

# THE *VELUM SCISSUM*

## MATTHEW'S EXPOSITION OF THE DEATH OF JESUS

Daniel M. Gurtner

This thesis addresses the enigmatic event of the tearing of the temple curtain (*velum scissum*) subsequent to Jesus' death in Matthew's gospel (Matt. 27:51a).<sup>1</sup> It begins by surveying the history of scholarly discussion of the topic and categorizing each of the major interpretations of the rending of the veil in all the synoptics, illustrating their weaknesses and gleaned from their strengths. It is particularly striking how little attention is given in previous attempts to the Old Testament as a 'source' for one's interpretation of the *velum scissum* and the lack of attention to the respective synoptic contexts, particularly that of Matthew. Nevertheless, several methodological approaches to the rending of the veil are promising and worthy of further consideration. First, Eta Linnemann argued that it is necessary to examine the functions of the curtains in the LXX translated καταπέτασμα ('veil') to determine both the identity of the veil (inner? outer? both? neither?) and the meaning of the cessation of its function as depicted in the synoptic rending texts. Second, it is necessary to assess the legitimacy of the view that the rending of the veil is in some sense symbolic and examine the possible reference of such symbolism (referentiality). Third, two contextual hermeneutical factors must be examined as means of interpreting the *velum scissum* in its particular *Matthean* context: Matthew's portrayal of the meaning and significance of the death of Jesus *and* his understanding of the temple, both of which are integral features in the *velum scissum* text.

Chapter 1 provides a comprehensive analysis of all the veils, curtains, and hangings in the tabernacle and temple in the Old Testament. Here the language used for the differing veils is examined in an attempt to identify what veil Matthew had in mind when he says

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel M. Gurtner, 'The *Velum Scissum*: Matthew's Exposition of the Death of Jesus', (Ph.D. thesis, St Andrews, 2005). Supervisor: Prof. Richard J. Bauckham.

that ‘the veil of the temple’ (τὸ καταπέτασμα τοῦ ναοῦ) was torn. This chapter concludes by showing that though lexically Matthew’s καταπέτασμα mostly translates ‘inner veil’ (פֶּרֶכֶת) in the LXX, it could, in fact, refer to any of three hangings in the tabernacle/temple: the ‘veil’ before the holy of holies, the ‘screen’ between the holy place and the courtyard, or the ‘curtain of the entrance of the courtyard’. While most scholars leave the Old Testament at this point because of this lexical ambiguity, there is far more to be gleaned from the Old Testament on this subject.

Chapter 2 builds upon the widespread assumption that the rending of the veil, in some sense, depicts the cessation of the veil’s function in the OT. In this chapter, it is argued that the inner veil before the holy of holies is the only viable option, from a functionality standpoint, for the veil which Matthew had in mind. The chapter then proceeds by providing a comprehensive examination of the function of the inner veil (פֶּרֶכֶת), concluding that its primary function is to provide cultic separation (בְּדֵל) between the holy and less holy, prohibiting physical and visual accessibility to God, which is graphically depicted by the presence of guardian-like cherubim woven into the veil, resonating with images of the angelic guardians from Gen 3.

Chapter 3 turns to depiction of the veil in Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism, where the historical, ideological, and theological portraits of the veil are examined in a variety of texts. Tracing the veil through idealized portrayals of the temple and its heavenly counterpart at Qumran and various other traditions from the Second Temple period, evidence emerges that the veil of the temple began to evolve an ideology of its own. As early as the book of Sirach (Sir. 50:5), the veil began to symbolize something beyond itself and is almost unanimously identified with the heavenly firmament (Gen. 1:6). Evidence indicates that this association is part of a wider Jewish temple cosmology and the identification of the veil with the heavenly firmament is employed explicitly in what is widely agreed to be a primary source for Matthew, the gospel of Mark.

Chapter 4 examines how Matthew’s compositional portrayal of the temple and of Jesus’ death informs our reading of the tearing of the veil. Matthean redaction of Markan temple texts portrays the temple and its cult in a positive light. Harsh polemics against it are toned down, sacrifices are still to be offered there, and God’s presence is said to still be there. As in Jeremiah, Matthew’s understanding of the

destruction is that it is necessitated not because of fault with the temple but because of its mismanagement by the Jewish leaders. Matthew's portrayal of the temple and its cult are strikingly positive, which suggests a positive reading must be seriously considered for the rending of its veil at 27:51a.

Matthew's portrayal of Jesus' death is an unfolding portrait. To Matthew, Jesus' death is necessary (16:21), expected, and imminent (17:22-23). Like John's, Jesus' death is depicted as that of an innocent prophet inaugurating the restoration of 'all things' (17:11-12). Significantly, Jesus' death is a 'ransom' (λύτρον) for many (20:28), a payment offered to rescue another, resonating with OT cultic language. Moreover, Jesus' death is for the purpose of the forgiveness of sins (26:28), from which he came to save his people (1:21). The 'saving' nature of Jesus' death is underscored even on the cross (27:42), where he is mocked for being unable to 'save' himself by coming down off the cross. The irony is that in remaining on the cross and dying, he is fulfilling his 'saving' role, which was depicted at the very outset of the gospel. The atoning significance of Jesus' death in Matthew's gospel, like the positive portrayal of the temple, must be kept in mind when evaluating the *velum scissum* text which, in some sense, serves as a commentary on the death of Jesus.

In Chapter 5, all the above data are brought together into the Matthean *velum scissum* pericope itself (27:51a). The chapter begins by concentrating on Matthean redaction of his Markan source as a guide to understanding the particular Matthean text. Much discussion is given to defining 'apocalyptic' and 'apocalyptic imagery' and how Matthew's *velum scissum* text fits into those respective contexts. Apocalyptic imagery employs a set of stock images to convey a transcendent reality, in which God is in control in the midst of a crisis situation. Therefore, the referentiality of the images employed is essential to discerning the meaning of the apocalyptic images used and thus the meaning of a text that utilizes them. Though scholars have rightly recognized that there is no precedent in Judaism – apocalyptic or otherwise – to the rending of the veil, there *is* precedent for the symbolism of the veil itself. Drawing from prior work in Chapter 3, it is then argued that Matthew uses the apocalyptic image of the veil as the heavenly firmament (Gen. 1:6) to convey that its rending images the rending of heaven, a common image in apocalyptic Judaism and early Christianity announcing a divine revelation. This suggests that the following material – the Matthean

‘special material’ and his redacted centurion’s profession – is the product of divine revelation triggered by the death of Jesus. Furthermore, the ‘special material’ (Matt. 27:51b-53) resonates with images from Ezek. 37 depicting the turning of the eschatological ages, perhaps indicating an eschatological restoration from exile for the people of God.

In addition to identifying the *velum scissum* as apocalyptic, scholars have frequently recognized that the rending of the veil depicts the cessation of its function. Chapter 2 showed the function of the veil was to provide cultic separation, specifically prohibiting visual and physical accessibility to God depicted graphically by the weaving of prohibitive cherubim woven into it. When this function ceases at the *velum scissum*, as a result of the death of Jesus, it removes such cultic barriers and permits accessibility to God not seen since the Garden of Eden. The cohabitation of man with God resonates with Matthew’s Emmanuel Christology and indicates an eschatological hope in Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity.

The conclusion includes a summary of the entire work and suggestions of areas in which it may be developed further. The latter includes more work on apocalypticism in Matthew and the relation between the synoptic *velum scissum* texts and the three veil texts in Hebrews (Heb. 6:19; 9:3; 10:20). The thesis contains a diagram, which lays out the tabernacle floor plan and labels each of its curtains with every term in the MT and its corresponding term in the LXX. This is followed by three appendices: a chart of every term used for all the curtains in the tabernacle/temple in the LXX, MT, Peshitta, and Vulgate; a chart of the similarities and differences of terms used for the same curtains in the two respective tabernacle accounts in the Pentateuch (Exod. 25-31 and 35-40); and a chart of all the occurrences of פֶּרֶכֶת in the MT and the LXX terms, primarily καταπέτασμα, used to translate it.