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Book Review of The Torn Veil: Matthew's Exposition of the Death of Jesus by Daniel M. Gurtner

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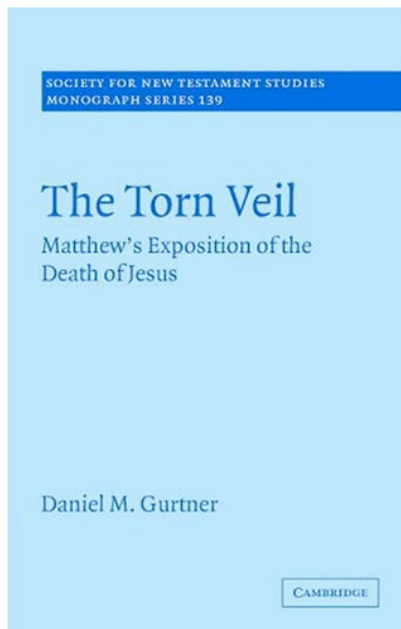
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Gurtner, Daniel M.

The Torn Veil: Matthew's Exposition of the Death of Jesus

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The Torn Veil is a revision of Daniel M. Gurtner's dissertation under Richard Bauckham at the University of St. Andrews. It is an important attempt to shed new light on the study of the perplexing assertion in Matt 27:51a that "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom," by suggesting a new approach. Gurtner suggests that in order to understand the meaning of the torn veil, "a sort of an hermeneutical algebra" (27) is necessary, since neither the author of Matthew nor the other Synoptic Evangelists stop to explain. The torn veil is the unknown element in Matthew's narrative equation. Gurtner argues that the analysis of the two elements intimately related to the torn veil in Matthew's narrative (the portrayal of Jesus' death and the temple) will help us discern the meaning of the unknown element (the torn veil). Gurtner's analysis provides valuable insights and methodological clarity to a problem that has intrigued biblical scholars since ancient times. This review will first provide a general overview of the work as a whole; then it will examine the argument in more detail.

The book consists of seven chapters that evidence a simple but carefully planned structure. Each chapter is devoted to one stage of the overall argument. Chapter 1 provides an analysis of the state of the discussion from the point of view of the methodologies employed by scholars from ancient times to the present, then describes the new approach

to be followed and its methodology. Chapters 2–4 consider the “curtain of the temple” (part of the unknown element of the equation, the “torn veil”) from lexical, syntactical, and functional points of view and explore its ideological, theological, or symbolic developments in Second Temple and rabbinic Judaism. Chapter 5 surveys the two remaining elements of the hermeneutical equation: Matthew’s portrayal of the death of Jesus and of the temple. Finally, once every element of the equation has been duly studied, chapter 6 analyzes the pericope of the “torn veil” (Matt 27:50–54) using Matthew’s portrayal of Jesus’ death and of the temple as “hermeneutic keys” to unlock its meaning. It concludes that the torn veil is a double comment on the death of Jesus: it is an apocalyptic opening of heaven to convey a heavenly vision of the sovereignty of God and the true identity of Jesus as Son of God despite its tragic death and also a depiction of the cessation of the separation between God and the people (138). Chapter 7 provides a brief summary and a helpful prospect for the further development of research on this intriguing topic.

The book is written in a clear style, and its flow is easy to follow. The structure of the book is simple and functional. Each section has very helpful introductions and conclusions that help the reader easily to follow the overall flow of the argument. The book has several spelling mistakes (e.g., the Hebrew פרכת is written פרבת in the table of contents [2.4], and פדכת in the respective title in the text [45]) as well as some errors (most notably the substitution of Moses by Abraham on 69). However, Gurtner should be commended for a well-done and comprehensive research, as this is attested in the breadth of works included in the bibliography and the detailed and extensive argumentation in the footnotes. More important, however, the author is intent at every step to be clear about the methodology that guides the work. In fact, it is in this area of methodological clarity and innovation where Gurtner considers his most important contribution to be (28).

I would like now to consider the stages of the argument in more detail. Chapter 1 reviews the state of the discussion from a methodological point of view. Here Gurtner surveys the lexical, visibility, apologetic, christological, and other arguments that have been put forward. He concludes that no argument is conclusive in itself and that a variety of them should be used. More important, he notes that in all of the studies surveyed there is a lack of attention to one or more of the following elements: the specific Matthean context; the referentiality of the symbolism; the Old Testament cultic function of the veil; or the apocalyptic imagery of the passage.

The Torn Veil is an attempt to correct those methodological shortcomings. Gurtner is concerned to analyze carefully Matthew’s immediate and broader context of the torn veil pericope. He explores with patience the Hebrew Bible, Second Temple, and rabbinic literature to understand the cultic function of the veil and the symbolism attached to it.

He correctly recognizes the apocalyptic nature of the events that surround the torn veil in Matthew and traces their background and meaning in the Hebrew Bible. In this way he seeks to obtain a solid grasp of each element of the equation in order to provide as much as possible a precise understanding of the meaning of the torn veil in Matthew.

Early in the book Gurtner acknowledges the work of Joel B. Green on the torn veil in Luke (“The Death of Jesus and the Rending of the Temple Veil: A Window into Luke’s Understanding of Jesus and the Temple,” *SBLSP* 30 [1991]: 543–57) as a methodological precursor and model for his own work (20–21; cf. 98). The goal for his work is unpretentious and specific: he “hope[s] to provide an initial word towards a new direction in examining this issue” specifically in Matthew (28). He may well have accomplished it.

Chapter 2 surveys the use of the term *καταπέτασμα καταπέτασμα* in the LXX to find out which curtain is referred to by the expression *τὸ καταπέτασμα τοῦ ναοῦ* in Matt 27:51a. He shows, like others before, that the lexical analysis is inconclusive by itself. There are three curtains translated *καταπέτασμα* in the LXX. He argues, however, that *καταπέτασμα* is primarily the term for the inner veil and that the LXX provides “syntactical keys” (e.g., a locative genitive) to indicate which of the veils is in view when not referring to the inner veil. Therefore, the absence of these syntactical keys privileges a reference to the inner veil in Matt 27:51a. It is not clear to me, however, why the author devotes so much space to describe several curtains of the tabernacle that are not called *καταπέτασμα* (36–40; e.g., the layers of the roof of the tabernacle) and is content only to refer to a previous publication of his for the more important point of the syntactical keys that help identify which veil is referred to (46).

Chapter 3 studies the *καταπέτασμα* curtains as regards their function and concludes that only the inner veil is given a particular cultic function in the Old Testament. Gurtner carefully studies the markers of the inner veil’s unique cultic function: lexicographical and etymological features; location; materials; color; workmanship; and the inclusion of cherubim. He argues that the inner veil executed a “*cultic-separation role by prohibition of physical and visual accessibility to the holy of holies* (and thus to God’s presence within)” (64–65, emphasis original). Gurtner concludes that, since no other veil is given any explicit function, the inner veil is probably referred to in Matt 27:51a (70). Gurtner assumes, then, that the torn veil in Matthew must have some kind of cultic or symbolic significance.

Chapter 4 considers ideological, theological, or symbolic developments of the veil in Second Temple and rabbinic Judaism. Gurtner shows how the veil developed an ideology of its own and was especially associated with heaven. He acknowledges, however, that this was firmly established only in rabbinic literature, which was too late to have influenced

Matthew (88). Also, Gurtner correctly notes, against Hofius, that Josephus does not argue that the veil represents heaven but only “looked like heaven” (95). Thus, by the time of the New Testament, we have only some indications of a tendency to associate the veil with heaven.

Chapter 5 considers Matthew’s portrayal of the death of Jesus and of the temple as hermeneutical keys to understand the meaning of the torn veil. Gurtner concludes that Jesus’ death is consistently portrayed in Matthew as saving people from their sins. Regarding the temple, he concludes that Matthew has a “remarkably consistent and positive portrayal of the temple” (100). Throughout the Gospel Jesus assumes the legitimacy of both the temple and its sacrifices, although he is critical of their abuse by corrupt leaders and hypocritical worshipers and is aware of its future destruction. Gurtner concludes that the lack of a polemic against the temple makes it improbable that the torn veil is itself a symbolic referent to the destruction of the temple.

Chapter 6 contains the analysis of Matt 27:50–54 for which the previous five chapters prepared. Gurtner concludes that the events related in verses 51–53 (the earthquake, the rocks split, the tombs opened) are part of a vision to the centurion and those with him that explain the meaning of Jesus’ death: Jesus is the Son of God and has opened humanity’s access to God. Some arguments are stronger than others, but none is conclusive.

Gurtner correctly shows that the events associated with the torn veil (the earthquake, the rocks split, the tombs opened) had apocalyptic significance and probably alluded to Ezek 37 (144–52). This does not prove, however, that the events themselves were part of a vision, just as the destruction of Jerusalem (Matt 24) had apocalyptic significance but was not part of a vision. Note that, though the author of Matthew is the only one to refer to Jesus’ transfiguration as a vision (Matt 17:9), he does not identify the events in 27:51–53 as a vision. Gurtner notes that the First Gospel uses the expression *καὶ ἰδοὺ* to introduce in several theophanic scenes, but this is true in a minority of cases. This phrase may just be an expression that expresses surprise, something unexpected (141).

I agree with Gurtner that the best explanation of the meaning of the torn veil in Matthew is that there is now open access to God for believers by virtue of the ability of Jesus’ death to cleanse our sins. This can be inferred clearly from the Hebrew Bible context for this passage and is probably the only sure footing we have to interpret this event, if Matthew understood that the event had symbolic significance (as he probably did). This does not make necessary, however, that the veil itself represents heaven or that the rupture of the veil implies a vision of hidden truths.

The relationship Gurtner suggests between the opening of heaven in Matt 3 and the rending of the veil in Matt 27 is not compelling. This relationship is more probable in Mark, which uses the verb σκίζω for both events, but that is not the case in Matthew. Also, in relating Jesus' reception of the Holy Spirit at his baptism and his "release of the spirit" at his death, Gurtner is right in affirming only that the "spirit" released at Jesus' death (Matt 27:50) "may be the Holy Spirit" (139, emphasis original). Gurtner is wise in asserting that his "study does not pretend to have the final word on a complicated text" (28), yet his analysis is insightful and illuminating.

The Torn Veil is a welcome addition to the debate of the rending of the veil in Matthew. It is a well-written and well-researched book. Though some of his conclusions may be less convincing, Gurtner brings innovation to the discussion and, more importantly, a much-needed methodological clarity. He does point, in my view, in a healthy new direction in highlighting the importance of the Old Testament context for the study of this troublesome passage and has provided valuable insights. From this perspective, the author may well have achieved his goal of providing "an initial word towards a new direction in examining this issue."