclosure, causing him to render John’s σημαίνω as “communicate by symbols.” How one interprets such symbols is crucial. When the symbols are not themselves identified by the author (as in Rev 1:20), one must look elsewhere for interpretation. Here, Beale looks primarily to two sources: first a “known commonplace association of a picture.” By this, Beale presumes a shared corpus of knowledge by the author and recipients from a variety of biblical and nonbiblical literature, primarily the OT and Judaism. Beale’s commentary focuses on tracing the exegetical tradition in the OT and Judaism of OT symbolic passages that John alludes to; thus, he hopes to see the commonplace associations of the OT symbols in their ongoing interpretive developments. The second source Beale looks to when interpreting symbolism in the apocalypse is the “literal subject itself.” Though there are varying degrees of correspondence in such cases, there is value in examining the nature of the comparison. If one were to say God is a rock, there may be a number of characteristics of a rock to choose from—hard, common, blunt, and so on, but context will aid in discerning the point(s) of comparison, which in Revelation can be many. At the same time, however, we must recognize at the outset that symbolic need not mean nonliteral. This point is made explicitly in Grant Osborne’s interpretation of apocalyptic symbols in Revelation. If this is the case in an apocalypse, one must be all the more sensitive to this in a narrative. We recognize this with highly symbolic biblical records such as the exodus and the resurrection of Jesus. Both are highly, even powerfully, symbolic. But both are perceived by biblical authors as literally and historically real, true, and factual in space and time. This is an important caution when interpreting highly symbolic apocalyptic symbols in a genre outside an apocalypse. For as we enter the bios of Matthew, we are presented with items in a manner that suggests they contain literal, historical aspects common to its narrative style while at the same time containing highly charged apocalyptic symbols that require some interpretation.

There are a wide variety of texts in Matthew that use apocalyptic symbols to which we can turn. There is the transfiguration, some of the parousia

46. Ibid., 56.
47. Beale also includes the LXX, pagan literature, and numismatic, inscriptional sources.
48. Ibid.
parables,\textsuperscript{50} and Matthew’s Olivet Discourse (chs. 24–25).\textsuperscript{51} One could also consider the four Matthean uses of the verb \(\text{ἀποκαλύπτω}\) (10:26; 11:25, 27; 16:17). In Matt 10:26 Jesus declares that there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed (\(\text{ἀποκαλυφθῆσαι}\)). Elsewhere he praises the Father because he has hidden things from the wise and learned and revealed (\(\text{ἀπεκάλυψας}\)) them to children (11:25). Astonishingly, Jesus asserts that no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (\(\text{ἀποκαλύψαι}\), 11:27). Then, after Peter identifies Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16), Jesus replies that Peter arrived at that conclusion not from personal experience with Jesus, witnessing his miracles, or simply keen perception, but from a revelation (\(\text{ἀπεκάλυψέν}\)) from Jesus’ heavenly Father (Matt 16:17). Each of these would help contribute to a composite picture of apocalyptic symbolism in Matthew, but I want to focus on one specific text: the tearing of the veil in Matt 27:51. Here I do not intend to introduce a novel interpretation of this enigmatic passage.\textsuperscript{52} Instead, I hope to demonstrate how the methodological controls suggested above guide us in identifying and interpreting an apocalyptic symbol within a narrative account in Matthew’s Gospel.

\textit{Apocalyptic Symbolism and Matthew 27:51}

When we come to the tearing of the veil in Matthew, scholarly confusion abounds. Most recognize that the pericope draws on apocalyptic images from the OT. But when most scholars use the term \textit{apocalyptic} with respect to the veil and its context, few define what they mean by that term and how the veil of the temple fits into that category. Even K. L. Waters, in a recent article titled “Matthew 27:52–53 as Apocalyptic Apostrophe,” never defines what he means by “apocalyptic.”\textsuperscript{53} Matthew’s “special material” (27:51b–53) is sometimes called “apocalyptic material” taken from an “apocalyptic tradition,”\textsuperscript{54} while the resurrection of holy ones is an “apocalyptic sign.”\textsuperscript{55} Hagner refers to the “symbolic-apocalyptic character of the language.”\textsuperscript{56} M. de Jonge uses “apocalypticizing description of events.”\textsuperscript{57} R. Brown discusses “apocalyptic trappings” and “symbolic, poetic, and popular apocalyptic events.”\textsuperscript{58} These diverse appropriations of terminology can be aided


\textsuperscript{51} Especially 24:5–9, which bears some striking resemblances to Rev 6:2–14.

\textsuperscript{52} This is offered in my \textit{Torn Veil}.


\textsuperscript{55} Senior, “Death of Jesus,” 323.


by the use of a methodology that employs the interpretation of apocalyptic symbols as a foundation. As we have seen, Beale has helpfully demonstrated that authors of apocalypses employ symbols from a stock of images primarily found in the OT and also Second Temple Judaism, as well as from the nature of the symbols themselves. For when interpreting apocalyptic symbols, a contextual interpretation requires discernment of what the symbol employed refers to. This is clear enough in apocalypses, but James D. G. Dunn has made the identical point with respect to interpreting apocalyptic language in Matthew.\(^59\) It would seem, then, that discerning the referent of the tearing of the veil would provide a key to interpreting the pericope in which it is found.

The tearing of the veil provides a particular problem because neither Matthew nor his synoptic counterparts offer an explicit interpretation, and there is no clear precedent in Judaism.\(^60\) To what the tearing of the veil refers is unclear, and conjecture has been dominant.\(^61\) There is no statement that gives us any indication of any symbolic meaning of the *tearing* of the veil. But if interpreting an apocalyptic symbol requires identification of its referent, it could be fruitful to search the OT and Second Temple Jewish texts to identify a symbolic referent for the veil itself. There are a few places where the veil is mentioned in Second Temple Judaism and numerous mentions of it in the OT. But in terms of its symbolism, it is primarily Jewish sources of the Second Temple period that help us. But even here speculation is found. For example, some scholars insist that the veil “is taken to embody the whole religious system of the Temple”\(^62\) or represents “the locus of God’s presence at the heart of Israel’s cultic life.”\(^63\) However, there are no texts from the OT or Judaism that make this connection. For in that period, the symbolic referent for the veil was only one thing, the heavenly firmament of Gen 1:6.\(^64\) I will rehearse the evidence for that here, in brief.

Throughout the vast literature in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Judaism, authors provide the clear information regarding the symbolic referent of the temple veil: Josephus and the Gospel of Mark. Perhaps because

\(^{59}\) He insists that “with apocalyptic language, the question of referentiality cannot be ignored” (“The Significance of Matthew’s Eschatology for Biblical Theology,” *SBLSP* 35 [1996] 161.

\(^{60}\) Except, perhaps, in *Liv. Pro.* 12.

\(^{61}\) For a survey of various interpretations, see D. M. Gurtner, “The Rending of the Veil: A Look Back and a Way Forward,” *Them* 29/3 (2004) 4–14. It is possible that the torn veil is symbolic of the beginning destruction of the old cosmos, since the accompanying imagery (Matt 27:51–53) describes things that were to happen at the end of the old cosmos (of which the temple itself was symbolic). This interpretation is touched on most closely by G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004) 189–90.


\(^{64}\) For a thorough treatment, see ch. 4 of my *Torn Veil*, “The Veil in Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism,” 72–96.
of his priestly heritage, Josephus is very descriptive of the veil. According to him, it was

of Babylonian tapestry (Βαβυλώνιος ποικιλτὸς), with embroidery of blue and fine linen, of scarlet also and purple, wrought with marvelous skill. Nor was this mixture of materials without its mystic meaning: it typified the universe. For the scarlet seemed emblematic of fire, the fine linen of the earth, the blue of the air, and the purple of the sea; the comparison in two cases being suggested by their colour, and in that of the fine linen and purple by their origin, as the one is produced by the earth and the other by the sea. On this tapestry was portrayed a panorama of the heavens, the signs of the Zodiac excepted (J.W. 5.5.4 §§212–214 LCL).

Josephus’ elaborate description is rich in symbolism. The Babylonian tapestry and the scarlet purple and skill clearly depict royalty. Pelletier claims that for Josephus “the embroidery of the curtain represented the stars of the firmament.” Hofius says that for Josephus the veil symbolizes the separation between heaven and earth. The colors depicted the elements of the universe, and describing it as portraying the “panorama of the heavens” (τὴν οὐράνιον θεωρίαν) suggests the firmament imagery associated with the veil summarized from rabbinic texts above. Precisely what does he mean by “panorama” and how does it relate to “the heaven”? Generally refers to a sight or spectacle. In Josephus, the term refers to a design, plan, or something visually depicting something else. Moreover, Josephus tells his readers what that “something else” is, ἀπασαν τὴν οὐράνιον. Οὐράνιος is a relatively rare adjectival form of οὐρανός and can, itself, mean a “panorama of the heavens” (Xenophon, Mem. 1.1.11) but mostly means “heavenly” or “dwelling in heaven” as a place for the gods. What Josephus tells us, then, is that there was something portrayed

65. Though this is not an apocalyptic context, as in other Jewish writings similarly depicting the veil, it is no longer valid to discredit Josephus’ connection with Jewish apocalypticism. Cf. P. Bilde, “Josephus and Jewish Apocalypticism,” in Understanding Josephus: Seven Perspectives (ed. S. Mason; JSPSup 32; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 35–61.

66. Such Babylonian tapestry likewise served as the coverlet for Cyrus’ golden sarcophagus when it was visited by Alexander the Great (Arrian, Anabasis of Alexander 6.29.5) who “founded the Persian Empire, and was King of Asia” (6.29.8; cf. 3.21.1; 4.18.3).


68. O. Hofius, Der Vorhang vor dem Thron Gottes: Eine exegetisch-religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu Hebräer 6,19f. und 10,19f. (WUNT 14; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1972) 23. Pelletier suggests that for both Philo and Josephus the veil served to obscure from public view the mystery of the abode of God to reserve it for the privileged priesthood. Pelletier, “La tradition synoptique,” 172.

69. LSJ 797.

70. Josephus, Ant. 2.9.5 §§226; 8.5.2 §138; 12.2.12 §§99; 16.5.1 §140; 19.1.12 §81; 19.1.13 §89; J.W. 5.5.2 §191.

71. Euripides, Ion 715; Phoenissae 1729; Plato, Phaedr. 247a; Inscriptiones Graecae 12(2),58b4; Aeschylus, Prometheus vinctus 165; Agamemnon 90; LSJ 1272. It is quite rare in the LXX and NT: 1 Esd 6:14; 2 Macc 7:34; 9:10; 3 Macc. 6:18; 4 Macc. 4:11; 9:15; 11:3; Dan (0) 4:26; Matt 5:48;
on the veil, presumably woven (“tapestry”), that looked like heaven. That is, whatever else Josephus is saying, he asserts that the veil itself, in some sense, looked like heaven. This need not say that the veil is in some sense equated with the heavens, as we have seen in the rabbinic literature, but it does draw our attention to an association being made between heaven and the veil that is within the first-century period.

In addition to Josephus, we find a similar association between the veil and the heavens in a second source, which is widely held to be Matthew’s primary source, the Gospel of Mark. Mark makes a recognized association between the heavenly firmament torn at Jesus’ baptism (σχίζω, Mark 1:10) and the splitting of the veil at the “baptism” of Jesus’ death (σχίζω, 15:38). Scholars have recognized a cogently structured literary style employed by the evangelist with respect to the rending of the heavens (1:10) and the rending of the veil (15:38). S. Motyer, among other scholars, argues that the tearing of the veil in Mark “picks up and forms an inclusio with the account of Jesus’ baptism in 1.9–11.” Others have suggested that Mark intended to bracket his Gospel with a tearing of the veil/splitting of the heavens inclusio. Elsewhere I have argued that Mark’s rending of the veil is an apocalyptic assertion whereby God’s declaration of Jesus as his son (ὁ υἱὸς μου, 1:11) is finally recognized by someone other than the “evil spirits” (3:11) as the Son of God (by the centurion, υἱὸς θεοῦ, 15:39). Mark is using the apocalyptic symbol of the veil as the symbolic and literary equivalent of the sky. In that sense, the tearing of the veil is the apocalyptic, symbolic equivalent of the tearing of the sky, or tearing open of heaven, an apocalypt-
tic assertion, and what follows is the content of what it reveals. In Mark’s case, it is that Jesus is “Son of God,” the first instance in his Gospel that occurs on the lips of a person. In Mark, after the splitting of the heavens at Jesus’ baptism, we find a voice declaring Jesus’ divine Sonship (1:10–11). At the “baptism” of Jesus’ death (Mark 15:38–39)\(^77\) the veil (of the heavenly firmament) was split (σχίζω, 15:38), with another voice declaring his divine Sonship (that of the centurion). In this sense, the centurion receives a supernatural disclosure of the true identity of the crucified Jesus precisely where his identity as “Son of God” has reached its climax, at the cross.

If both Mark’s connection between the veil and the heavens and Josephus’ identification of the veil with the sky are legitimate recognitions of the veil as a symbol referring to the heavenly firmament, it not only establishes a very early recognition of the connection between the heavenly firmament and the veil of the temple, but locates that association within Mark’s Gospel, which scholars widely agree was a primary source for the composition of Matthew.\(^78\) This suggests, then, that Matthew, like Mark, employs the apocalyptic symbol of the veil as the heavenly firmament. Its rending then, like the rending of the heavens, suggest the introduction of an apocalyptic vision. Matthew seems to have adopted the Markan revelatory function of the tearing of the veil while developing the content of what it reveals by including his special material and recording not a single centurion, as in Mark, but a plurality of soldiers. The following material is developed extensively elsewhere\(^79\) and only the points that demonstrate the interpretation of the tearing of the veil as an apocalyptic symbol are rehearsed here.

**WHAT IS REVEALED**

If the torn veil is an apocalyptic symbol for the opening of heaven, it brings us to a familiar depiction of an apocalyptic vision. When the opening of heaven occurs, it often introduces an apocalyptic vision and is accompanied by visionary material and a clear indication that what is described is seen.\(^80\) The material following the opening of heaven often constitutes the content of the vision, what is revealed by that supernatural disclosure.\(^81\) This is seen in numerous examples, starting with Ezek 1:1, where the prophet reports, “the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God”

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77. However, the “baptism” of Christ’s death is a feature of Mark (10:38–39) and Luke (12:50) but absent from Matthew (cf. Matt 20:22–23), though it is added by C W 33 (892) 1006 1342 (1506) M f h q sy p h bo pt.

78. Though this is not an apocalyptic context, as in other Jewish writings similarly depicting the veil, it is no longer valid to discredit Josephus’ connection with Jewish apocalypticism. Cf. P. Bilde, “Josephus and Jewish Apocalypticism,” 35–61.

79. The Torn Veil, especially pp. 152–82.


81. Of course, sometimes the heavens are opened to pour forth rain (Gen 7:11; Deut 28:12; 2 Kgs 7:2, 19; Isa 24:18; cf. Ps 78:23; Isa 45:8; Mal 3:10).
(RSV). Similar visions occur in both apocalyptic texts (Rev 4:1; 19:11; 2 Bar. 22:1; Hermas, Vis. 1.4.1; cf. Aproc. Abr. 19.4; 1 En. 14:15) and narratives (Acts 10.11; T. Levi 2.6), most explicitly in Matt 3:16–17, where the heavens are themselves opened at Jesus’ baptism (ιδοὺ ἠνεῴχθησαν οἱ οὐρανοὶ, 3:16). Here in the veil pericope, as in other passages where an apocalyptic symbol is used to introduce a vision, what follows serves as the content of the revelation—what is revealed to the centurion and those with him (27:54). That is, Matthew’s so-called “special material” (27:51b–53) constitutes an apocalyptic vision, introduced by the apocalyptic symbol of the opening of the heaven conveyed with the tearing of the veil. In this instance, Jesus’ death has itself occasioned a revelatory assertion indicating its own significance. The special material, employing further apocalyptic images such as the splitting of stones, raising of holy ones, and so on convey that Jesus’ death has brought about the onset of the turning of an eschatological age.

The imagery here is drawn largely from Ezek 37, in which exiles will return and God will dwell among his people. But this is not all that is revealed, for another item follows the torn veil in both Matthew and Mark: that Jesus is “son of God” (Matt 27:54; Mark 15:39). I will now unpack each, briefly.

What Is Revealed: Special Material

The first item that he reports is an earthquake (27:51b; καὶ ἡ γῆ ἐσείσθη). Earthquakes are frequently present in theophanic scenes and are expected to occur at the end of time, particularly in apocalyptic literature. It has been widely recognized that Matthew draws, at least in part, from Ezek 37, where an earthquake (σεισμός; Ezek 37:7 LXX) precedes the opening of graves and the resurrection of people who return to the land of Israel (Ezek 37:12–13). J. I. H. McDonald asserts that the earthquake is “Matthew’s code for an apocalyptic act of God.”


83. It is often suggested that the rending of the veil connotes the destruction of the temple. While this view is often posited it does not seem to be sufficiently demonstrated exegetically, for I have yet to find the veil symbolizing the temple itself in any extant sources. See D. M. Gurtner, “Matthew’s Temple and the ‘Parting of the Ways’” in Built upon the Rock: Studies in the Gospel of Matthew (ed. John Nolland and Daniel M. Gurtner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 128–53.


In 27:51c, the rocks are split (καὶ οἱ πέτραι ἐσχίσθησαν). Splitting of the stones is also the result of a manifestation of God’s power (Nah 1:5–6; 1 Kgs 19:11; Ps 114:7–8; Isa 48:21) and is used in some Second Temple texts with Ezek 37 to indicate God’s victory over death in the final age.\(^88\) Dale Allison has persuasively argued that Zech 14:4–5 stands out as the most appropriate allusion.\(^89\) In that text, the Mount of Olives is “split” and the Lord comes together with “all the holy ones.”\(^90\) The significance of this background is that, in Zech 14, the allusions drawn by Matthew where the rocks are the Mount of Olives depict the turning of a new eschatological age.\(^91\)

Matthew 27:52a recounts the opening of tombs (καὶ τὰ μνημεῖα ἀνεῴχθησαν). Scholars have frequently noted the allusion in this verse to Ezek 37:12–13 LXX (ἐγὼ ἀνοίγω ὑμῶν τὰ μνήματα).\(^92\) Significantly, Ezek 37:12–13 “offers the only opening of the tombs (as distinct from the simple raising of the dead) described in the OT.”\(^93\) Furthermore, in the Ezekiel text the opening of the tombs is associated with knowing the Lord and his leadership of them into restoration from exile, which may be similar to the assertion that Matthew’s holy ones come out of their tombs after Jesus’ resurrection (27:53b).

The raised bodies of the saints (Matt 27:52b) raises questions too numerous to be discussed here.\(^94\) Most see here a reference to OT saints from Ezek 37:12: “and I will bring you forth out of your tombs” (μνημάτων)\(^95\) (surely with influence from texts such as Zech 14:4–5 and Dan 12:2\(^96\)). The

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88. Senior, “Death of God’s Son,” 42–43.
90. Carroll and Green, \textit{Death of Jesus}, 49.
94. The identity of these “fallen asleep holy ones” has been the subject of some discussion. Luz (\textit{Matthäus}, 4.365) insists that since Matthew refers to πολλά ("many") rather than "all" of the holy ones, he cannot refer to the general resurrection. Others ask whether this is a general or some other resurrection. D. Witherup (“The Death of Jesus and the Raising of the Saints: Matthew 27:51–54 in Context,” \textit{SBLSP} 26 [1987] 574) looks solely to how the event “functions within the context of Matthew 27 and the Gospel of Matthew as a whole.” R. H. Gundry (\textit{Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution} [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994] 576) suggests τῶν ἁγίων is used to produce a parallel between “the holy people” and “the holy city” into which they enter. If this is true, it may underscore the visionary nature of the pericope, as it would then connect the raised people and Jerusalem with the visionary “holy city” in Matt 4:1–11.
95. Davies and Allison, \textit{Matthew}, 3:634–35. Senior (“Death of God’s Son,” 45), referring to the general resurrection. Brown (\textit{Death of the Messiah}, 2:1125) suggests that τῶν ἐκκοιμημένων ἁγίων is an epexegetical expression to πολλά σώματα, denoting that the “many bodies” are “the fallen-asleep holy ones.” Thus, it does not refer to every holy one of all time.
identity of these figures has been the subject of some discussion. 97 Though Brown is perhaps right that Matthew’s concern does not seem to be with the precise identity of the raised, his assertion that Matthew is concerned with “the awesome power of God’s action” and that “an inbreaking of God’s power signifying that the last times have begun” is true but incomplete. 98 For surely the raising of the saints in reference to the death of Jesus is not generally about God’s power but is specifically related to God’s activity displayed in Jesus’ death.

Yet the timing is curious (27:53b, μετὰ τήν ἐγέρσιν αὐτοῦ) 99 and at times simply unclear. Matthew seems to have no problem with the fact that at least part of what the centurion saw from Golgotha on Friday may have occurred in Jerusalem after Sunday. 100 Some have seen a “temporal and spatial collapse” employed by the evangelist101 that suggests that the evangelist has no difficulty in taking the reader from Golgotha, to the temple, to Jerusalem, perhaps to the Mount of Olives, and back to Golgotha. However, Matthew does not explain all of what the centurion (and others, 27:54) saw, only mentioning earthquake (τὸν σεισμὸν) and, ambiguously, what took place (τὰ γενόμενα). Matthew also is unclear as to whether they were raised Friday and seen by many on Sunday, or both raised and seen by many on Sunday. 102 These ambiguities may illustrate that the evangelist seems more concerned to narrate the miraculous events occasioned by Jesus’ death, while retaining sensitivity to the tradition that Jesus must himself be raised.


98. Brown, Death of the Messiah, 2:1126.

99. Davies and Allison (Matthew, 2:634 n. 130) rightly indicate the reading “after their” resurrection (αὐτῶν instead of αὐτοῦ; so 30 220 Eth ms) is weakly attested and is probably a secondary modification intended to avoid the difficulties of the text as it stands. But Hagner (Matthew, 2:850) adopts the plural reading as original. McNeile (St. Matthew, 424, citing Ps 138[139] 2) averts the issue by claiming that ἐγέρσις is not used elsewhere of resurrection.

100. Collins (Apocalyptic Imagination, 15) suggests that “apocalyptic writings are far more tolerant of inconsistency and repetition” than some, particularly R. H. Charles, have realized.


102. The first option would take 27:52 as a complete event, the tombs are opened and the holy ones are raised, yet they do not enter into the holy city and appear to many until after they come out of the tombs (ἐξελθόντες ἐκ τῶν μνημείων), which occurs after Jesus’ resurrection (μετὰ τήν ἐγέρσιν αὐτοῦ). This would suggest that they are raised to life at 27:52 (presumably on Friday), yet remain in their tombs until after Jesus’ resurrection (Sunday).

It seems more plausible that 27:52 only signifies that they were raised (ἠγέρθησαν), without mention of when, and 27:53 clarifies when (Sunday) they entered the city and were seen by many. This takes the aorist participle (ἐξελθόντες) and the prepositional phrase (μετὰ τήν ἐγέρσιν αὐτοῦ) grammatically to modify the verb (εἰσῆλθον). Or, the prepositional phrase (μετὰ τήν ἐγέρσιν αὐτοῦ) could modify the participle (ἐξελθόντες), which itself modifies the verb (εἰσῆλθον). Either way, in this reading the coming out of the tombs occurs first, then they enter into the city and are seen by many. See J. W. Wenham, “When Were the Saints Raised?” JTS 32 (1981) 150–52.
first (1 Cor 15:20), than to providing sufficient data to piece together precisely the sequence of events.

What Is Revealed: Centurion’s Profession.

The “Son of God” is recognized as a distinctive term of Jesus’ obedience in Matthew.103 Jesus “is the obedient Son of God” who fulfills the Scriptures and is “faithful to God’s will unto death.” 104 The same expression appears elsewhere in Matthew, particularly in Matthew’s account of Peter’s confession. Here, the disciple acknowledges Jesus as “the Christ, the son of the living God” (16:16), whereas Mark only has “you are the Christ” (8:29).105 That Matthew has added “the son of God” to his source may help us with the centurion’s profession. For Matthew reads something not found in either of the synoptic parallel accounts: μακάριος εἶ, Σίμων Βαριωνᾶ, ὅτι σάρξ καὶ αἷμα οὐκ ἀπεκάλυψέν σοι ἀλλ’ ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς (16:17). Whatever other intertextual allusions may be happening here, it seems apparent that, for Matthew, the confession of Jesus as the Christ, the “Son of God,” is a product of divine revelation (cf also Matt 14:33).106 This revelation also appears in 27:51a, where the veil of the heavenly firmament is opened and the true identity of Jesus as the “Son of God” and the life-giving, new-age-inaugurating death of Jesus is revealed. And that his identity as Son of God is seen most vividly in his death107 suggests that his role in bearing that title is most explicitly articulated by his death for sins (cf. 26:28).

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, I will summarize the theoretical method that leads me to my exegetical findings. First, we saw that many scholars have

105. Luke has “the Christ of God” (9:2) and John reads “you are the holy one of God” (6:69; Wright, Resurrection, 621).
addressed the subject of “apocalyptic” variously understood from a variety of perspectives: eschatology, motifs, themes, and so on. We found that what seems to be the most fruitful point of entry is to discuss the use of apocalyptic symbols. Apocalyptic symbols constitute both a defining characteristic of apocalyptic thought and occur in a variety of ancient genres, not only apocalypses. Once an apocalyptic symbol is identified, we can interpret it using methods similar to those employed for interpreting these symbols in a formal apocalypse. This includes determining the referent of the symbol employed. When applied to Matthew’s account of the tearing of the veil, we found that there is sufficient evidence for identifying the apocalyptic symbol of the veil of the temple with the sky. That is, its referent seems to be the heavens or the sky (from Gen 1:6). In this sort of reading of the apocalyptic symbols, the rending of the veil connotes the opening of the heaven, a familiar event accompanying an apocalyptic vision. Here, the centurions view the dramatic, eschatological significance of the death of Jesus. Returning to Rowland, the employment of an apocalyptic scene here enables Matthew to convey the “meaning of history more profoundly than would be possible from a straightforward narrative.”  

I suggest that Matthew has made use of an apocalyptic symbol in the rending of the temple veil, asserting in these vivid images that the death of Jesus has inaugurated the eschatological restoration from exile, completing his earlier anticipation that Jesus will save his people from their sins (1:21).

Regardless of how one may or may not embrace this view about the so-called “special material,” the contribution this essay looks to make pertains primarily to the methodological underpinnings to interpreting apocalyptic symbolism within the first Gospel. Inevitably, the question arises as to how one identifies apocalyptic symbolism within a narrative. I can only make a few parting comments at this point: first, one must look to the narrative itself to see if and how the author himself gives indication that the reader has left the narrative plane of the Gospel. We see that Matthew, in our example above, propels readers from Golgotha, to Jerusalem, likely to the Mount of Olives, back to Golgotha and from Friday to Easter Sunday and back to Friday all within the span of a few verses. It does not require extensive reflection to see that the author has himself directed readers to matters outside the narrative scene at Golgotha, only to return. It does, however, require a degree of hermeneutical sensitivity to how one interprets what is reported for us in the narrative. The second place one may go to identify apocalyptic symbolism within the narrative is, as I have identified above, any set of “stock” images that may be within the author’s sphere of influence. This requires a great deal of caution, for one must bear in mind that often features in Matthew’s narrative are highly symbolic and entirely historical in nature. Nevertheless, looking to apocalyptic

109. Thanks go to Wes Olmstead for raising this important question.
110. The historical reality of highly symbolic, supernatural and even apocalyptic events is within the world view of the author (1:25, 8:1–4, 23–27; 14:13–21; 28:6, etc.), but it seems that,
literature of earliest Christianity could be a helpful starting point. Revelation is replete, of course, with symbolism and may offer interpreters a starting point for its myriad symbols. Again, however, interpreters must account for the importance of differentiating genres between an apocalypse proper and apocalyptic features that appear within a narrative such as Matthew. However one chooses to address these issues, interpreters of Matthew who encounter symbols that appear to be of an apocalyptic nature must equip themselves with a set of hermeneutical principles to govern how they handle these texts. I have argued that this must include the recognition of apocalyptic symbols and some clear indication of what those symbols represent. I hope this discussion has served to further our thinking on the matter.

given the brevity of this remarkable account, the author does not intend to describe it to any extent. Hagner points to what he perceives as a question of “historical plausibility” of this account, suggesting that “the event makes little historical sense” (Matthew, 2:851). But it does not seem that the author is intending to address the myriad questions left unanswered (questions raised by Hagner, Matthew, 2:850). Furthermore, that an author does not answer questions to the modern historian’s satisfaction does not seem to warrant dismissal of their historical veracity. Moreover, that Matthew makes reference to what he perceives as a clearly historical event (the resurrection of Jesus, μετὰ τὴν ἐγέρσιν αὐτοῦ) in the middle of this account may lend credence to the historical reliability of these manifestations from the author’s perspective. Importantly, the apocalyptic nature of these symbols introduces a degree of ambiguity that, when pressed to answer historical beyond what the evangelist himself has provided, runs the risk of flattening the symbolic purposes for which the symbols are employed.