



The Veil, the Darkness, and the Order of Events at the Crucifixion

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Introduction

In the final moments of Jesus Christ's crucifixion, the Gospel writers record a series of extraordinary events: a supernatural darkness covering the land, the tearing of the temple veil, a great earthquake, and the reactions of witnesses, such as the centurion. Critics often point to the variation in how these events are presented, particularly between Matthew 27, Mark 15, and Luke 23, and suggest that the accounts are contradictory. One of the most common objections concerns whether the temple veil was torn before or after Jesus died, based on Luke 23:45 and Matthew 27:50-51.

However, such objections arise from imposing a modern expectation of strict chronological narration onto ancient texts that often prioritize theological emphasis over linear sequencing. The Gospel writers are not contradicting one another; they are presenting complementary perspectives on the same climactic moment in redemptive history. When the passages are examined carefully, alongside their literary structure, theological intent, and Old Testament background, the events align coherently and reveal profound meaning.

These events are not merely historical markers but prophetic signals. The darkness, the torn veil, and the accompanying signs all declare that something cosmic has occurred. The crucifixion is not simply the death of a man; it is the decisive moment in which sin is judged, access to God is opened, and the old covenant system reaches its fulfillment. Understanding the order and meaning of these events requires careful attention to both the text and the broader biblical narrative.

The Darkness Over the Land

All three Synoptic Gospels record a period of darkness during the crucifixion. Matthew 27:45 states, "Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour." Mark 15:33 repeats this exactly, and Luke 23:44-45 says, "And it was about the sixth hour, and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. And the sun was darkened." This darkness spans from noon to approximately 3:00 PM.

This is not a natural eclipse. Passover occurs during a full moon, making a solar eclipse impossible. The darkness is therefore supernatural. It functions as a sign of divine



judgment. In Amos 8:9, God declares, “I will cause the sun to go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in the clear day.” This prophetic language aligns closely with the events at the crucifixion. The darkness signifies that judgment is taking place—not merely upon Christ, but upon sin itself.

From a theological standpoint, this darkness reflects the separation between the Father and the Son as Jesus bears the sin of the world. Matthew 27:46 records His cry, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” This is not a loss of divine nature but an expression of relational separation as He takes upon Himself the penalty of sin. The darkness, therefore, is both a physical and symbolic manifestation of this moment.

Throughout Scripture, significant moments of judgment or transition are marked by disruptions in the natural order. The darkness at the crucifixion fits this pattern, signaling that the event transcends ordinary history.

The Death of Jesus and the Final Cry

At the end of the period of darkness, Jesus utters His final words. Luke 23:46 records, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost.” Matthew 27:50 states, “Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost.” John 19:30 adds the declaration, “It is finished.” These statements collectively describe the moment of His death.

The phrase “It is finished” (John 19:30) carries profound significance. It is not a statement of defeat but of completion. The Greek term *tetelestai* conveys the idea of a debt fully paid. This connects directly to the Old Testament sacrificial system, where offerings were made for sin. Hebrews 10:10 explains, “we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” The crucifixion fulfills the requirement for atonement, rendering the old system obsolete.

This moment also marks the transition from the old covenant to the new. The sacrificial system, centered in the temple, is no longer necessary because the ultimate sacrifice has been made. The events that follow—particularly the tearing of the veil—demonstrate this transition visibly.

The Tearing of the Veil



The tearing of the temple veil is recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels, but with slight variations in placement. Matthew 27:51 states, “And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom.” Mark 15:38 similarly says, “And the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom.” Luke 23:45, however, places this statement before the final cry: “and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst.”

This difference has led some to argue that the accounts are contradictory. However, this conclusion assumes that Luke is presenting a strict chronological sequence. In reality, Luke often arranges events thematically rather than sequentially. His placement of the veil tearing emphasizes its connection to the darkness and the moment’s overall significance, rather than its precise timing.

Matthew and Mark, by contrast, place the tearing of the veil immediately after Jesus’ death. This suggests that the veil was torn at the moment He yielded His spirit. When these accounts are harmonized, the most natural conclusion is that the veil was torn at or immediately following His death, and Luke includes it within the broader description of the events surrounding the crucifixion.

The direction of the tearing is also significant: “from the top to the bottom.” This indicates divine action. The veil was not torn by human hands but by God Himself. The veil separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place in the temple, restricting access to God’s presence. Only the high priest could enter, and only once a year (Hebrews 9:7).

By tearing the veil, God demonstrates that access to His presence is now open. Hebrews 10:19–20 explains, “Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way... through the veil, that is to say, his flesh.” The physical tearing of the veil corresponds to the spiritual reality that Christ’s death has removed the barrier between God and humanity.

The Earthquake and Other Signs

Matthew 27:51–53 records additional phenomena: “and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose.” These details are unique to Matthew’s account and further emphasize the magnitude of the event.

The earthquake signifies divine intervention. Throughout Scripture, earthquakes are associated with the presence of God, as seen in Exodus 19:18 when Mount Sinai trembles.



The opening of the graves and the resurrection of saints point forward to the ultimate resurrection. These events serve as a preview of what Christ's victory over death will accomplish.

The centurion's response is also noteworthy. Matthew 27:54 records, "Truly this was the Son of God." Mark 15:39 similarly states, "Truly this man was the Son of God." Luke 23:47 adds that he "glorified God." These reactions demonstrate that even those outside the covenant community recognized the significance of what had occurred.

Harmonizing the Sequence of Events

When the accounts are carefully aligned, the sequence of events can be understood as follows. First, darkness covers the land from the sixth to the ninth hour. During this time, Jesus endures the judgment associated with sin. Near the end of this period, He cries out and yields His spirit. At or immediately following His death, the veil of the temple is torn from top to bottom. This is accompanied by an earthquake and other signs, as recorded in Matthew.

Luke's placement of the veil tearing within the description of the darkness does not contradict this sequence. Instead, it reflects a thematic arrangement. Luke groups the darkness and the tearing of the veil together to emphasize their combined significance. Matthew and Mark provide a more sequential presentation, placing the tearing of the veil after Jesus' death.

This harmonization preserves the integrity of all accounts. It recognizes that the Gospel writers are not attempting to provide identical timelines but complementary perspectives. The differences in arrangement enhance the narrative by highlighting different aspects of the same event.

The Veil and Access to God

From a typological perspective, the tearing of the veil is one of the most significant events in Scripture. The veil represents the barrier between God and humanity caused by sin. Its tearing signifies the removal of that barrier through Christ's sacrifice.

This event fulfills the typology of the Day of Atonement, described in Leviticus 16. On that day, the high priest entered the Most Holy Place with the blood of a sacrifice to atone for the sins of the people. Hebrews 9:11-12 explains that Christ, as the true high priest,



entered “into heaven itself” with His own blood, securing eternal redemption.

The tearing of the veil also connects to the incarnation. John 1:14 states, “the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.” The term “dwelt” can be understood as “tabernacled.” Just as the tabernacle and temple represented God’s presence, so Christ embodies that presence. When His body is broken, the veil is torn, symbolizing the opening of access to God.

The timing, the method, and the symbolism all align with remarkable consistency. The crucifixion is not an isolated event but the culmination of a pattern established throughout the Old Testament.

Conclusion

The differences in the Gospel accounts regarding the darkness, the tearing of the veil, and the sequence of events at the crucifixion do not represent contradictions. They reflect the distinct perspectives and emphases of the Gospel writers. When the passages are read carefully and in context, they form a coherent and unified narrative.

The darkness signifies divine judgment. The death of Jesus represents the completion of the work of redemption. The tearing of the veil demonstrates the opening of access to God. The accompanying signs confirm the significance of the event. Together, these elements reveal the crucifixion as the central moment in God’s redemptive plan.

Far from undermining the reliability of the Gospels, these accounts provide a rich and multifaceted portrayal of the most important event in human history. They invite the reader not only to understand the sequence of events but to grasp their profound theological meaning. The veil is torn, the darkness is lifted, and access to God is made possible through the finished work of Jesus Christ.