

# RESURRECTION OF CHRIST AFTER CRUCIFIXION

Analytical Notes On Matthew 27:52-53 And Ephesians 4:8

## I. Matthew 27:52-53 (American Standard Version)

"And the tombs were opened; and many bodies of the saints that had fallen asleep were raised; and coming forth out of the tombs after his resurrection they entered into the holy city, and appeared unto many."

1. There is nothing said in the scripture as to what happened to the foregoing afterwards, which should preclude dogmatism in connection with any of the possibilities, which seem to be no more than three, as follows:

(a) That they died again, as we suppose from Colossians 1:18 that others did that had been raised back to life, as the widows son at Nain, Jairus daughter, and Lazarus. An example of that view:

"They were subject to death a second time, as was Lazarus, presumably" (James Burton Coffman, Commentary on Matthew).

(b) That they remained on earth without dying again:

This seems most unlikely, and nobody is on record either as claiming to be such individuals, or as claiming to have seen such, or of even believing such, so far as I have either heard or read.

(c) That they were received up into heaven. Examples of that view:

"We have no positive information, but the natural supposition is that they ascended into heaven" (McGarvey,

Commentary on Matthew; McGarvey and Pendleton, Fourfold Gospel).

"We are not told what happened to the saints between the Lords death and his resurrection, nor what happened to them afterwards. Presumably their graves remained empty and they were translated to heaven." (The New Bible Commentary, by Davidson, Stibbs, and Kevan.)

"We do not know which saints arose (the account says many), nor do we know whether they continued in resurrection as bodies and eventually died again and were buried. Verse 53 makes it appear that they came out of the graves after the resurrection of Christ and entered into the city of Jerusalem where they appeared to many people. Matthew Henry suggest that these resurrected saints ascended with Christ to glory, although this is simply an inference." (Annotation of Harold Linsell, in Harpers Bible Study, Revised Standard Version.)

Matthew Henrys precise words are: "But it is more agreeable, both to Christs honor and theirs, to suppose, though we cannot prove, that they arose as Christ did, to die no more, and therefore ascended with him to glory. ... These saints that arose, were the present trophies of the victory of Christs cross over the powers of death, which he thus made a show openly. Having by death destroyed him that had the power of death, he thus led captivity captive, and glorified in these re-taken prizes, in them fulfilling the scriptures, I will ransom them from the power of the grave." (See Hosea 13:14.)

2. It is obvious that Matthew Henry and maybe others of the foregoing in (c) think in terms of "leading captivity captive" in Ephesians 4:8. The latter passage will now be noted in regard to possible if not probable relevance to the saints raised after Christ resurrection.

II. EPHESIANS 4:8 (AMERICAN STANDARD VERSION).

"Wherefore he saith, When he ascended on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men." The King James Version reads exactly the same way, but has a note, saying, "or, a multitude of captives" instead of "captivity captive."

1. Other translations:

(a) New International Version: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train, and gave gifts to men."

(b) New English Bible: "He ascended into the heights with captives in his train; he gave gifts to men."

(c) Revised English Bible: "He ascended into the heights; he took captives into captivity; he gave gifts to men."

(d) Revised Standard Version: "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men."

(e) New Revised Standard Version: "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people."

(f) New American Bible: "When he ascended on high, he took a host of captives and gave gifts to men."

(g) Berkley Version: "As he ascended on high, He led the captives away in captivity; He gave gifts to men."

(h) Goodspeed: "When he went up on high, he led a host of captives, And gave gifts to mankind."

(i) Williams: "He led a host of captives, when He went up on high, And granted gifts to men."

(j) Moffatt: "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives and granted gifts to men."

(k) Barclay: "He ascended on high, after he had taken his prisoners captive, and gave gifts to men."

## 2. Lexical Notes on "he led captivity captive"

(a) In the Greek text, "he led captive" is one word, *echmaloteusen*, 3rd person singular, aorist 1. indicative, of the verb *aichmaloteou*; and "captivity" is another word, *aichmalosian*, accusative singular of the noun *aichmalosia*. The latter may be used either abstractly or concretely. When employed abstractly, it means the state of captivity or of being captive; but when used concretely, as in Ephesians 4:8, it means persons in a state of captivity. In English translation, however, we have to insert the noun "captivity in the midst of the verb "led captivity," so that it reads "led captivity captive." But remember that the abstract noun "captivity" is used concretely of persons in a state of captivity, hence in the sense of being "captivity."

(b) Accordingly, in Hapers Analytical Greek Lexicon we have for the noun, "captive multitudes"; in Thayers Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, the statement that in Ephesians 4:8 we have the abstract for the concrete; and Arndt & Gingrich, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, "prisoners of war"; in Liddell and Scott, Greek-English Lexicon, "a body of captives"; W. E. Vine, Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, gives the alternate rendering in the King James Version, "a multitude of captives," as an example of the noun being used in the concrete sense.

(c) Incidentally, the Greek language has also a cognate (or, related) noun, *aichmalotos*, literally one taken by the spear (from *aichme*, a spear, and *halotos*, a verbal adjective, from *halonia*, to be captured), hence denotes a captive, Luke 4:18. (Vine.) This is being mentioned to give something more of the flavor of the word family involved, which is taken into account by lexicons and commentaries.

### 3. Commentaries:

(a) A. E. Harvey, The New English Bible, Companion to the New Testament: "Psalm 68:18 [referred to in Ephesians 4:8] runs, in both the Greek and Hebrew versions: Thou didst ascend into the heights / with captives in thy train / having received gifts among men. These words were doubtless addressed originally to the victorious king returning to Jerusalem."

(NOTE: The Hebrew word rendered above as "received" is translated in the Old Testament either as "receive" or "give," depending on context. And Ephesians 4:8 in the New Testament quotes it as give, which the context there requires.)

(b) The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible: "Paul quotes the passage [Psalm 68:18] with slight alterations, which may mean he is following a Jewish paraphrase. ... Originally the Psalm described the Jewish Kings triumphal procession to the newly conquered hill of Jerusalem; he is accompanied by his spoil and receives gifts as tribute. The ascent into the high mount now refers to Jesus triumphal return to his heavenly glory when his work is completed (see also John 17:4; Acts 1:9). The captives are now the powers and forces opposed to God, which Jesus had defeated (see below on Col. 2:15). Instead of receiving gifts as tributes from men the conqueror distributes gifts among men."

(c) Pulpit Commentary: "As in a literal triumph, the chiefs of the enemies army are led captive, so the powers of darkness are led captive by Christ (captivity, *aichmalosia*, denotes prisoners); and as on occasion of a triumph the spoils of the enemy are made over to the conqueror, who again gives them away to the soldiers and people, so gifts were given to Christ after his triumph to be given by him to his church. We must not force the analogy too far; the point is simply this -- as a conqueror at a triumph gets gifts to

distribute, so Christ, on his resurrection and ascension, got the Holy Spirit to bestow on his Church."

(d) David Lipscomb, Commentary of Ephesians: "Captivity refers to death, as death had held dominion over every living thing on earth. Jesus went down into death's inner prison, and struggled with the powers of death ad hell; bursting asunder the bars of death, and roes a triumphal victor over the power of death and hell. In his triumph he secured mans resurrection, and won his crown as King of kings and Lord of lords. By virtue of his victory over death, his angelic convey, as it approached the city of God cried: "Lift up your heads, o ye gates; and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory will come in. (Psalm 24:7-11.) In his glorious ascension, convoyed by an angelic host, he led death a captive, a conquered captive, in his train."

NOTE: While each of the above has something good to contribute, it seems to me that the Cambridge Bible , Pulpit Commentary, and David Lipscomb miss the point about Jesus "leading captivity captive." The first says "the captives are now the powers and forces opposed to God, which Jesus had defeated"; the next, that they are "the chiefs of the enemies army" and the last, that "captivity refers to death."

But is it likely that our Lord led any or all these to heaven in his train? And, of course, the "convoy of angels" mentioned by Lipscomb are not a part of the imagery of our text. To me, the next two expositors are more to the point, with one possible exception to be mentioned afterward, perhaps in concluding remarks.

(d) Albert Barnes, Notes on the New Testament: It is language derived from a conqueror, who not only makes captives, but who makes captives of those who were then prisoners, and who conducts them as a part of his triumphal procession. He not only subdues his enemy, but he leads his

captives in triumph. The allusion is to the public triumphs of conquerors, especially as celebrated among the Romans, in which captives were led in chains (Tacitus, Ann. xii.38), and to the custom in such triumphs of distributing presents among the soldiers; comp. also Judg. 5:30, where it appears that this was also an early custom among other nations (...) [Adam Clarke also states that at such times the conqueror was wont to throw money among the crowd -- that is , along the line of parade.] When Christ ascended to heaven he triumphed over all his foes. It was a complete victory over the malice of the great enemy of God, and over those who had sought his life. But he did more [emphasis added]. He rescued those who were the captives of Satan as a prisoner. His chains were around him. Christ rescued the captive prisoner, and designed to make him a part of his triumphal procession with the attending host of those who had been the captives of Satan, now rescued and redeemed."

(e) W.E. Vine, Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words:

" ... the concrete [use of captivity] is found in ... Eph.4:8, where He led captivity captive (mage., a multitude of captives) seems to be an allusion to the triumphal procession by which a victory was celebrated, the captives taken forming part of the procession. See Judg.5:12. The quotation is from Psa. 68:18, and probably is a forceful expression for Christs victory, through his Death, over the hostile powers of darkness. An alternative suggestion is that at his ascension Christ transferred the redeemed Old Testament saints from *Sheol* to his own presence in glory."

### III. CONCLUDING PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS.

1. In principle, it seems that Barnes, and Vine (in his "alternate suggestion"), must be correct. But should they mean all the Old Testament worthies redeemed by the blood of Jesus (see Hebrews 9:15) were led in his train to the heavenly Jerusalem, that must be a

mistake -- the "possible exception" referred to above. For according to Peter on Pentecost after Christ's ascension, David had "ascended not into heavens" (Acts 2:34); and, according to Hebrews 11:39-40, none of the Old Testament worthies mentioned in that chapter (including David, v.33) would receive the "promise" (of eternal inheritance, 9:15) before we Christians do, "God having provided some better thing concerning us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect."

That being the case, they were not to go to heaven before we do; and likely the same would be true of Old Testament saints general, though there might well be (a) an exception of the smaller number of Matthew 27:52-53, just as (b) Enoch and Elijah were individual exceptions to the rule that it is appointed unto men[in the sense of mankind] once to die and after that the judgment -- and salvation also for the redeemed (Hebrews 9:27-28).

2. Moreover, leading a smaller number to heaven by Christ at his ascension would not in any way conflict with the fact that his own resurrection and ascension were a powerful exhibition of his victory over the hostile powers of darkness, as Vine and Lipscomb appropriately suggest, but would actually enhance it -- not only escaping from their clutches himself, but also snatching from them a select group of saints, and thus demonstrating all the more his ability to fulfill his promise of a general resurrection and the eternal salvation of the redeemed at his second coming.

3. Finally, (a) the foregoing represents what occurs to me as not only a possibility, but also as most likely what happened to the "many bodies of the saints that had fallen asleep [but] were raised; and coming forth out of the tombs after [Christ's] resurrection ... entered into the holy city and appeared unto many" (Matthew 27:52-53) -- namely, that they were taken to heaven as a part of the triumphal procession of our Lord upon his ascension there, referred to in Ephesians 4:8 -- but (b), in the absence of more explicit supporting evidence, it is neither a necessary inference nor a matter crucial to our faith, and should not be regarded as such, however plausible it may appear.

Had more explicit information about those saints been necessary for our obedience of faith, and therefore our salvation, it surely would have been supplied as was the fact of Christs own ascension as well as his resurrection. But, not being thus necessary, to have equally elaborated of "leading captivity captive" would have detracted from rather than contributing to highlighting the bestowal of spiritual gifts within the church in connection with Christs "ascending on high," which was the contextual emphasis.

Stated another way: (a) Whereas the appearance of those saints to many in Jerusalem after the resurrection of Christ (the decease of whom may have been recent enough for them still to be recognized by friends and acquaintances) would surely make all the more credible the proclamation of the Lords resurrection by chosen witnesses, and therefore serve a useful purpose in Matthews account, (b) their being a part of the triumphal procession of our Lord when ascending on high would not have a similar bearing on or relation to his bestowal of spiritual gifts within his church on earth.

Therefore, elaborating upon the former would have served no particular purpose in the context of Pauls discussion of the latter, and its omission says nothing one way or another as to the meaning of Christs "leading captivity captive" when "ascending on high." It can therefore be only a matter of unconfirmed inference, however probable of otherwise.

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