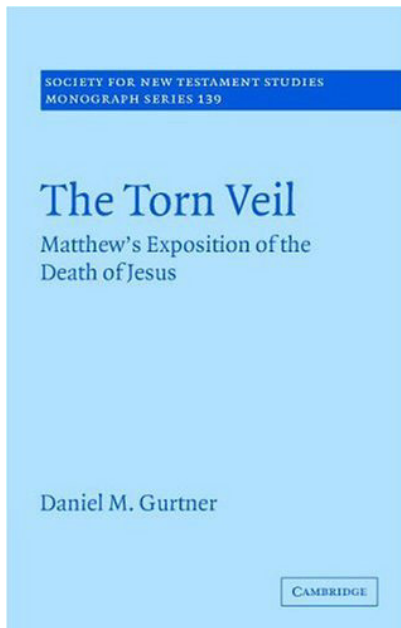


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Gurtner, Daniel M.

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

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In this book Daniel M. Gurtner examines the subject of the tearing or rending of the veil of the temple at the event of the death of Jesus as recounted by Matthew in his passion narrative (Matt 27:50–51a). Gurtner focuses his attention on the meaning of the tearing of the veil, or the *velum scissum*, and how it relates to the death of Jesus. This work is a “minor revision” of his Ph.D. thesis completed under Richard Bauckham, and Gurtner offers up this work to the scholarly community for scrutiny and critique (xii). One cannot help but feel overwhelmed at times when reading this work, given the massive documentation contained therein, along with a plethora of footnotes from a wide range of scholars and commentators. It becomes clear that Gurtner has researched this area at a very deep level and that he displays a capable working knowledge of the sources he cites.

In canvassing the subject of the *velum scissum*, Gurtner begins his introduction by presenting the various views in Christendom that have arisen by way of interpretation. What Gurtner seeks to arrive at is what Matthew meant to express by his account of the *velum scissum*, and he shows that the interpretations in church history and biblical scholarship have been variegated and diverse. The various interpretations have also been arrived at not only by using the Matthean account but also the Markan and Lukan

accounts. In short, the *velum scissum* is part of the passion narrative traditions in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 27:50–51a; Mark 15:37–38; Luke 23:45b–46). While Gurtner concerns himself mainly with the Matthean account, he refers to Mark and Luke and the Q material when it is relevant to his arguments. Among the various views that have arisen regarding the *velum scissum* is the view (espoused by D. A. Hagner) that Matthew did not have to explain it, since he believed it would have been obvious and familiar to his readers (1 n. 1). Another view (Raymond Brown) maintains that neither Matthew nor his readers understood the symbolism of the *velum scissum* (1 n. 1). Gurtner is not satisfied with either view, arguing that Matthew clearly applied apocalyptic motifs from the Old Testament, esp. Ezek 37 and Zech 14, that can be analyzed and that shed light on the language that Matthew uses to describe the *velum scissum* at the death of Jesus.

Gurtner begins with Ephraem the Syrian in the fourth century, who in his *Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron* discusses the *velum scissum* and shows that it is subject to various interpretations. Ephraem takes the view that the tearing of the veil indicated that God had taken the kingdom from the Jews and given it to others, presumably, in Ephraem's mind, the Gentiles. This view applies a replacement model where, in effect, the church replaces the Jews in the divine plan, a view that certainly did not originate with Ephraem. The replacement view was already advanced in the second century, and the *velum scissum* was used as a justification for it (11). Ephraem also provides other views for the *velum scissum*, such as the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E. because the Spirit of God had departed from the temple, the interesting yet beautiful analogy of the Spirit rending the veil in mourning as the high priest tore his robe at the trial of Jesus, and God throwing down the veil of the temple as Judas Iscariot threw down the silver coins into the temple. Gurtner mistakenly refers to the coins as "gold" (2), when they are clearly called *arguria* "pieces of silver" (Matt 26:15; 27:3, 9). While Ephraem provides a number of interpretations, he does not settle with any of them, which points to an ambiguous element in the *velum scissum*.

After discussing some interpretations, Gurtner proceeds to address the subject of the veil itself. Was the veil that was torn the inner or outer veil of the temple or perhaps both? Gurtner also warns about the tempting tendency to read the tearing of the veil of the temple in Matthew (or the Synoptics, for that matter) with the readings in the letter to the Hebrews, which makes reference to the veil or curtain three times (6:19; 9:3; 10:20) and in the last passage identifies the veil with the body of Jesus, giving it a christological meaning. It is primarily the conflation of the Hebrews passages with the Synoptic accounts of the *velum scissum* that has contributed to the traditional view of the tearing of the veil signifying that a new way to God has been opened through Jesus' death. Based on the description of the veils mentioned in Exod 26:4–33 in the tabernacle and later in the temple, the question is asked: Which one does Matthew have in mind in his use of *katapetasma*? Gurtner argues, in company with a number of other scholars, that the

reference is to the *inner* veil that hung in front of the holy of holies and separated it from the holy place. Attention is drawn to the articular *to katapetasma*, “the veil,” in the text (Matt 27:51a) as strongly favoring the inner veil. This is reinforced by the Septuagint use of *katapetasma* as the preferred term for the inner veil, while the outer veil is referred to by the words *epispastron* and/or *kalymma*. From a lexicographical perspective, Gurtner makes a convincing case, and the scholarly consensus appears unanimous on this point. However, Gurtner notes that *katapetasma* in the Septuagint can also refer to the “screen” between the holy place and courtyard (twice) and to the “curtain” of the entrance to the courtyard (five times), but thirty-one times it refers to the “inner veil” (33, 49–71).

Gurtner raises the question of the visibility of the veil. According to Matthew’s account, the centurion and those with him saw the portents that occurred following Jesus’ death, and presumably one of these portents was the tearing/rending of the temple veil. This would take the Matthean account from a historical perspective, and some have argued that, from the place where Jesus was crucified (Golgotha), the veil or curtain of the temple would have been visible. This presents a number of problems. It is highly speculative to determine where exactly Golgotha was and whether it faced the temple entrance. The other problem inherent in this approach is that if any veil/curtain was visible, it certainly was not the inner veil/curtain but rather the *outer* veil/curtain of the temple. The inner veil could only be viewed by the priests who ministered in the holy place and the high priest who entered the holy of holies by the inner veil once a year at Yom Kippur. If the *velum scissum* is not to be taken as a literal historical event, how should it be taken? Gurtner proposes that Matthew’s literary device in recounting the *velum scissum* is one of apocalyptic imagery. Gurtner asserts that to press the historical details of the *velum scissum* is to neglect the “distinctly apocalyptic language in which the evangelist places this event” (7). The common interpretation of the *velum scissum* is that an opening or access to God has been made available and that it is related to the death of Jesus. According to Gurtner, it is meant to function as a theological and eschatological commentary on the death of Jesus. From an eschatological standpoint, it represented the turning of the ages in the death of Jesus (163).

What Gurtner perceives is a lack of further and deeper discussion on the *velum scissum* especially as it is presented by Matthew (22). The best place to commence in order to understand Matthew better is with the Old Testament and its description of the veil(s) and its/their cultic functions. Gurtner provides a helpful diagram on veil language in the tabernacle (203–4).

In chapter 2 Gurtner explores the Old Testament and its references to the *katapetasma* in the Septuagint and examines whether it sheds any light on the Matthean account. Gurtner explores the reference to the veil in the Old Testament both within the context of the

tabernacle and the temple. Gurtner also brings the Masoretic Text into the discussion. Three helpful appendices are supplied at the end of the book dealing with veil language.

In chapter 3 Gurtner examines the cultic functions of the veils and then observes which of the cultic functions Matthew had in mind in his description of the torn veil. Another important component that Gurtner addresses is the significance of the cherubim, which in the Old Testament are said to be embroidered onto the veil itself. The cherubim represented the presence of God, as they were also placed over the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant. Gurtner sees the presence of cherubim embroidered on the veil as significant in indicating the divine presence, but he also takes into account their function as guardians of the divine. They prevented any unauthorized entrance. The tradition of cherubim as guardians has its roots in Gen 3:24, where they guarded the way to the tree of life after Adam and Eve's disobedience. The removal of the veil in the case of Matthew indicates the removal of the cherubim or angelic guardianship and thus reinforces the opening of accessibility to God through Jesus' death.

Gurtner proceeds in chapter 4 to examine the veil and its meaning within Second Temple Jewish and rabbinic texts, including Josephus and Philo, with special attention given to texts that contain an apocalyptic genre. These texts, or at least their themes, Gurtner believes, would have been recognized by the readership of Matthew. The veil of the temple had developed in Jewish thought particularly in rabbinic writings to represent the firmament of heaven taken from Gen 1:6. The idea of the veil like the firmament as a divider and having a separating function helps illuminate Matthew's *velum scissum*. Gurtner sees in this an allusion to the torn veil in Matthew as a boundary marker that has been opened through the death of Jesus. If the veil came to be seen as a symbol of the firmament of heaven, then the tearing of the veil would indicate the tearing of the firmament so that heaven would be opened. Gurtner points to the Markan emphasis on the tearing or rending (*schizo*) of the heavens at Jesus' baptism (1:10), and later the same word is used to describe the rending of the veil at Jesus' death (15:38), thus implying a relationship between "heaven" and the "veil." Gurtner sees this as important for Matthew, since Mark was the source for Matthew's composition (172). Thus the boundary marker of separation was removed with the death of Jesus but also with the identification of Jesus as "Son of God" (Matt 27:54; cf. Mark 15:39). The opening of heaven is "a well-attested apocalyptic image introducing a revelatory assertion" (201). Jesus' death in Matthew becomes a revelation event highlighted by apocalyptic imagery.

In chapters 5–6, Gurtner engages the Matthean text itself and employs the "composition-critical" method (26–27). He highlights the importance of the temple for Matthew and demonstrates that, even though Jesus is conceived as being greater than the temple (Matt 12:6), the temple itself is an object of reverence as the dwelling place of God (23:21) and

the place where sacrifices are endorsed (5:23–24; 8:4). The negative connotation Matthew imposes on the temple is to the mismanagement of the temple by the religious leaders who have abused their offices, which inevitably leads to the departure of the divine presence. Gurtner calls attention to the important Matthean Emmanuel Christology, where the divine presence is experienced in Jesus “God with us” (1:23; 18:20; 28:20). Gurtner asserts, “God now dwells among his people in the person of Jesus” (162). He also examines the relationship of Matthew to Mark and highlights where Matthew has redacted Mark principally in the “special material” that Matthew introduces in Matt 27:51b–53.

In addition to interpreting the *velum scissum* in Matthew in apocalyptic categories, Gurtner also addresses another meaning of the *velum scissum* as a cessation of the function of the veil as a divider, again in the context of Jesus’ death. The *velum scissum* is interpreted as “an apocalyptic opening of heaven” (138) whereby the sovereignty of God is validated in event of the death of Jesus. The sovereignty of God is indicated by the uses of the *passivum divinum* in Matt 27:51b–53. One of the apocalyptic features is the earthquake following the death of Jesus (27:51, 54) and the earthquake at the rolling away of the tombstone by the angel on Easter morning (28:2). This feature is unique to Matthew. The opening of the tombs and the appearing of the “holy ones” in the “holy city,” presumably Jerusalem (27:52–53) is also part of Matthew’s “special material.” All of this is tied to the efficaciousness of Jesus’ death. While Gurtner places the raising of the “holy ones,” which he calls “an apocalyptic sign” (153), and their appearing to “many” in the category of apocalyptic language, the tension remains as to how the appearing of the “holy ones” was witnessed by those in the holy city. Gurtner refers to the entry of the holy ones into the holy city as “a vision” by the centurion and others (156, 166). However, who are the witnesses (“the many”) to whom they appeared? Was it the centurion and company? Gurtner implies this is the case (167–68) but admits that there are “no reports of any raised ones being seen” (158) outside of Matthew’s account and that this is meant to be apocalyptic. The passage remains problematic. In the conclusion, Gurtner summarizes his findings and provides suggestions on how the study of the *velum scissum* can be further enhanced and studied.

There were a number of errors in the book, including a few spelling mistakes. The appendices in the back of the book lack page numbers, which makes it difficult to reference the material. In treating the theophany passage in Exod 33:19–23, Gurtner mistakenly speaks of the Lord passing “by Abraham” (69), when the proper referent is actually Moses. Gurtner also makes the statement that Matthew “depicts the founding of the church during Jesus’ ministry” (122) instead of after his resurrection. This does not take into account the statement by Jesus in Matt 16:18 in which Jesus affirms regarding “the church” (its first appearance in Matthew) that *oikodomeso*, “I will build,” where a

future indicative is used in reference to the building of the church by Jesus. It would be more plausible to see the church as postresurrection.

Overall, this is a well-researched and well-documented work. It should prove to be a tremendous asset in scholarly research of Matthean and Synoptic studies, particularly with reference to the passion narratives. A very detailed and comprehensive bibliography is supplied at the end of the book.