

December 2012

Significance of the Tearing of the Temple Curtain

Andee-Sue Clark
St. John Fisher College

[How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Clark, Andee-Sue (2012) "Significance of the Tearing of the Temple Curtain," *Verbum*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 14.
Available at: <http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol10/iss1/14>

This document is posted at <http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol10/iss1/14> and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.

Significance of the Tearing of the Temple Curtain

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Through-out the course of this paper we will explore the importance of the tearing of the curtain after Jesus' death. This topic is of great interest because, although it is only mentioned briefly in the gospels of the New Testament, many theologians and scholars claim it holds great importance and symbolism to the Christian faith. This question is also intriguing because in order to understand and formulate an answer one must also explore aspects of Judaism, including what Jews thought of this event."



Andee-Sue Clark

*** Significance of the Tearing of the Temple Curtain

Introduction

Through-out the course of this paper we will explore the importance of the tearing of the curtain after Jesus' death. This topic is of great interest because, although it is only mentioned briefly in the gospels of the New Testament, many theologians and scholars claim it holds great importance and symbolism to the Christian faith. This question is also intriguing because in order to understand and formulate an answer one must also explore aspects of Judaism, including what Jews thought of this event.

The purpose of this paper is to show the importance of Christ's death for the Christian religion as well as point out how Jewish interpret what some scholars claim to be a historical event. Examining how these religions interpret the symbolism of the torn curtain we will find that it shows some fundamental divergence between Christianity and Judaism.

The following pages will explain the importance of the tearing of the temple curtain in three sections. The first section will explain the purpose and importance of the curtain in the Jewish temple, so as to give the reader a sense of the weight of this event. The second will give an account of the Christ's death directly from the text and using the notes of commentaries. The third and final section will explore the symbolic meaning Christian theologians place on the event recorded in the Gospels.

A.) Tearing of the Temple Curtain

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ the Nazarene is an event that has been under much scrutiny by historians and religious individuals throughout history. All four of the gospels of the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, contain detailed accounts of the events leading up to and following Christ's crucifixion. According to three of the four gospels supernatural events took place following Christ's death and as a result scholars, theologians and historians alike have tried to determine the validity of these accounts.

The first question one must ask is what were these events and why is it that they were not recorded in all of the gospels. According to Matthew, at the moment Christ "gave up his spirit...the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (Mt 27:50-51). Very similar accounts are given in chapter fifteen of Mark as well as chapter twenty three of Luke. All three of these accounts also share that following Christ's death the sun was darkened during the afternoon and Matthew adds that "the earth shook and the rocks split" (Matthew 27:51). However, John neglects to add any of these details to his account of Christ's death. Does this mean that the other three accounts should be disregarded? Andreas J. Kostenberger, who is a professor of New Testament and Greek, would not say the other accounts should be disregarded because he states that "John is a rather subtle writer who regularly chooses not to refer directly to important events (such as Jesus' baptism by John or the institution of the Lord's supper) but opts instead for more indirect strategies of bringing out the theological significance of certain incidents" (215). This being said, the fact that John does not include details of any unusual events in the temple or elsewhere in his account does not discredit the theological or historical importance of the event.

In order to understand the full importance of the tearing of the temple curtain, it is necessary to know about its function in the temple. While some Bible commentators like Luke Timothy Johnson insist that it is impossible to know, at least from Luke's gospel, which temple curtain was being referred to, most commentators agree that the authors of the gospels were referring to the curtain guarding the Holy of Holies (see pg. 379). This curtain's purpose was to divide the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple. It was so effective that "no light entered the Holy of Holies, except on the rare occasions" (Comay 48).

Behind this massive curtain inside the Holy of Holies was the Ark of the Covenant which “had always been a symbol of God’s presence” throughout Jewish history beginning in the desert as the Israelites fled Egypt (see Werblowsky and Wigoder 680). Because the Holy of Holies was considered the dwelling place of God it was elaborately decorated even though it was strictly hidden from view. The Ark of the Covenant inside the temple was surrounded by two large, gold covered, cherubim and two smaller cherubim creating a “throne” for the “Divine Presence” (Comay 49). This detailed and beautiful chamber which also held other symbols of the Lord’s covenant with the Israelites was only entered once a year. Only the High Priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement (also known as Yom Kippur) and on that day it was only to offer the most important sacrifice of the year (see Hurvitz and Karesh 218). For all of the reasons above, the idea of the Temple curtain tearing was a highly confrontational and monumental claim.

Although many may assume the tearing of the temple curtain to be a detail included in the account of Jesus’ death simply for dramatic effect or for theological symbolism, which will be discussed later, some scholars believe there may be some historical truth to the accounts written by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Robert L. Plummer is one such scholar. In his article *Something awry in the Temple?* Plummer points out that in the Talmud Tractate Yoma 6:3 there are records of events taking place in the temple that are similar to the events recorded in the gospels. Plummer says that the “unusual events reported in the temple are dated to forty years before the temple was destroyed—that is, around 30 AD—the time of Jesus’ death” (see pg. 306). Although records in Rabbinic writings say that it was the temple gates that swung open rather than the curtain tearing, Plummer says that this is a similar idea and the fact that this was accompanied by an earthquake makes the correlation seem even more plausible.

B.) Jewish Interpretation

As stated in the previous section, there are Rabbinic texts that contain records of unusual events occurring in the Temple. Although some scholars, like Plummer, have linked these events to the estimated time of Christ’s death, Jews do not link the unusual events to Christ in any way. Instead Plummer says that Jews have their own interpretation of these unusual events that have no connection to Christ.

According to Rabbinic sources, “the gates of the temple opened at night of their own accord in an inexplicable manner” (Plummer 307). Plummer says that this “seems to demonstrate either a departure of God’s presence, an invitation to invaders or both” (Plummer 307). Other Christian Bible commentators, like Luke Timothy Johnson, agree that it is possible that “the rendering of the veil signifies the punishment to come to the temple” (379); however, he says this is because they rejected “the prophet,” that being Jesus Christ (see Johnson 379).

The reason this interpretation and the relation of these supernatural events is so important rests on the fundamental beliefs of both Judaism and Christianity. If it is assumed (although it is only an idea) that the events recorded in Jewish sources are the same events recorded by the authors of the Gospels, it makes sense that the Jewish leaders would later conclude that these events predicted destruction of the temple. First, it makes logical sense to correlate such unusual events in the temple to its destruction by the Romans in 70 B.C.E., approximately forty years after the events spoken of in the Talmud regarding the temple gates and the earthquake (see Comay 161). Secondly, if the Jews were to believe these events had any correlation with Christ that would be to acknowledge that Jesus was more than a Rabbi which, according to Will Herburg, is what he was to the Jews. He says, “Jesus stands merely as one among many, one of the Rabbis of Judaism” (Herburg 256). In addition, scholar David Flusser says, “The idea that the Messiah frees those who believe in him through his blood is an exclusively Christian one” (Flusser 70). This being said, Jewish Rabbis would obviously not equate the unusual events in the temple as having anything to do with Christ’s death because, according to Jewish beliefs, Jesus was nothing more than a teacher.

C.) Christian Interpretation

For Christians, Christ’s death led to a new relationship with the God of the Israelites. Many scholars and theologians claim some of these fundamental aspects of this new relationship were symbolized by the tearing of the temple curtain. Theologian W.F. Albright says, “It is not possible to say whether this detail was intended to be read as history, or whether by this means the evangelists are further pursuing symbolism...Matthew certainly seems to indicate a symbolic meaning”(352). Other authors say of these accounts: “It is a theological statement not a historical one” (Schweizer 352).

However, it makes little difference whether the temple curtain actually tore, because the event itself had no power, but is understood by theologians as a means to create a symbolic image of Christ's purpose on earth.

One of the main ideas theologians claim the tearing of the temple curtain symbolized, was the start of a new relationship with God. This new relationship is understood through Christ's portrayal as the new High Priest offering the final and perfect sacrifice. Before this time Jews were expected to follow rituals and perform sacrifices. An example of such rituals is one of the Jews' most important and sacred holidays known as Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur, also known as the day of Atonement, was the one day of the year when the high priest ceremoniously entered the Holy of Holies. On this day animal sacrifices were made to purify the people of Israel for a year to come, renewing God's covenant with the people (see Hurvitz and Karesh 566). Theologian Timothy Luke Johnson says that the tearing of the temple curtain could symbolize "the end of the old covenant of atonement through animal sacrifice and the beginning of a 'new covenant'" (Johnson 379). In this "New Covenant" a priest would no longer be needed. Christ symbolically entered the Holy of Holies, although he was not the Jewish High Priest, and rather than offering an animal sacrifice he offered himself. This idea of the end of the old covenant is based Hebrews 10:4, and other verses like it, that says "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." The chapter continues by explaining that Christ offered himself to be the new sacrifice. John P. Meier puts more weight on this idea of a 'new covenant' by describing the tearing of the temple curtain as an "apocalyptic event" that signified a "turning point of the ages" (351). This "turning point" led to a new belief system. Meier also reiterates this by saying that the tearing of the temple curtain and other "apocalyptic events" recorded in Matthew seem to show that "the death of Jesus in some way puts an end to the sacrificial cult of the temple" (351). This "turning point" was one of the major ways the new religion of Christianity differed from its mother religion of Judaism.

With this "new covenant" Christians claim that Christ allowed new access to God, which theologians also say is signified by the tearing of the temple curtain. Luke Timothy Johnson lists this idea as one of three possible meanings of Luke's record of the temple curtain tearing, saying it could symbolize "the end of the division separating Jews and Gentiles, giving all equal access to God" (379). This symbolism is significant because historically the Israelites claimed to be God's chosen people. John Shelby Spong writes of the Jewish understanding of God: "This is the God who parted the waters, who led his people with a cloud of fire, who covenanted with them at Mt. Sinai" (74) and continues on with other short references to other Old Testament stories of God's faithfulness to the people of Israel. This covenant and relationship with God did not include Gentiles, even the temple itself beyond the outer courtyard was off limits to non-Jews (see Goldhill 61). However, Christians claim the tearing of the Temple curtain symbolized an end to this exclusion. Author Richard D. Nelson claims: "Christ's entrance into God's presence blazed a trail for others to follow...hope has entered behind the curtain...opening a way to God" (251). To most Christians this trail that Christ "blazed" into God's presence is the way to the personal relationship with God that is treasured by many Christians. Christians view the tearing of the temple curtain as a means to direct contact with God without the need for a human High Priest, and so they feel a more personal connection to God.

Conclusion

As we have discussed above, the seemingly simple detail of the tearing of the temple curtain, which was even left out of John's account of Christ's death holds much meaning to Christian theologians. Even Rabbis and Jewish scholars have had to come to terms with historical accounts of the events described in the Gospels.

This subject is difficult to discuss completely because of the differing opinions on whether the account in Matthew 27:50-51 should be read as a historical event or only as an attempt at symbolism. Because of this dispute it is a stretch to correlate the events recorded in Jewish sources to the events recorded in the gospel. However, we must remember that for the purposes of this paper we have focused on what each of these religions understand, the unusual events happening in the temple mean, and not which is "right" or more historically accurate. In addition, with a more in depth understanding of Jewish beliefs and rituals, we would be able to better understand the symbolism Christians find in the tearing of the temple curtain.

This research is merely scratching the surface of all the knowledge needed to understand the reason behind Christians divergence from traditional Judaism. It is interesting to learn how both of these religions were able to logically formulate very different symbolic meaning to a similar event. Through each

of the symbolic meanings of the tearing of the temple curtain and we have briefly touched on some of the different ways these religions attempt to understand God's relationship with humans.

Bibliography

- Albright, W.F., and C.S. Mann "Matthew." *The Anchor Bible*. Garden City, NY. Doubleday and Co., 1971.
- Comay, Joan. *The Temple of Jerusalem*. New York, NY. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975
- Flusser, David. "To What Extent is Jesus a Question for the Jews?" *Christians and Jews*. New York, NY: The Seabury Press, 1974. 68-72.
- Goldhill, Simon. *The Temple of Jerusalem*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Herberg, Will. "A Jews Look at Jesus." *Jewish Perspectives on Christianity*. New York, NY: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1990. 256-263.
- Hurvitz, Mitchell M. and Sara E. Karesh. "Holy of Holies." *Encyclopedia of World Religions: Encyclopedia of Judaism*. New York, NY. Facts on File Inc., 2006.
- Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Gospel of Luke*. Sacra Pagina Series 3. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991.
- Kostenberger, Andreas J. "The Destruction of the Second Temple and the Composition of the Fourth Gospel." *Trinity Journal* 26 (2005) 205-242.
- Meier, John P. *Matthew*. Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier Inc., 1980.
- Nelson, Richard D. "He Offered Himself." *Sacrifice in Hebrews. Interpretation* 57. Richmond, VA. 2003. 251.
- Plummer, Robert L. "Something Awry in the Temple? The Rending of the Temple Veil and Early Jewish Sources that Report Unusual Phenomena in the Temple around AD 30." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 48.2 (2005) 301-316.
- Schweizer, Eduard. *The Good News According to Mark*. Richmond, VA. John Knox Press, 1970. 352.
- Spong, John Shelby. "The Continuing Need For Judaism." *Christianity and Judaism: The Deepening Dialogue*. Scranton, PA. Ridge Row Press, 1983. 73-80.
- Werblowsky, R.J Zwi, and Geoffrey Wigoder. "Temple". *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997.

