

Chapter 7

***TEARING OF  
THE TEMPLE  
CURTAIN***

There is an event associated with Jesus' death which has *not* been thought by most people as having any bearing on the identification of the crucifixion site, but had this one event been properly appraised in its geographical and historical contexts, the actual location of Jesus' crucifixion would never have been lost. Strangely, this simple proof has been neglected by scholars and this includes my own research for the first 30 years of my professional career. But once this evidence is realized, a new perspective is made available towards solving the geographical mysteries concerning Jesus' crucifixion.

Look first at the scene of the crucifixion as described by Luke. Note carefully his account of the tearing of the Temple curtain. For clarity's sake, quotes in this chapter are made directly from the original languages into English. The King James renderings are a little archaic to us moderns, so I will give the scriptures with a modern translation.

“And darkness occurred over the whole earth until the ninth hour because the sunlight failed, but the curtain of the Holy Place was

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rent down the middle. And with a loud voice Jesus said: Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit. When he had said this, he died” (Luke 23:44-46).

The Gospel of Matthew reverses the events involving the tearing of the Temple curtain and Jesus’ death.

“But again Jesus having cried out with a loud voice, he yielded up the spirit. And, behold, the curtain of the Holy Place was rent in two from top to bottom” (Matthew 27:50,51).

It is important to note that Jesus’ death and the severing of the curtain were regarded by the two Gospel writers as synchronous events. Once this is realized, a significant clue emerges to identify the place of the crucifixion. Pay close attention to what Luke said happened at the exact time of Jesus’ crucifixion. [I have emphasized certain words.]

“But the centurion *having seen THE THING* having occurred glorified God saying: Surely this man was righteous” (Luke 23:47).

In this account Luke lays emphasis on “the thing” that was seen by the centurion (note carefully that the evangelist is referring to “one thing” — a single event — that prompted the centurion to exclaim that Jesus was truly righteous). What was that single event? It could hardly have been the witnessing of his death because Jesus’ death was fully expected and represented nothing unusual to anyone. The earthquake that Matthew mentioned could not have been Luke’s “one thing” because Luke doesn’t even refer to that particular event anywhere in his context. The three hours darkness (probably caused by dark clouds and/or smoke, see my research study titled “The Location of the Lake of Fire” for proof) could hardly have been “the thing” causing the centurion to glorify God. Note that the darkness did not seem to disturb the other inhabitants of Jerusalem who apparently dismissed it as an event (naturally explainable) which normally occurred in the Jerusalem area at that time of the year. But something caused the centurion to recognize the supernatural origin of one event associated with the death

of Jesus. What was “the thing” that the centurion viewed as significant? A careful reading of the context shows it was the tearing in two of the Temple curtain at the precise time of Jesus’ death.

### ***Geographical Knowledge Locates the Site of the Crucifixion***

This event concerning the tearing of the curtain, provides us with some excellent geographical evidence from the New Testament that allows us to identify the general region of Jesus’ crucifixion. The truth is, there was only one place within the environs of Jerusalem where the centurion could have witnessed the tearing of the Temple curtain (and still be outside a gate of Jerusalem as the Book of Hebrews informs us). This would of necessity have been in an *easterly* direction from the Temple. The reason for this is simple to understand. This is because the Temple curtain, that could be seen from outside the Temple, was the one suspended from a large stone support (or lintel) that covered the eastern entrance to the Holy Place (Greek: the *naos*). This curtain was located directly in front of the eastern doors to the Holy Place and only from the eastern side of the Temple could this curtain be seen by spectators located outside the walls of Jerusalem. It would have been a physical impossibility for anyone to have seen the curtain from the south, from the north or from the west. This means that anyone near the present area of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre or even around the Garden Tomb would only have been able to see the back walls of the Temple. In no way was it possible to view the Temple curtain hanging in front of the Holy Place from any area around Jerusalem other than from the east. Anyone familiar with the Temple and its entrances would recognize this factor instantly.

The Gospel of Matthew gives even more information on this matter that substantiates this conclusion.

“Again Jesus cried out with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And, *behold, the curtain of the Holy Place was rent in two from top to bottom, and the earth quaked and the masses of rocks were*

split” (Matthew 27:50,51, quoted directly from the Greek).

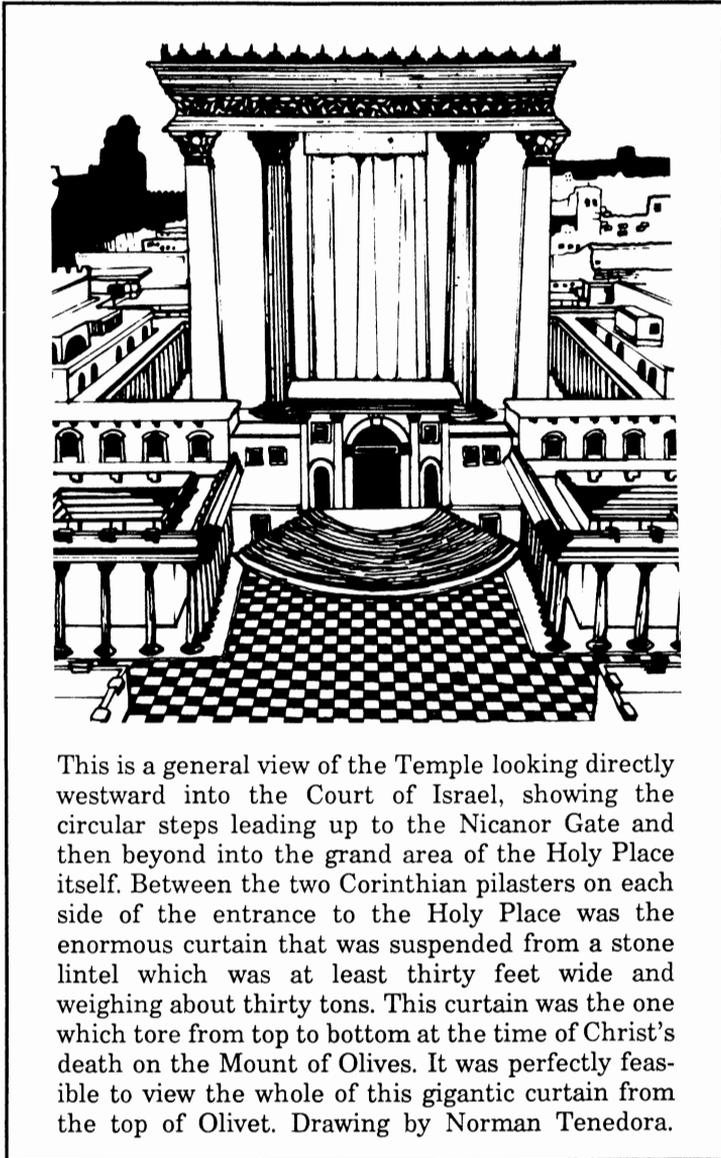
Matthew then provides some parenthetical details which occurred after Jesus’ resurrection. He said that the tombs were opened and many of the bodies of the saints were resurrected. These saints then entered Jerusalem and showed themselves to individuals who had previously known them. After presenting this added bit of information which happened three days after Jesus’ death, Matthew returns to his account of the crucifixion itself. He mentions that the Temple curtain tore in two at the time of a great earthquake.

“But the centurion and the others with him watching Jesus *having seen* the earthquake and *THE THINGS occurring*, became very much afraid, saying: Truly, this was God’s son” (Matthew 27:54).

It should carefully be noted that not only the centurion but also those standing beside him witnessed the effects of the earthquake as well as “the things” (in Matthew the usage is plural, see Greek). What were these particular “things” that Matthew said were happening simultaneously with Jesus’ death? They were the earthquake, the termination of the sun being obscured, and also the rending of the Temple curtain. In fact, Matthew makes an added emphasis concerning the severing of the curtain. He calls attention to its significance by stating: “And, behold [that is, look intently], the curtain of the Holy Place was rent in two” (Matthew 27:51). He wants his readers to pay particular heed to this event—to “look intently” at the tearing of the Temple curtain. This rending of the curtain at the exact time of Jesus’ death (along with the earthquake and the ending of the sun’s obscuration) were prime events of importance to Matthew. Indeed, they would have been to anyone standing amidst the scene of the crucifixion. No wonder that the centurion and the others exclaimed: “Truly, this was God’s son.”

### ***The Events of the Crucifixion Taken Together***

What is necessary to our present discussion is the realization that



This is a general view of the Temple looking directly westward into the Court of Israel, showing the circular steps leading up to the Nicanor Gate and then beyond into the grand area of the Holy Place itself. Between the two Corinthian pilasters on each side of the entrance to the Holy Place was the enormous curtain that was suspended from a stone lintel which was at least thirty feet wide and weighing about thirty tons. This curtain was the one which tore from top to bottom at the time of Christ's death on the Mount of Olives. It was perfectly feasible to view the whole of this gigantic curtain from the top of Olivet. Drawing by Norman Tenedora.

these concurrent events can help us to locate the region of Jesus' crucifixion. The fact that these occurrences could be seen from the site of the crucifixion is one of the things that the Gospel writers were trying to convey. Again this shows (since the Temple curtain could only be seen from the eastern side of Jerusalem) that the centurion and the others around the scene of Jesus' crucifixion had to be *east* of the Temple. It also means that they had to be at an elevated area higher than the *eastern* wall of the Temple in order to see the Temple curtain. Thus, they were situated somewhere up the slopes of the Mount of Olives and probably near its summit.

We are provided with more information about this matter in the Gospel of Mark.

“But Jesus having let out a loud voice died. And the curtain of the Holy Place was rent in two from top to bottom. But the centurion standing alongside and opposite of him HAVING SEEN that he expired THUSLY [that is, he died at the exact time the curtain tore in two], said: Truthfully, this man was a Son of God” (Mark 15:37-39).

The adverb “thusly” in the above quote shows that Mark reckoned Jesus' death as contemporaneous with the rending of the Temple curtain and that the centurion was able to see the two events happening at the same time. It must be understood that it was not simply the death of Jesus that caused the centurion to exult (because his death was quite naturally expected), but it was *witnessing* the tearing of the curtain at the time of his death.

### ***The Plainness of New Testament Teaching***

One thing we should recognize. Drawing attention to the details of the words found in Luke, Matthew and Mark concerning Jesus' crucifixion is not “straining at a gnat” or trying to make a mountain out of a molehill. These are important considerations that have long been overlooked by individuals trying to comprehend the geography of Jesus' crucifixion. It is now time to begin paying attention to these details. Once we do, we will then be in a proper position to

understand some of the important doctrinal and prophetic teachings of the New Testament that the real site of the crucifixion affords. The fact is, the New Testament makes it clear that the centurion and all the others around the crucifixion site *could see with their own eyes* the Temple curtain being torn in two. This curtain was hanging in front of the eastern portal of the inner Temple. This means that the crucifixion had to have taken place near the summit of the Mount of Olives located on the eastern side of Jerusalem.

It must be realized that there was no difficulty in witnessing the tearing of the Temple curtain from the Mount of Olives, which was a Sabbath Day's journey of about half a mile away from the Temple mount (Acts 1:12). This outer curtain was 55 cubits high and 16 cubits wide (over 80 feet tall and 24 feet in breadth) (Josephus, *War* V.210-214). This curtain was a magnificent creation of art. Josephus (who was an eyewitness) described it as a wonderfully made tapestry woven with the finest materials (*ibid.*). And how majestic it was! Imagine a curtain about 24 feet wide and as high as a modern eight story building. It is important to realize how enormous in size this curtain was because one might wonder how people standing about half a mile distant could witness it tear from the top down. When it is understood how large its dimensions were, all problems of distance vanish away.

### ***The Doors of the Holy Place***

It also ought to be mentioned that early Jewish records show that the doors of the Holy Place (in front of which this curtain was suspended) mysteriously opened of their own accord in A.D.30 (the year in which Jesus was crucified). "Forty years before the Temple was destroyed.... the gates of the Hekel [the Holy Place] opened by themselves, until R. Yohanan Ben Zakkai rebuked them [the gates] saying: Hekel, Hekel, why alarmist you us? We know that you are destined to be destroyed. For of you has prophesied Zechariah Ben Iddo (Zechariah 11:1): Open your doors, O Lebanon [the Temple], and the fire shall eat your cedars" (Yoma 39b).

Forty years before the destruction of the Temple in A.D.70 is obviously A.D.30. This is the year in which Jesus was crucified (see Addendum One of this book with new information which demonstrates this). Edersheim was of the opinion that the miraculous opening of these Temple doors was in some way associated with the tearing of the curtain since the doors were positioned directly behind the curtain itself (*Life and Times*, vol.II, pp.610,611). This would have to be the case if the tearing of the curtain was to show that the spiritual barriers to the Holy Place were now made redundant by Jesus' death. These two doors opened inwardly and the symbolic teaching would have been meaningless had the two doors remained closed. Indeed, for the intended symbol to have any relevance whatever, the two events would have had to occur at the same time.

### ***The Consequence of Tearing the Temple Curtain***

But how was it possible for the doors to the Holy Place to open? A Jewish Christian work of the early second century called "The Gospel of the Nazaraeans" said that the large stone lintel which supported the curtain (which no doubt had the inner doors attached to it for stability) split in two when the curtain was severed (*cf.* Hennecke-Schneemelcher, *The New Testament Apocrypha*, vol.I, pp.150,153). Remember that there was a major earthquake at the precise time of Jesus' death and this could have been the cause for fracturing the stone lintel. There is no reason to deny the possibility that the collapse of the overhead lintel (which was an enormous stone at least 30 feet long and weighing probably 30 tons) was the "natural cause" of the curtain tearing in two. The fact that the curtain was severed from top to bottom demonstrates that it was the force of the falling lintel that caused the curtain to rend. This collapse could also have been the means by which the inner doors next to the curtain were forced open. The crashing down of 30 tons of stone from the height of an eight story building could surely have opened the two doors that were directly next to the falling

stonework. No wonder Jewish people long remembered the event about the opening of the doors to the Holy Place in A.D.30.

The collapse of this lintel at the time of the earthquake (as attested by the “Gospel of the Nazaraeans”) is excellent evidence that the curtain did in fact tear in two. It helps to show that the New Testament is giving *literal* information and not *symbolic* teaching alone. But even if some people might believe the biblical accounts are only symbolic, the crucifixion would still have to be reckoned as occurring east of Jerusalem. This is because anyone living in the first century and aware of the geography of Jerusalem would realize that even such a *symbolic* illustration (if that is what it was) would still demand an *eastern* aspect for the observer if the figure was to have valid geographical parameters. But if the lintel did break in two as shown by the “Gospel of the Nazaraeans,” then we have remarkable evidence that the New Testament is giving literal teaching when the three Gospels said the curtain was severed from top to bottom.

This means the New Testament is giving eyewitness evidence that the centurion and the other spectators at the scene of Jesus’ crucifixion were able *to observe* the tearing in two of the Temple curtain. It then follows that the observers were situated in an elevated region that was high enough for them to view the tearing of the curtain over the eastern wall of the Temple. Without doubt, this New Testament evidence demonstrates that the crucifixion of Jesus occurred *east* of the Temple mount somewhere near the summit of the Mount of Olives. In the next chapter more evidence will be given to show this.