

“Torn in Two”

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Matthew tells us that at the moment of Christ’s death on the cross, “the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.” What is Matthew talking about, and what does it *mean*?

There was, in ancient Judaism, just one temple. Lots of synagogues, where people would gather to worship and pray and sing and hear the scriptures read and interpreted. But only one temple, in Jerusalem, a massive structure, where the Jewish priests would diligently maintain the sacrifices that were called for in the Torah, the five books of the Bible that were attributed to Moses. That temple contained a number of rooms and enclosures. There were two in the inner sanctuary that were of central importance: the Holy Place, and the Holy of Holies. The Holy Place was the larger room. It contained three sacred objects: (1) the Menorah, a golden lampstand, with seven branches, and seven burning lamps, which provided the only light in this enclosed space; (2) the Showbread, twelve sacred loaves of bread, which were replaced every week; these represented the Twelve Tribes of Israel; and (3) an Altar of Incense, where fragrant incense was burned every morning and every evening; the smoke from the incense represented the prayers of the people, going up to God. The priests of the temple would enter this Holy Place every day in the performance of their sacred duties.

Then there was another chamber, a smaller room, perfectly square. Originally, the Holy of Holies had held several *very* sacred objects, including: (1) a jar of manna, leftover from Israel’s sojourn in the wilderness; the staff of the first high priest, Aaron, the brother of Moses; and, most importantly, the Ark of the Covenant, the large sacred chest which housed the Ten Commandments, and upon which, the Israelites believed, sat the Divine Presence of God. Those objects appear to have all been lost when the original temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC. When the temple was rebuilt a century later, those sacred objects could not be put into the Holy of Holies, because the Jews did not have them. The chamber was, we think, empty, or at least mostly empty. But the Jews continued to believe that the Divine Presence of God resided in this sacred chamber, the Holy of Holies. Only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and only once a year, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. At all other times, he and all the other priests could not pass beyond the Holy Place, the larger chamber.

There was a curtain separating the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. This was not your ordinary curtain! It was *immense* – roughly sixty feet high, thirty feet wide, and four inches thick. It was woven from blue, purple, and scarlet linen. An ancient tradition says it was so heavy it took 300 priests to lift it or move it. *This* was the curtain that, we are told, was “torn in two” when Jesus died.

So what does it mean? What does it mean that this sacred curtain was torn in two at that specific moment? None of the Gospel accounts tells us clearly what the tearing of the curtain

symbolized or represented; we have to do some interpreting. And the *primary* interpretation, the one that has stood the test of time for centuries, is this: *God is no longer contained inside the Holy of Holies.* God is now *out here*. No longer is the presence of God locked away where no one can access it, *except* the High Priest, and him only once a year. *Now*, the presence of God is something we *all* have access to. We *all* have access to God, *through* Jesus Christ, and *because* of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross – a sacrifice that, for us Christians, serves the same purpose that all those sacrifices in the temple served for the Jewish people of old, especially including the *forgiveness of sins*. We do not need to go to a sacred temple to receive forgiveness for our sins. We do not have to perform all sorts of ritual sacrifices day after day and year after year. All we need ... is Jesus. We have access to the Divine Presence *all the time*.

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