

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

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Some have theorized that a liberal-over-literal style of reporting history by Roman biographers influenced Matthew in the writing of his biographical gospel of Jesus. This Roman Influence Theory (RIT) has been applied to four, six, or nine of the nine unusual events reported by Matthew in Mt. 27:45-54. This theory can be tested by examining the thirty or more references made by ancient Roman writers to these contested events. In thirty such references, every interpretation of these events was literal, factual, and historical. No known ancient Romans show any awareness of or support for the RIT.

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 by something for three hours? Was the thick fabric of the great veil of the 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 dead saints *really* raised back to life? And did they really appear in Jerusalem? At face value it seems Matthew recorded these events in Matthew 27:45-54 as historical facts. But could it be, as a few have theorized, that Matthew styled his reporting after the Roman biographers who liberally embellished fact with fiction? Their theory suggests that while Matthew wrote about these events in a way that might *seem* to us with modern standards of historical reporting to be fully factual and literally historical, he *actually* intended for his readers to take these events non-literally. If the scholars of today who are familiar with Roman historiography and biography can detect the influence, the emulation, the pattern, and the authorial intent, surely the ancients who were reading the Roman biographies

could likewise detect it in Matthew, if it is there at all. Such a Roman influence theory (or RIT for short) may be tested if any of the literate citizens of the ancient Roman Empire happened to record their interpretations of the Mt. 27 pericope in focus. Did any ancient Romans write about these events in a way that showed awareness of a stylistic emulation? Did they detect any signs and license to interpret the events as less than fully factual? Or are the RIT theorists of today seeing something that the ancient Romans were unable to see?

The Cluster of Nine Unusual Events

<u>Events</u>	<u>Mt. 27</u>	<u>Mk. 15</u>	<u>Lk. 23</u>
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

The first obstacle to testing the theory is the fact that Matthew seems to be the *only* 1st century AD biographer who records some of these unusual events as if he had direct knowledge of them. James Crossly, a secular critic of Christianity, and professor in the Department of Biblical Studies at the University of Sheffield, concluded that the reporting of the Jerusalem 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.”¹ For Crossley, the fact that the ancient Jewish historian Josephus did not corroborate Matthew’s account of unusual events

makes Matthew's account particularly suspect. Similarly Michael Bird, a Protestant scholar from Australia, asserted that "Matt 27:51-53 is a strange story that is reported nowhere else in Christian or non-Christian literature."² E. Michael Green, an English Protestant scholar, 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?"³ This lack of extra-biblical corroboration by Matthews contemporaries makes it more difficult for modern historians to commend and defend the historical validity of the cluster of nine events in the Mt. 27:51-53 pericope. If Matthew reports nine events and Mark and Luke only corroborate three of the nine. John corroborates none. The lack of biblical corroboration by Mark, Luke, John, and other New Testament writers⁴ likewise presents a challenge to some biblical scholars in defending four of the nine events—the opening of the tombs, the bodies of the dead saints being raised, the raised saints leaving their tombs, and the raised saints appearing to many in Jerusalem.

The challenge in defending the historicity of Matthew's cluster of nine unusual events, and more particularly the four events that revolve around the raised saints, seems to have caused some to attempt to defend against the problem by de-literalizing and de-historicizing some or all of the nine events. If Matthew intended for his readers to not take some or all of those events literally as true history, the apologetic problem is solved and the Bible once again can be said to have no errors of historical fact. If Matthew is the only one to report four of the nine events, it is a challenge to defend those four events *in isolation* without corroboration. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "Every fact is to be confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses," (2 Cor. 13:11). It is important to note at the outset here that the testing conducted in this essay is *not* aimed at arguing how defensible the four

(or nine) unusual are by modern standards of historical criticism. The testing here focuses strictly on the matter of interpretation: did any ancient Romans interpret the some or all of the unusual events of Mt. 27 the way the RIT predicts they would? With this distinction in mind, we need not limit our testing to the writings of others that might help bolster the case for their historicity; we can expand the testing to include any ancient mention of these events strictly to note how literally or liberally they interpreted them.

Focusing on interpretation rather than historicity, we can test the RIT with thirty or more references made by ancient Romans to one or more of the nine unusual events clustered together in Mt 27:45-54. And there sixteen or more references by ancient Roman writers to the events specific to the raised saints of Jerusalem. 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.

All nine events have been the subject of critics’ doubts through the centuries. As we shall see, the debate between early Roman critics and early Christian apologists in the early centuries tended to focus on the eclipse of the sun and the three hours of total darkness, which were reported by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. This focus seems understandable as this event would be the most universally noticeable of all the events. Whatever it was that was large enough to block out the sunlight in such a way that there was total darkness in Jerusalem for three hours would probably—but not necessarily—have cast its shadow over several of the towns and cities of more than one province in the Roman Empire. Today, in the 21st century, the doubts of the critics are driven by the application of literary criticism and historical 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.⁵ 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 seems arbitrarily contrived; the cluster of nine 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 be inconsistent 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 nine events non-literally. Since the RIT is contingent upon the detection of a pattern in sequences of multiple events, any attempt to isolate one or two events from the others that helped form the pattern could disrupt the pattern and invalidate the theory. Dr. Licona's

RIT proposes that Matthew's way of reporting history closely resembles the historical reporting of Romans like Virgil, Plutarch, Philo, and Dio Cassius.⁶ 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 expressly stated by Matthew in the text of Mt. 27 indicating 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 as there seems to be in Mt 11:14-15 where Jesus seems to imply that that while John is not literally a reincarnation of Elijah despite their strong resemblance in spirit. 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 pattern begins with the main subject of the report. When the Roman historians wrote 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 reported *that part* literally and factually. Matthew was writing factually about the main subject here—the arrest, trial,

execution, and resurrection of Jesus. The second part of the pattern consists of events 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 seem 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”⁷ 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.

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

Michael Licona mentioned four Roman test cases that he considered before publishing his RIT. He describes them as “a number of sources [that] may report that these were real persons who were raised by Jesus.”⁸ 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

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."⁹ 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 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 simply because it seems unusual. The signs, wonders, and miracles of God in human history are by design and by definition unusual.

Interestingly, Licona neglects *The Epistle of Ignatius to the Trallians*. This is surprising because this letter clearly echoes Matthew's account of the raised saints and their graves where it says, "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."¹⁰ There is only one group of saints that this could possibly refer to. Some will object to the entrance of this testimony into evidence based on the fact that it is very possible that some or all of this letter may not have actually been written by Ignatius.¹¹ The letter is found in the long recension of Ignatius's letters (which contains

material that is probably not genuinely written by Ignatius) and is not found in the shorter recension. While this objection is a serious one when considering the question of whether historicity of the events in focus can be corroborated or not, it has absolutely no bearing on the question of whether an ancient Roman—be it Ignatius or some Pseudo-Ignatius who came a few decades after him—interpreted Matthew’s account literally, historically, and seriously. This allusion to the raised saints and their opened graves sets another precedent for a literate Roman Christian interpreting Matthew 27:51-53 literally. This Ignatius took the raising of the saints every bit as literally as the raising of Jesus himself.

It is important to keep in mind that the aim of the present testing is *not* 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. We are not here trying primarily to defend the historicity of Matthew’s account. We are instead 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, less than literally, or less than factually. While the two objectives may be intertwined, they should not be confused.

QUADRATUS OF ATHENS

Quadratus of Athens was quite obviously a man of the ancient Greco-Roman world. He was also one of the first Christian apologists. He provides an early (AD 125) attestation for Jesus raising several people 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.¹²

Licona rightly points out that this reference should not be pinned specifically to the saints Matthew mentions. For the dead mentioned here seem to have been raised from the dead sometime before Christ was arrested, killed, and raised. By contrast, the raised saints in Matthew's focus were raised on the same day that Jesus arose. It is more likely that Quadratus was referring to the son of Nain's widow (Luke 7:11-17), the daughter of Jarius (Luke 8:52-56), Lazarus of Bethany (John 11), or perhaps some other people Jesus may have raised whose names were not recorded in the gospels (John 20:30). However, this serves as a reminder that Jesus did literally raise several people while he was alive on earth. This could be extended to the idea that God raising up multiple witnesses from the dead around the same time that he raised Jesus from the dead should not be thought of as strange. Quadratus took these raisings of the dead literally. There is no reason to believe that Quadratus would have doubted Matthew's account of raised saints as literal and there is a legitimate possibility—albeit a rather slim one—that the saints in Quadratus view might include Matthews saints as lumped together with the saints raised earlier. 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 for the genuineness of the amazing, enduring, and verifiable works of Jesus Christ.

THE ACTS OF PILATE / THE GOSPEL OF NICODEMUS

The apocryphal book *The Acts of Pilate*, which Licona mentioned, are perhaps better-known today as *The Gospel of Nicodemus*. In no way should this book be considered a reliable witness of records that Pontius Pilate wrote about the events surrounding Jesus's trial, execution and resurrection. Quite understandably, Licona dismisses this account as having no historical value. He says, "the authenticity of this source has long been questioned." While I am happy to grant that point for any discussion of its value as historical evidence for the events themselves, I will remind that there is still ample value in its use as an interpretive test case. Here are three quotes from Pseudo-Nicodemus (and his Pseudo-Pilate):

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.¹³

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.¹⁴

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.¹⁵

Since this book may have been composed by a Roman around 425 AD, and since it may contain material written by earlier Romans that dating back to 300 AD, it serves our purpose of testing how the ancient Romans were inclined to interpret Matthew's events. The parallels with Matthew's account are unmistakable. The author(s) are either echoing Mt. 27 directly, echoing it indirectly, or echoing some other lost source which is virtually identical to Matthew's account. Despite the fact that Pseudo-Nicodemus was probably (but not necessarily) inventing historical details to harmonize with and fill in some gaps in the apostolic gospel accounts, the fact remains that there is no hint that he was interpreting Matthew less than literally. Nor is there any hint here that he expects his readers to take his account less than literally.

Having re-examined the four test cases Licona considered, we may not have strong corroborative evidence to help convince the critics and skeptics of the historicity of the unusual events of Mt. 27. But we have even less evidence that any of the interpreters Licona mentioned had any awareness of the supposed need to interpret any of the events in Mt. 27 in a less than literal way. We actually have five cases so far where the RIT fails rather miserably.

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 Latin Romans up into the fifth century (when the Latin half of the Roman Empire was overrun by

Germanic tribes) and Greek or Byzantine Romans up to the sixteenth century AD (when the Byzantine Roman Empire was overcome by the Ottoman Turks).

SEXTUS JULIUS AFRICANUS, THALLUS, AND PHLEGON

SEXTUS JULIUS AFRICANUS (Third Century AD), or Julius for short, citing both Thallus (whom Licona mentions) and Phlegon of Tralles, who wrote in Greek during the 2nd century AD, 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 falls 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.¹⁶

Julius read Latin, wrote in Greek, travelled the Roman world, and studied in Alexandria. He is a prime example of the type of learned man who should detect any Roman influence signposts for deliteralization and dehistoricization if they are present in a text. If he misses the signs, we should expect everyone else to miss them too. Yet Julius clearly gives no hint of wondering if any of these elements which Matthew reported—whether he got them directly from Matthew, indirectly from Matthew, or from some other parallel source

independent of Matthew—actually happened. He takes the three hours of darkness so literally that he makes an argument that the eclipse must have been caused by something other than moon. He was insightful. The crucifixion of Christ happened during a full moon, which makes a solar eclipse by the moon impossible. Following Matthew's list of events perfectly, Julius 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 of non-literal apocalyptic symbols. The modern RIT fails the tests offered by Julius Africanus quite miserably. In the ninth century, the Roman-Byzantine historian George Syncellus cites Julius positively in his discussion of these events.¹⁷

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. McDowell says, "Possibly one of the earliest writers to mention Jesus was Thallus. . . Some scholars set the date of his writing at circa A.D. 52, others at the end of the first century or early in the second century. . . The most important observation to make about Thallus' comment [about the solar eclipse], however, is that he does not seek to explain away the existence and crucifixion (with the accompanying darkness) of Jesus. Thallus presented the crucifixion as a definite historical event, though one which needed a naturalistic [but literal and historical] explanation for the darkness which covered the earth at the time of the event."¹⁸

CELSUS AND ORIGEN

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's death were fictitious inventions. Origen gave an answer to Celsus' criticism. Origen was a scholar in Alexandria, the greatest center of scholarship (Christian and otherwise) in the Greco-Roman world. He had access to the greatest library in the world and was one of the best-read scholars of his time. 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. If anyone would have been inclined to interpret the Matthew 27 cluster in a non-literal way, it would have been Origen. It is also difficult to imagine that Origen was not acquainted with Virgil and Plutarch. If the RIT is right, we should expect Origen to say that these events were spiritual rather than carnal, earth-bound historical 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 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 *earthquake*, 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."¹⁹

Regarding the earthquake and darkness, Origen also wrote:

Regarding these we have in the preceding 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 Savior suffered.²⁰

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. McDowell and Wilson add:

we need to be careful in using Phlegon as a 'proof-positive' reference to Jesus. Inaccuracies in his reports demonstrate that his sources to the life of Christ are sketchy. But Phlegon is a significant reference because of one important fact. Like Thallus, he gives no hint whatsoever that in this early period that fact that Jesus' existence (and even related details such as the darkness and the crucifixion) were ever disputed. They were taken for granted as historical facts. It was only how those facts were interpreted [supernatural signs or natural coincidences] that was a matter of debate.²¹

The Roman-influence theory fails these three intertwined rounds of testing.

IRENAEUS OF LYONS

Irenaeus, an early Roman church leader, may or may not 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."²² The objection that Irenaeus may not have been the actual author of this text remains irrelevant so long as

it was an ancient, literate Roman who wrote it. Whether Irenaeus or Pseudo-Irenaeus, the author sets no precedent for interpreting the raising of saints less that literally. The objection that these specific raisings of the dead in focus here may not refer to the raised saints of Mt. 27 is noteworthy. But then we are left with the difficulty of identifying which other group of raised saints Irenaeus could possibly 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). These examples are all singular and fail to fit the plural nature of the "many souls" and multiple bodies Irenaeus speaks of. The most likely reference here is that of the Jerusalem saints Matthew wrote about.

EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA

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].²³

JOHN PHILOPONUS OF ALEXANDRIA, or Philopon for short, echoing Phlegon and writing in the sixth century AD, 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.²⁴

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.'²⁵

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*.²⁶

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA may or may not 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."²⁷ Even if 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?"²⁸ 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-portent 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.²⁹

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.³⁰

JEROME, the 4th century man who is best known for translating the Bible into Latin and for writing commentaries on the Gospels, 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.³¹

GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, the 4th-century theologian and archbishop, was trained in the classics and very familiar with Greek thought. He also seemed to take the Mt. 27 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.*"³²

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, another famous theologian and archbishop of the 4th century, with a reputation of literal and Antiochian-school interpretation of the Bible, agrees: "... and *come*

out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many."³³

REMIGIUS, Latin Bishop of the 5th century, 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."³⁴

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."³⁵

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."³⁶

PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS, a Greco-Roman writing around AD 532, offers us no value as to the historical verifiability of the events. Regardless, he offers yet another good test case for interpretive sensibilities. Even this Neo-Platonist, whom we might naturally expect to "spiritualize" and "platonize" and "dehistoricize" the stuff of this world into some heavenly symbol, 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."³⁷

THE EPISTLE OF PONTIUS PILATE TO TIBERIUS CAESAR contain a few spurious letters styled as 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. Consider the following five selections:

And when [Jesus] was hanged supernatural signs appeared, and in the judgment of philosophers menaced the whole world with ruin.³⁸

[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. . .³⁹

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.⁴⁰

[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.⁴¹

. . . 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.⁴²

THE LOST GOSPEL ACCORDING TO PETER may have been written in the second century by a Greco-Roman writer exercising a great amount of artistic license. It was certainly not written by the Apostle Peter. Even so, it has value in showing how yet another early Greco-Roman writer interpreted the gospels which he plagiarized and expanded upon.

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 . . .⁴³

Conclusion

After examining thirty references to various events that fit with Matthew's account, it seems the RIT 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 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,⁴⁴ this RIT 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 intrusion⁴⁵ of the New Hermeneutic and New Historicism⁴⁶ into the biblical studies of what some have dubbed the New Evangelicalism. As 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 gospel⁴⁷—further concerns about the same wedge eventually creating further discontinuity in the big things (like the interpretation of Jesus’s resurrection in Mt 28) are not unwarranted.

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	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				
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								

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Notes

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

² Bird, "Michael Licona on the Resurrection of Jesus"

³ Green, *Message of Matthew*, 302-3n18.

⁴ The author of Hebrews does report that "women received back their dead by resurrection," (Heb. 11:35) and while this could possibly include the saints of Mt. 27, such an inclusion is unlikely. The overarching context of Hebrews 11 suggests that the author was probably alluding to the raising of the sons of two widows by Elijah (1 Ki. 17:17-24) and Elisha (2 Ki. 4:18-37). If the author of Hebrews had known about the raising of the Jerusalem saints as Matthew did, mentioning them in the Hebrews 11 "hall of faith" would seem to be an appropriate.

⁵ For a discussion of the controversy over the tearing of the Temple veil, for example, consider Plummer, "Something Awry in the Temple?" 301-316.

⁶ 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. However, the author of this essay is likely the only one to refer to it as the Roman Influence Theory, or RIT. First of all, this alleged influence is not really presented as a theory at all in Q1 of the 21st century. It is typically presented as fact—the consensus of the enlightened scholars in the UK and in North America—and seems to have been generally received rather uncritically as fact. Also, it is more commonly referred to as a Greco-Roman Biography or Greco-Roman Bios (GRB) influence since the Greeks set the precedent for later Latin-Roman and Greco-Roman biographers. Virgil was a Latin-Roman, Plutarch a Greco-Roman, Philo was both Jewish and Greco-Roman, and Dio Cassius was a Greco-Roman.

⁷ Sandmel, "Parallelomania," 1-13.

⁸ Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 551.

⁹ Lightfoot, et al., *The Apostolic Fathers*, 115.

¹⁰ Roberts, et al., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:70.

¹¹ Peters, "Fathers Know Best?" n. pag.

¹² Eusebius. *Hist. eccl.* 4.3.1-2; emphasis added.

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

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 79.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 89-90.

¹⁶ Roberts and Donaldson, "Writings of Julius Africanus," n. pag.

¹⁷ Syncellus, *The Chronography*, n. pag.

¹⁸ McDowell, *He Walked Among Us*, 35.

¹⁹ Roberts, et al., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. 4:444—446.

²⁰ Origen, *Against Celsus*, 2. 59. Cited in McDowell, *He Walked Among Us*, 36.

²¹ McDowell, *He Walked Among Us*, 36-37.

²² *Ibid*, 1:573.

²³ Jerome, *Chronicle*. n. pag.

²⁴ Philoanon. *De Opificio Mundi*. 2:21.

²⁵ Malalas, John. *Chronographia*.

²⁶ Maximus the Confessor, *Scholia*.

²⁷ Roberts, et al., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:491.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3:170.

²⁹ Roberts, et al., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:170.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 7:98

³¹ Aquinas, *Commentary on the Four Gospels*, 1:964.

³² *Ibid.*, 6:309.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1:963—964.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:964.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 963.

³⁶ Citation needed.

³⁷ Luibheid. *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 268.

³⁸ Hone, "The Epistle of Pontius Pilate to Tiberius Caesar." *The Lost Books of the Bible*, 273.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, "The Report of Pilate," 273-274.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 274-275.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, "The Report of Pontius Pilate," 276-277.

⁴² *Ibid.*, "The Trial and Condemnation of Pilate," 277-278.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, "The Lost Gospel of Peter," 284.

⁴⁴ 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?

⁴⁵ 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*.

⁴⁶ 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).

⁴⁷ 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.

Compare https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crucifixion_darkness

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This essay originally appeared as a blog post in 2014 at <https://defendinginerrancy.com/historical-testing-for-the-genre-theories/> and was revised and expanded for inclusion as a chapter in F. David Farnell, ed., *Vital Issues in the Inerrancy Debate* (Wipf & Stock, 2016).