

**Did Roman Christians Detect the Influence  
of Roman Historiography in Matthew 27:45-54?**

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Precisely what was Matthew *really* trying to say about all those unusual events that coincided with the death and resurrection of Jesus? Was he saying that the light of the sun was *really* eclipsed totally by something for three hours during the day? Was the thick fabric of the great veil of the Second Temple *really* torn completely in half? Did the earth *really* shake so fiercely that boulders were split and stone tombs were broken open? And were the bodies of several saints *really* raised back to life from the dead such that they could walk a few miles and provide a witness to the inhabitants of Jerusalem? At face value it seems Matthew recorded these events as historical fact. But could it be, as a few have theorized, that Matthew styled his reporting after the Roman historians who liberally mixed fact and fiction? Such a Roman influence theory could be tested if any of the Christian citizens of the Roman Empire wrote about these events in a way that showed awareness of a stylistic emulation.

But if the critical scholars are right, Matthew is the only historian who mentioned these events. If so, there is no way to test novel interpretations against archaic ones. James Crossley, a secular critic of Christianity, and professor in the Department of Biblical Studies at the University of Sheffield, concluded that the reporting of the saints being raised from the dead was “quite obviously a human invention. ... the first Christians were inventing stories about resurrection[s].” On what basis? Because the story of the raised saints is “not mentioned elsewhere.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly Michael Bird, a Protestant scholar from Australia, asserted that “Matt 27:51-53 is a strange story that is reported

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<sup>1</sup> Crossley, *Was Jesus Raised from the Dead?* Minutes 38-40.

nowhere else in Christian or non-Christian literature.”<sup>2</sup> E. Michael Green, an English Protestant scholar and apologist, relegates the event to the category of “powerful symbolism” while asking, “why is there no reference to this event elsewhere, either inside or outside the New Testament?”<sup>3</sup>

If they were saying that there are currently no known extra-biblical references to the Mt 27:51-54 events from other historians in the first century A.D. that corroborate Matthew’s account, they would be correct. Aside from Crossley’s emphasis that Josephus did allude to any sightings of raised saints in Jerusalem, they’re not saying that. The fact is that there are sixteen or more extra-biblical references made by ancient, literate Romans which may refer to the same raised saints that Matthew wrote about. And there are no fewer than thirty Roman references to one or more of the nine events clustered together in Mt 27:45-54. These references can be used by those who “examine everything carefully” (1 Th 5:21) to judge whether ancient Roman thinkers recognized any of the exaggerated symbolism and “artistic license” used by Roman historians while interpreting Matthew’s historical account.

**The Cluster of Nine Unusual Events**

	<b>Events</b>	<b>Mt 27</b>	<b>Mk 15</b>	<b>Lk 23</b>
1	three hours of total darkness	:45	:33	:44-45
2	temple veil being torn	:51	:38	:45
3	earth shook	:51, 54		
4	rocks were split	:51		
5	stone tombs were opened	:52		
6	bodies of dead saints raised from the dead	:52		
7	raised saints left tombs after Jesus arose	:53		
8	raised saints appeared to many in Jerusalem	:53		
9	Centurion vindicates or worships Jesus	:54	:39	:47

All nine events have been the subject of critic’s doubt through the centuries. As we shall see in our investigation, the debate between Roman critics and Christian apologists in the early

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<sup>2</sup> Bird, “Michael Licona on the Resurrection of Jesus”  
<sup>3</sup> Green, *Message of Matthew*, 302-3n18.

centuries tended to focus on the eclipse of the sun and the three hours of total darkness. This seems understandable as this event would be the most universally noticeable of all the events. An object massive enough to produce total darkness would most probably have cast its shadow over not just a suburb of Jerusalem but over the cities and towns of a large portion of the Roman Empire. But today doubts are focused by the application of literary criticism to literature. If ancient rabbinic Jewish literature (which quickly became hostile to the Christian outgrowth from Judaism) does not specifically mention the Jerusalem temple veil being torn, the critic is more inclined to challenge the veracity of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.<sup>4</sup> Without the testimony of Josephus, Mark, or Luke to corroborate Matthew's report about the raising of the dead saints (v.52b) and their subsequent appearance in Jerusalem (v.53), there is a growing reluctance among the Christian apologists who are sensitive to literary criticism and to historical criticism to defend the literal interpretation and the historical reality of Matthew's account about the raised saints in particular.

While our testing will focus mainly upon the sixteen Roman references to Matthew's raised saints, our testing will also include the Roman references to the other seven events in Mt 27 for multiple reasons. First, all nine events have been contested to one degree or another. Second, the cluster of nine events is contested as a whole. Third, any attempt to separate one or two events out of the cluster of nine events seems contrived because the cluster is very cohesive from a literary standpoint. There is nothing visible in the text of Mt 27 that would give the slightest hint of a division between the nine events. There is nothing in the grammar or style that sets any of the nine events apart from any of the other events. Therefore a reference by a Roman to any one of the nine events may shed indirect light upon the other events in the cluster. Fourth, in the case of Mt 27 it would seem inconsistent at best to use five of the nine events to establish the pattern that supposedly legitimizes non-literally interpretation and then proceed to only interpret two of the

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the controversy over the tearing of the Temple veil, for example, consider Plummer, "Something Awry in the Temple?" 301-316.

nine events non-literally. Since the Roman influence theory is contingent upon the detection of a pattern in sequences of multiple events, any attempt to isolate one or two events from the other events that helped form the pattern could disrupt the pattern and invalidate the theory. Dr. Licona's Roman influence theory proposes that Matthew's way of reporting history closely resembles the historical reporting of Romans like Virgil, Plutarch, Philo, Dio Cassius.<sup>5</sup> To recognize patterns or parallels between all these historians the mind must create and compare lists of the events they each reported. Categorizing the events into categories of likely-historical, possibly-historical, unlikely-historical, and very-unlikely-historical would be one way to differentiate some events from others while evaluating patterns. But doing so would be a highly subjective endeavor which creates speculative, artificial, imaginary, unverifiable, and dubious distinctions.

Arguably the most formidable objection to the recommendation to interpret any of these events in a less-than-literal way is the fact that there is nothing stated clearly in words by Matthew in the text of Mt 27 that indicates that part of it should be interpreted any differently (non-literally) than the rest of the historical narrative of Matthew. There are no obvious clues left by the author to shift the reader into non-literal mode like there are, for example, when Jesus analogized believing in him to eating his flesh and drink his blood (Jn 6:47-66). Nor is there even a faint clue here like there seems to be in Mt 11:14-15 where Jesus seems to say that that John is not literally a reincarnation of Elijah. All we supposedly have in the text of Mt 27:45-54 is a pattern that supposedly can and should be recognized by those who are familiar with ancient trends in ancient Latin historiography.

The first part of the pattern, to the best of my ability to discern it, is the main subject of the report. When the Roman historians were writing about the death of a great leader (such as the assassination of Emperor Julius Caesar or the death of Romulus) or the end of a great epoch, they

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<sup>5</sup> Licona. *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 552. While Dr. Licona has in other places left the option open for explaining these events as non-literal based away on generic precedents of Jewish Apocalyptic symbolism or Jewish midrash, his argument in *The Resurrection of Jesus* is strictly based on the genre of Greco-Roman *bios*. The only examples he provides to lightly substantiate his theory are Virgil, Plutarch, Philo, and Dio Cassius—four Latin writers. His published theory is a Roman influence theory.

reported *that part* literally and factually. Matthew was writing factually about the main subject here—the execution and resurrection of Jesus. The second part of the pattern consists of events

Matthew 27	Virgil	Plutarch	Dio Cassius
The Lord Jesus was executed	Emperor Julius Caesar assassinated	Emperor Julius Caesar assassinated	Death of Emperor Claudius
Three hours of total darkness in daytime	The sun became less radiant	The sun paled for one year	
The temple veil torn in half	Idols in pagan temples wept / images sweated		Jupiter's temple doors opened
The earth shook	The Alps rocked by earthquakes		
Rocks were split			
Stone tombs were opened			
The bodies of dead saints were raised from the dead			
Raised saints left tombs after Jesus arose			
Raised saints appeared to many in Jerusalem	Phantoms were seen	One phantom spoke to Brutus	
Centurion vindicates/ worships Jesus			
	Animals spoke with human words		
	Wolves howled, dogs barked		
	Bad omens in entrails		
	Birds behaved strangely		Bees swarmed
	Great lightning without any clouds		
	Comet's glare caused alarm	Great comet seen for 7 days	Comet seen
	Blood flowed from water wells		Rained blood

that were unusual—but not absurd—disturbances in the natural world. Examples of this might include mighty earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and disturbances among the sun and stars. A third part of the pattern consists of events that are just plain unbelievable or absurd to enlightened thinkers today but which would have impressed superstitious people of old as “bad omens.”

Examples of this could include idols in temples weeping, blood flowing from wells that once produced water, animals speaking in human languages, and phantoms (spirits without material bodies) appearing and communicating with the living.

It is possible to note a resemblance in the accounts of events that were triggered by the execution of Jesus and the accounts of events that supposedly occurred after the assassination of Julius Caesar. But is the resemblance strong enough to warrant iron-clad categorizations of genre which can then be used to impose an external meaning upon what Matthew wrote? Or is this resemblance and the theory built upon it just another case of “parallelomania”<sup>6</sup> that scholars sometimes fall into? Was the resemblance strong enough to cause any ancient Romans to interpret some of Matthew 27 symbolically? It is one thing for a modern scholar to imagine the correlation; it is quite another for ancient Romans to make it.

Michael Licona mentioned four Roman test cases that he considered before publishing his Roman influence theory. He describes them as “a number of sources [that] may report that these were real persons who were raised by Jesus.”<sup>7</sup> He lists Ignatius, Quadratus, and *The Acts of Pilate*. But then dismissed them due to ambiguities or questions of authenticity. He also briefly considered a reference to the eclipse by Thallus. We start with a re-examination of those four cases before proceeding to consider additional test cases.

Ignatius was a leader of a Roman-Syrian church in the Second Century. Licona cites his letter to the Magnesians, which says, “. . . even the prophets. . . rightly waited [for Christ] raised them from the dead.”<sup>8</sup> Licona does not put much weight on this as an interpretive precedent however because, “it is uncertain how this report was intended to be interpreted.” It is unclear which prophets Ignatius is talking about and it is unclear when they were raised. But regardless of whether the references to the raised prophets refer specifically to the saints mentioned in Mt 27, to

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<sup>6</sup> Sandmel, “Parallelomania,” 1-13.

<sup>7</sup> Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 551.

<sup>8</sup> Lightfoot, et al., *The Apostolic Fathers*, 115.

other people Christ raised to life before his arrest, or to a combination of both, these remain witnesses to the fact that Jesus did raise many from the dead. Matthew's account of raised saints should not be interpreted as fiction because it seems unusual. The miracles God works are supposed to be unusual.

Licona does not mention Ignatius' letter to the Trallians which does clearly echoes Mt 27: "For Says the Scripture, 'Many bodies of the saints that slept arose,' their graves being opened. He descended, indeed, into Hades alone, but He arose accompanied by a multitude."<sup>9</sup> The noteworthy objection has been raised that this may not have actually been written by Ignatius.<sup>10</sup> It is found in the long recension of Ignatius letters (which contains material that is probably not genuinely written by Ignatius) and is not found in the shorter recension. While this makes it less valid for corroborating the historicity of the event, it still legitimately sets another precedent for a literate Roman Christian (although not Ignatius himself) interpreting Matthew 27 literally.

It is important to keep in mind that the aim of the testing here is not primarily to attempt to determine what did or did not happen in history. We are not primarily attempting to determine whether any or all of the nine events did or did not actually occur in the first century. Rather We are not here trying primarily to defend the historicity of Matthew's account; we are attempting to test the theory that Matthew should be interpreted as if he were emulating Roman historians, if there is warrant for excusing his exaggerations and symbolism and artistic license, and if there is a legitimate hermeneutical reason for interpreting Matthew's report figuratively, poetically, symbolically, rather than literally. While the two objectives are intertwined they should not be confused.

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<sup>9</sup> Roberts, et al., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:70.

<sup>10</sup> Peters, "Fathers Know Best?" n. pag.

Quadratus of Athens was a Greco-Roman. He was also one of the first Christian apologists. He provides an early (AD 125) attestation for Jesus raising several from the dead. Eusebius conveys his view as follows:

After Trajan had reigned for nineteen and a half years Ælius Adrian [Emperor Hadrian] became his successor in the empire. To him Quadratus addressed a discourse containing an apology for our religion, because certain wicked men had attempted to trouble the Christians. The work is still in the hands of a great many of the brethren, as also in our own, and furnishes clear proofs of the man's understanding and of his apostolic orthodoxy. He himself reveals the early date at which he lived in the following words: But the works of our Saviour were always present, for they were genuine:— those that were healed, and *those that were raised from the dead*, who were seen not only when they were healed and when *they were raised, but were also always present; and not merely while the Saviour was on earth, but also after his death, they were alive for quite a while, so that some of them lived even to our day.* Such then was Quadratus.<sup>11</sup>

Licona rightly points out that this reference should not be pinned specifically to the saints Matthew mentions. For the dead mentioned by Quadratus were raised from the dead before Christ was arrested while the dead Matthew mentioned were raised on the same day that Jesus arose. However, in a general sense this does give further evidence that Jesus really did literally raise several people. The idea of Jesus raising people is not an odd one. And this would not necessarily exclude the saints mentioned by Matthew. Quadratus (and presumably Eusebius) clearly interpret these events literally and present them as historical realities. The fact that several saints were literally raised was an argument that the genuineness of the amazing, enduring, and verifiable works of Jesus Christ.

The apocryphal book *The Acts of Pilate* which Licona mentioned are perhaps better known today as *The Gospel of Nicodemus*. This book is should not be considered a reliable witness to any records that Pontius Pilate may have written about the events surrounding Jesus' trial, execution and resurrection. Licona understandably dismisses this account as having historical value because "the authenticity of this source has long been questioned." But his second objection ("it is likewise

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<sup>11</sup> Eusebius. *Hist. eccl.* 4.3.1-2; emphasis added.



possible that this was a reference to one of Jesus' activities during his earthly ministry"<sup>12</sup>) is unpersuasive considering the many details which Pseudo-Nicodemus shares with Matthew:

And it was about the sixth hour, and *darkness* was upon the face of the whole earth until the ninth hour. And while the sun was *eclipsed*, behold the *vail of the temple was rent* from the top to the bottom; and the *rocks also were rent*, and the *graves opened*, and many *bodies of saints, which slept, arose*. ... Have ye seen the *miracle of the sun's eclipse*, and the other things which came to pass, while Jesus was dying? That while they were guarding the sepulcher of Jesus, there was an *earthquake*; and we saw an angel of God roll away the stone of the sepulcher.<sup>13</sup>

And Joseph rose up and said to Annas and Caiaphas: Truly and well do you wonder, since you have heard that Jesus has been seen alive from the dead, ascending up into heaven. But it is more to be wondered at that *he is not the only one who has risen from the dead: but he has raised up alive out of their tombs many others of the dead, and they have been seen by many in Jerusalem*. And hear me now, that we all know the blessed Simeon, the great priest, who took up with his hands Jesus, when an infant, in the temple. And Simeon himself had two sons, full brothers; and we all were at their filling asleep, and at their burial. Go, therefore, and *see their tombs: for they are open, because they have risen*; and, behold, they are in the city of Arimathaea, living together in prayers. And, indeed, they are heard crying out, but speaking with nobody, and they are silent as the dead. But come, let us go to them; let us conduct them to us with all honour and respect. And if we adjure them, perhaps they will speak to us of the mystery of their resurrection.<sup>14</sup>

After we had crucified Jesus, not knowing that he was the Son of God. . . we deliberating among one another about the miracles which Jesus had wrought, we found many witnesses of our own country, who declared that they had seen him alive after his death. . . and *we saw two witnesses, whose bodies Jesus raised from the dead*, who told us of many strange things which Jesus did among the dead, of which we have a written account in our hands.<sup>15</sup>

Since this book may have been composed around 425 AD by a Roman, and since it may contain material written by other Romans that goes back to 300 AD, it still could serve our purpose of testing how the ancient Romans were inclined to interpret Matthew's events. Despite the fact that Pseudo-Nicodemus was probably (but not necessarily) inventing historical details to harmonize with and fill in some gaps with the apostolic gospel accounts, the fact remains that there

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<sup>12</sup> Licona. *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 552.

<sup>13</sup> Hone, "The Gospel of Nicodemus." *The Lost Books of the Bible*, 73-75.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 79.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 89-90.

is no hint that he was interpreting Matthew less than literally. Nor is there any hint in his text that would make us expect that he expects his readers to take his account less than literally.

If we only had these three test cases, the test results would be weak. While they may be irrelevant as to the question of historicity, they remain relevant as interpretive test cases from real Romans. Besides, there are more test cases to be considered. For the sake of determining how literate Romans interpreted Matthew, we will consider any echoes of Matthew made by any Romans up into the fifth century (when the Latin half of the Roman Empire was overcome by Germanic tribes) and beyond (the Greek half of the Roman Empire continued on until Constantinople was conquered by the Turks in the sixteenth century).

Sextus Julius Africanus (AD third century), citing both Thallus (whom Licona mentioned) and Phlegon, refers to the darkness, the earthquake, the splitting of rocks, and the resurrection of the saints:

On the whole world there pressed a most *fearful darkness*; and the *rocks were rent by an earthquake*, and many places in Judea and other districts were thrown down. This darkness Thallus, in the third book of his History, calls, as appears to me without reason, an eclipse of the sun. For the Hebrews celebrate the Passover on the 14th day according to the moon, and the passion of our Savior fails on the day before the Passover; but an eclipse of the sun takes place only when the moon comes under the sun. And it cannot happen at any other time but in the interval between the first day of the new moon and the last of the old, that is, at their junction: how then should an eclipse be supposed to happen when the moon is almost diametrically opposite the sun? Let that opinion pass however; let it carry the majority with it; and let this portent of the world be deemed an eclipse of the sun, like others a portent only to the eye. Phlegon records that, in the time of Tiberius Caesar, at full moon, there was a *full eclipse of the sun* from the sixth hour to the ninth—manifestly that one of which we speak. But what has *an eclipse in common with an earthquake, the rending rocks, and the resurrection of the dead, and so great a perturbation throughout the universe?* Surely no such event as this is recorded for a long period. But it was a *darkness* induced by God, because the Lord happened then to suffer. And calculation makes out that the period of 70 weeks, as noted in Daniel, is completed at this time.<sup>16</sup>

Julius read Latin, wrote in Greek, travelled the Roman world, and studied in Alexandria. He gives no hint whatsoever of wondering if any of these elements really happened. He takes the three hours of darkness so literally that he makes an argument that the eclipse must have been caused by

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<sup>16</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, "Writings of Julius Africanus," n. pag.

something other than moon. Following Matthew's list of events perfectly, he is certainly referring to the raised saints of Jerusalem when he mentions "the resurrection of the dead." And showing his eschatological fascination, he spends the next several paragraphs (not quoted here) working through historical dates to calculate the literal fulfilment of prophecies in Daniel. He makes no foray into notions about non-literal apocalyptic symbols. The modern Roman influence theory fails the tests offered by Julius Africanus quite miserably. It also fails the test with Thallus and Phlegon. Thallus was a Roman historian who wrote around AD 52 and tried to dismiss the literal darkness as a literal solar eclipse by the moon. Phlegon was a non-Christian, Roman historian who wrote in the first century and who was clearly fascinated by Jesus Christ. In the ninth century, the Roman-Byzantine historian George Syncellus cites Julius positively in his discussion of these events.<sup>17</sup>

Celsus was a Roman pagan who was antagonistic to the Christian faith. Early in the third century he argued that the earthquake and the darkness at the time of Jesus' death were inventions rather than actual happenings. Origen gave an answer to Celsus' criticism. Origen was a scholar in Alexandria, the greatest center of scholarship (Christian and otherwise) of the Greco-Roman world. He had access to the greatest library in the world and was one of the best-read scholars in the world. With neo-platonic predilections, Origen had earned a reputation for attempting to transcend the literal sense of a text (or Bible passage) and seeking out its supposed deeper, spiritual, higher, non-literal sense. It is no stretch to say that if anyone would have been inclined to interpret the Matthew 27 cluster in a non-literal way, it not have been Origen. It is also difficult to imagine that Origen was not acquainted with Virgil and Plutarch. If the Roman influence theory is right, we should expect Origen to say that these events were spiritual rather than carnal events. But instead Origen surprises us by defending the literal historicity of the event. He wrote:

And with regard to the *eclipse* in the time of Tiberius Caesar, in whose reign Jesus appears to have been crucified, and the *great earthquakes* which then took place, Phlegon too, I think, has written in the thirteenth or fourteenth book of his *Chronicles*. [ . . . ] Celsus [ . . . ] imagines also that both the *earthquake and the darkness* were an invention, but regarding these, we have in the preceding

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<sup>17</sup> Syncellus, *The Chronography*, n. pag.

pages made our defense, according to our ability, adducing the testimony of Phlegon, who relates that these events took place at the time when our Saviour suffered. . . . Now to this question, although we are able to show the striking and miraculous character of the events which befell Him, yet from what other source can we furnish an answer than the Gospel narratives, which state that 'there was an *earth quake*, and that the *rocks were split asunder*, and *the tombs were opened*, and the *veil of the temple was rent in twain* from top to bottom, and the *darkness prevailed in the day-time*, the sun failing to give light. . . . But if this Celsus, who, in order to find matter of accusation against Jesus and the Christians, extracts from the Gospel even passages *which are incorrectly interpreted*, but passes over in silence the evidences of the divinity of Jesus, would listen to divine portents, let him read the Gospel, and see that even the *centurion*, and they who with him kept watch over Jesus, on seeing the earthquake, and the events that occurred, were greatly afraid, saying, "This man was the Son of God."<sup>18</sup>

It seems that Origen (a defender of the Christian faith) and Phlegon (a pagan historian of the AD second century) interpreted the Matthew 27 cluster events literally. Even Celsus who denied that the events happened at all was responding to the account as if he interpreted it literally. (Christians said it literally happened and Celsus was saying it literally did not happen.) I detect no hint of any attempt to salvage their credibility by removing them from the sphere of real history and placing them into a realm of symbol and type. The Roman-influence theory fails these rounds of testing.

Irenaeus, an early Roman church leader, may have been writing of the raised saints Matthew mentions when he wrote about "those souls aloft that followed His ascension," and "the many souls ascended and were seen in their bodies."<sup>19</sup> If the objection is raised that Irenaeus was not the actual author, the point still stands that an ancient, literate Roman demonstrated set no precedent for interpreting the raising of saints less that literally. And if someone were to be raised that these specific raisings might not refer to the raised saints of Mt 27, one runs into the difficulty of identifying which other group of raised saints Irenaeus might be referring to. In the four gospels there are only three other examples recorded of Jesus raising someone from the dead: a widow's son (Lk 7), Jairus' daughter (Mt 9, Mk 5, Lk 8), and Lazarus (Jn 11). Perhaps John opens the door to the possibility of additional groups of the dead being raised by writing, "Therefore many other signs

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<sup>18</sup> Roberts, et al., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. 4:444—446.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 1:573.

Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book,” (Jn 20:30-31 NASB). The simplest explanation would be to associate them with the saints Matthew wrote about.

Along with Phlegon, Eusebius, a Roman and Christian historian, took the darkness and earthquake literally saying:

Indeed Phlegon, who is an excellent calculator of olympiads, also writes about this, in his 13th book writing thus: ‘However in the fourth year of the 202nd olympiad, an *eclipse of the sun* happened, greater and more excellent than any that had happened before it; at the sixth hour, *day turned into dark night*, so that the stars were seen in the sky, and an *earthquake in Bithynia* toppled many buildings of the city of Nicaea.’ These things the aforementioned man [says].<sup>20</sup>

John Philoponus (Philopon) of Alexandria, echoing Phlegon, writing in the AD sixth century, treats the eclipse as having literally happened.

Phlegon mentioned *the eclipse* which took place during the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus and no other (eclipse); it is clear that he did not know from his sources about any (similar) eclipse in previous times . . . and this is shown by the historical account of Tiberius Caesar.<sup>21</sup>

John Malalas, a Greco-Roman historian writing in the AD sixth century, offers:

And the *sun was darkened*, and there was darkness upon the world. Concerning which darkness, Phlegon, that wise Athenian, writes thus: ‘In the eighteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, there was a *great eclipse of the sun*, greater than those that had been known before: and it became night at the sixth hour of the day, so that the stars appeared.’<sup>22</sup>

Maximus the Confessor, a Byzantine scholar in the AD seventh century wrote,

Phlegon, the Gentile chronographer, in the thirteenth book of his Chronography, at the two hundred and third olympiad, mentions this *eclipse*, saying that it happened in an unusual manner: but does not say in what manner. And our Africanus in the fifth book of his Chronography, and Eusebius Pamphili likewise in his Chronicle, mention *the same eclipse*.<sup>23</sup>

Clement of Alexandria very well may have been talking about the same raised saints as Matthew when he wrote, “But those who had fallen asleep descended dead, but ascended alive . . . . many bodies of those that slept arose—plainly as having been translated to a better state.”<sup>24</sup> Even if

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<sup>20</sup> Jerome, *Chronicle*. n. pag.

<sup>21</sup> Philopon. *De Opificio Mundi*. 2:21.

<sup>22</sup> Malalas, John. *Chronographia*.

<sup>23</sup> Maximus the Confessor, *Scholia*.

<sup>24</sup> Roberts, et al., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:491.

Clement was talking about a set of raised bodies that is not the same set Matthew was talking about, there is still some indirect relevance to Matthew's set.

Tertullian, an early and influential Roman and Christian, clearly affirmed the literal interpretation of several of the Matthew 27 events: "And the sun grew dark at mid-day; and when did it shudder exceedingly except at the passion of Christ, when the earth trembled to her centre, and the veil of the temple was rent, and the tombs burst asunder?"<sup>25</sup> He again wrote about the darkness and the earthquake in *The Apology*:

And yet, nailed upon the cross, He exhibited many notable signs, by which His death was distinguished from all others. At His own free-will, He with a word dismissed from Him His spirit, anticipating the executioner's work. In the same hour, too, *the light of day was withdrawn, when the sun at the very time was in his meridian blaze. Those who were not aware that this had been predicted about Christ, no doubt thought it an eclipse. You yourselves have the account of the world-potent still in your archives.* Then, when His body was taken down from the cross and placed in a sepulcher, the Jews in their eager watchfulness surrounded it with a large military guard, lest, as He had predicted His resurrection from the dead on the third day, His disciples might remove by stealth His body, and deceive even the incredulous. But, lo, *on the third day there was a sudden shock of earthquake, and the stone which sealed the sepulcher was rolled away, and the guard fled off in terror: without a single disciple near, the grave was found empty of all but the clothes of the buried One.*<sup>26</sup>

Cyril of Jerusalem clearly paralleled Matthew as if the events literally occurred:

But it is impossible, someone will say, that the dead should rise; and yet Eliseus twice raised the dead,—when he was alive and also when dead...and is Christ not risen? ... But in this case both the Dead of whom we speak Himself arose, and many dead were raised without having even touched Him. For many bodies of the Saints which slept arose, and they came out of the graves after His Resurrection, and went into the Holy City, (evidently this city in which we now are,) and appeared to many.<sup>27</sup>

Jerome touched on several of the events in a literal way:

As Lazarus rose from the dead, so also did many bodies of the Saints rise again to shew forth the Lord's resurrection; yet notwithstanding that the graves were opened, they did not rise again before the Lord rose, that He might be the first-born of the resurrection from the dead. It is not doubtful to any what these great signs signify according to the letter, namely, that heaven and earth and all things should bear witness to their crucified Lord.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 3:170.

<sup>26</sup> Roberts, et al., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:170.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 7:98

<sup>28</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary on the Four Gospels*, 1:964.

Gregory of Nazianzus also seemed to take the events literally when he wrote, “He lays down His life, but He has the power to take it again; and *the veil rent*, for the mysterious doors of Heaven are opened; *the rocks are cleft, the dead arise.*”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Chrysostom wrote, “... and *come out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many.*”<sup>30</sup> Remigius adds, “But someone will ask, what became of those who *rose again when the Lord rose*. We must believe that they rose again to be witnesses of the Lord’s resurrection. ... We ought therefore to believe without hesitation that they who *rose from the dead at the Lord’s resurrection* ascended also into heaven together with Him.”<sup>31</sup> Hilary of Poitiers harmonizes well saying, “The *graves were opened*, for the bands of death were loosed. And *many bodies of the saints which slept arose*, for illuminating the darkness of death, and shedding light upon the gloom of Hades, He robbed the spirits of death.”<sup>32</sup> Augustine of Hippo mentioned several of the disputed events as if they happened literally:

as at the time of Christ’s passion *many bodies of the saints arose*, and after his resurrection *appeared*, according to the Scriptures, *to many in the holy city*” and, “Matthew proceeds thus: ‘And the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arise, and come out of the graves after the resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many.’ There is no reason to fear that these facts, which have been related only by Matthew.”<sup>33</sup>

There are a few more apocryphal accounts worth considering. Pseudo-Dionysius, a Greco-Roman writing around AD 532, was no historian. But even this Neo-Platonist managed to write as if he took one of Matthew’s events literally:

What have you to say about the *solar eclipse* which occurred when the Savior was put on the Cross? At the time the two of us were in Heliopolis and we both witnessed the extraordinary phenomenon of the moon hiding the sun at the time that was out of season for their coming together . . . . We saw the moon begin to hide the sun from the east, travel across to the other side of the sun, and return on its path so that the hiding and the restoration of the light did not take place in the same direction but rather in diametrically opposite directions.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 6:309.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 1:963—964.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 1:964.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 963.

<sup>33</sup> Citation needed.

<sup>34</sup> Luibheid. *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 268.

There are a few letters written as a correspondence between Pontius Pilate, King Herod, and Emperor Tiberius Caesar. They show up in some sixth century Syriac manuscripts and mention several of the contested events.

And when [Jesus] was hanged supernatural signs appeared, and in the judgment of philosophers menaced the whole world with ruin.<sup>35</sup>

[Jesus] raised the dead. . . There is another very mighty deed which is strange to the gods we have: he raised up a man [Lazarus] who had been four days dead, summoning him by his word alone. . . so did he go forth from his tomb. . .<sup>36</sup>

Now when he was crucified, there was darkness over all the world, and the sun was obscured for half a day, and the stars appeared, but no lustre was seen in them. . . the dead appeared rising again, as the Jews themselves bore witness, and said that it was Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the twelve patriarchs, and Moses, and Job, who had died before. . . And there were very many whom I myself saw appearing in the body. . . And the terror of the earthquake continued from the sixth hour of the preparation until the ninth hour. . . walked in the body among the dead that were raised. . . He that raised up all the dead and bound Hades . . . Others saw the apparition of men rising again whom none of us had ever seen. . . I have written what I saw at that time.<sup>37</sup>

[Jesus] raised from the dead one Lazarus, who had been dead four days . . . Now when he was crucified darkness came over all the world; the sun was altogether hidden, and the sky appeared dark while it was yet day . . . in all the world they lighted their lamps from the sixth hour until evening . . . And on the first day of the week . . . the mountains and hills were moved, and the rocks were rent, and great chasms were made in the earth, so that the very places of the abyss were visible. And amid the terror dead men were seen raising again, so that the Jews who saw it said "We beheld Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and the twelve patriarchs . . . and we beheld Noah clearly in the body." And all the multitude walked about and sang hymns to God with a loud voice, saying, The Lord our God, who hath risen from the dead, hath made alive all the dead, and Hades he hath spoiled and slain.<sup>38</sup>

. . . through the transgression of Pilate, the darkness and the earthquake had happened to all the world . . . and verily his records are true; for even I myself was convinced by his works that he was greater than all the gods whom we venerate . . . they compelled Pilate to crucify a certain god called Jesus, through which great transgression of theirs the world was darkened and drawn into ruin.<sup>39</sup>

*The Lost Gospel According to Peter* may have been written in the second century by a Greco-Roman. It may still have value in showing how yet another early Greco-Roman writer interpreted the gospels which he plagiarized from and expanded upon.

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<sup>35</sup> Hone, "The Epistle of Pontius Pilate to Tiberius Caesar." *The Lost Books of the Bible*, 273.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., "The Report of Pilate," 273-274.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 274-275.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., "The Report of Pontius Pilate," 276-277.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., "The Trial and Condemnation of Pilate," 277-278.



And it was noon, and *darkness* came over all Judea; and they were troubled and distressed, lest the sun had set, while he was yet alive: it was written for them, that the sun set not on him that hath been put to death. . . and many went about with lamps, supposing that it was night, and fell down. . . . And in that hour the *vail of the temple of Jerusalem was rent in twain*. And then they drew out the nails from the hands of the Lord, and laid him upon the earth, and *the whole earth quaked*, and great fear arose. Then the sun shown, and it was found the ninth hour . . .<sup>40</sup>

	Writer	Year	Sun Eclipsed	Veil Torn	Mega Earth Quake	Rocks Split	Tombs Broken Opened	Centurion Vindicates Jesus	Dead Saints Raised	Risen Saints Appear	Lazarus Raised
1	Matthew	55	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	
2	Mark	56	Y	Y				Y			
3	Luke	57	Y	Y				Y			
4	John	60									Y
5	Thallus	109	Y								
6	Ignatius of Antioch	117					Y		Y		
7	Publius Cornelius Tacitus	117	Y								
8	Phlegon of Tralles	137	Y		Y						
9	Gospel of Peter	175	Y	Y	Y						
10	Celsus	177	Y		Y						
11	Clement of Alexandria	200							?		
12	Irenaeus of Lyons	202							Y	Y	
13	Quadratus of Athens	220							?	?	
14	Tertullian	222	Y	Y	Y		Y				
15	Hipolytus	235							?		
16	Sextus Julius Africanus	240	Y		Y	Y			Y		
17	Origen	284	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y			
18	Lucian	312	Y								
19	Eusebius of Caesarea	340	Y		Y						
20	Hilary of Portiers	357					Y		Y		
21	Cyril of Jerusalem	386							Y	Y	
22	Gregory of Nazianzus	389		Y		Y			Y		
23	Chrysostom	407							Y	Y	Y
24	Jerome	420	?				Y		Y		Y
25	Gospel of Nicodemus	425	3	Y		Y	2	Y	3	2	
26	Augustine	430			Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	
27	Pseudo-Dionysus	532									
28	Remigius	533							Y	Y	Y
29	John Philoponus	570	Y								
30	John Malalas / Malelas	578	Y								
31	Letters of Herod and Pilate	600	3		2	2	Y		5	5	2
32	Maximus the Confessor	600	Y								
33	George Syncellus	800	Y								

After examining thirty references to various events that fit with Matthew's account, it seems the Roman influence theory has nothing going for it and everything going against it. Not a single Roman betrayed any hint of a need to interpret these events in any way that was less than fully literal and fully factual. Those who are favorable towards the non-literal, non-factual interpretation of any of the events Matthew 27 are then favoring an interpretation that is alien to Matthew (in so far as he did not follow the alleged pattern) and to early Roman Christians of the first several

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., "The Lost Gospel of Peter," 284.

centuries. To the chagrin of this theory, even the Neo-Platonists, the plagiarists, and the critic Celsus seemed to take Matthew's events literally. For this and other reasons,<sup>41</sup> this Roman influence theory deserves categorization in the genre of "worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called knowledge" (1 Tim 6:20-21).

This is not just about one little section of Matthew's narrative. The discussion of the relationship of various books of the Bible to other ancient literature is at the forefront of scholarly evangelical discourse. The Mt 27 controversy is just one intrusion<sup>42</sup> of the New Hermeneutic and New Historicism<sup>43</sup> into the biblical studies of what some have dubbed the New Evangelicalism. As

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<sup>41</sup> Even if the first premise of the Roman influence theory could have managed to pass this round of testing, its second premise would have failed the next test. The theory also stands on the supposition that just as the Roman authors did not intend for their readers to take everything they said literally, so too Matthew did not intend for his readers to take everything he wrote seriously. And therefore we should not take everything Matthew (or Virgil or Plutarch) wrote as factual. The theory assumes to know the unstated intentions of the minds of these authors. But such attempts at retroactive clairvoyant psychoanalysis can never transcend the confines of unverifiable speculation. While agreeing that many (perhaps even most) of the ancients flavored their historical reporting with fiction, we cannot know what the unstated authorial intentions of Virgil, Plutarch, Matthew, etc. were. We only know what they thought-and-wrote, not what they thought-but-did-not-write. Besides, is it not more reasonable to imagine that Virgil and Plutarch really did intend for their superstitious Roman readership to interpret their extraordinary tales of bad omens in the heavens and on the earth as literally true?

<sup>42</sup> As documented in Farnell's *Vital Issues in the Inerrancy Debate*, Clark Pinnock (242), Craig Evans (200), Dale Allison (200), Donald Hagner (47, 201), Leon Morris (202), Michael Green (201), Robert Gundry (124-127), and William Lane Craig (200) have echoed similar views about the raised saints. See also Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 276, and Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*.

<sup>43</sup> There is room to question whether or not the term "New" here is coterminous with "Post-modern." The subtitle of Licona's book, *A New Historiographical Approach*, shows its connection to the methodology of New Historicism. This movement (or school of thought) applies a variety of philosophies (rooted in some of the ideas of Stephen Greenblatt, Lynn Hunt, Michel Foucault, and Karl Marx) to the interpretation of literature and history. The New Historical methods are influenced by pre-modern, modern, and post-modern philosophies. Dr. Licona holds that his new historiographical work should not be classified as postmodern. Whereas Postmodernism tends to deny that the truth about history can be known, Licona does not. He believes strongly that many important historical truths can be known with confidence. While his book should not be classified as a purely postmodern work, it is not absolved from the charge that it remains influenced by postmodernism. In her treatment of the history of historicism, Dr. Davaney, citing Veeseer and Colebrook, contends that "the 'New Historicism' that has emerged in literary studies demonstrates the fluid relationship between a diffused postmodernism and new forms of historicism." (Davaney. *Historicism*, 185.) Davaney also pointed out that, "a number of contemporary thinkers see postmodernism as either an outgrowth of the more radical implications of earlier historicisms or, alternatively, contemporary historicism is interpreted as one mode of a larger, more diffused postmodern shift. ... In theology, postmodernism has taken a number of forms and, in its varied forms, has expressed all of the above stated relations to historicism." (Ibid, 132.) The fluidity and diffusion factors at work here do not remove postmodernism from the equation; they make it more difficult to pin down. The fact remains that Licona's interpretive method clearly leads to skepticism about several narratives in the Gospels. He himself admits that using this method leaves one in doubt of "where history ends and legend begins" (Licona. *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 34).

the New Evangelicalism is pried away by the wedge of postmodern methodologies from traditional Evangelicalism on what might seem like little things—things like the raising of some saints in Matthew 27 or the raising of Lazarus in John’s gospel<sup>44</sup>—further concerns about the same wedge eventually creating further discontinuity in the big things (like the interpretation of Jesus’ resurrection in Mt 28) are not unwarranted.

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<sup>44</sup> John’s report of the raising of Lazarus is similar to Matthew’s account of raised saints and suffers similar attacks. Hunter, *Contextual and Genre Implications for the Historicity of John 11:41b-42*, 53-70, and Lea. *The Reliability of History in John’s Gospel*, 387–402. Note also James Hamilton’s anemic conclusion in the attempt to defend it: “it appears to be at least possible that the raising of Lazarus is historical and took place in the way John has recorded it.” Hamilton, *Did Jesus Really Raise Lazarus from the Dead?* N. pag.

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