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September 5, 2021

Faithful Sayings

BULLETIN OF
THE OL-
SEN PARK
CHURCH OF
CHRIST

The Earthquake When Jesus Died

By Kyle Pope

Services

Sunday: 9:00 AM
9:30 AM
10:30 AM
Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:

Patrick Ledbetter
Brady McAlister
Jeff Nunn

Deacons:

Ben Hight
Blake McAlister
Walker McNear
Sam Nunn
Lance Purcell
Justin Smiley
Trevor Yontz

Evangelist:

Kyle Pope

The Bible records many dramatic events that took place in connection with the death and resurrection of Jesus. While on the cross, **"from the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land"** (Matt. 27:45; cf. Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44). Upon His death, **"the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split"** (Matt. 27:51; cf. Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45, NKJV). When that happened, Matthew tells us that tombs were opened and some of the dead were resurrected back to life and appeared within the city (Matt. 27:52-53). Upon the resurrection of Jesus, **"there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it"** (Matt. 28:2). Are these accounts merely examples of literary hyperbole, or did these things really happen?

Those who believe in the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus and the divine inspiration of the Bible will have no problem answering this question. Yes, they really happened! When God in the flesh laid down His life as a sacrifice for sin and then overcame death itself, nature itself was moved in response to that event. But for souls who have not yet come to recognize these tenets of faith, in recent years, some intriguing discoveries have been made which appear to show that nature further bears witness to the reality of these events.

Dead Sea Sediments

In December 2011, geologist Jefferson B. Williams (in association with other researchers) published an article in *International Geology Review* entitled “An Early First-Century Earthquake in the Dead Sea.” Williams analyzed layers of sediment deposits from the Dead Sea that are now exposed due to the continuing drop in the water level of the lake over the last centuries. The surface elevation of the Dead Sea is now 427 m (or about 1370 ft) below sea level. In the past it was 250 m (or about 800 ft) higher. This drop has left visible layers of striation all around the rim of the lake. This is similar to what is some-

times called “Spanish Skirts” in canyons in the American Southwest. Most often these layers of sediment deposits form smooth straight lines, but an earthquake leaves a jagged layer that can be seen and analyzed for material within the deposit.

Williams worked in Ein Gedi, on the western side of the Dead Sea. His study built upon earlier work done by German geologist Claudia Migowski who had successfully correlated evidence of twenty-eight historically documented earthquakes to layers in the sediment deposits. These ranged from 140 BC to AD 1458. She utilized (as do most geologists) what are known as earthquake catalogs which compile dates from historical sources documenting when various earthquakes occur. Often these catalogs draw upon previous catalogs, but do not always reveal the sources used. In 2004, Migowski had first identified a sediment layer showing evidence of an earthquake in AD 33 but had not addressed the historical source for the entry in the catalogs. Williams further studied the sediment deposits but also sought to determine the historical source for the catalog entry. To his surprise, the only historical source he could find was Matthew 27:51.

It is unclear what his actual religious beliefs are, but Williams was not pushing a religious agenda. He is a geologist. In his study, he did cite a 1983 work by Colin Humphreys and W. G. Waddington that estimated the likely date of the

crucifixion at April 3, AD 33 based on astronomical calculations of the lunar cycles. But Williams did not assign an exact date to the time of the earthquake. He estimated it could have been between AD 26 - 36 (based on Roman sources regarding the rule of Pontius Pilate). The layers themselves, as revealed in the study, seemed to narrow this closer to AD 33, but he was likely being cautious realizing how that could be seen within the scientific world.

A few months after his article was published popular media reported on his study drawing from an article in *Discovery News* with titles such as, “Quake Reveals Day of Jesus’ Crucifixion, Researchers Believe” (NBC), “Jesus’ Crucifixion Date Possibly Friday April 3, 33 A.D., According to Earthquake Study” (*Huffington Post*), or “Day of Jesus’ Crucifixion Believed Determined” (NBC). Sadly, such specific claims about his study damaged his reputation among secularists within his field. He became ostracized and violently attacked.

His study had merely explored the evidence. He had treated the text of Matthew as a historical source not as an inspired text. Even so, the very fact that his evidence might correlate with the biblical record led some to view him as an outcast. He felt compelled to clarify his position. *Bible History Daily*, an online posting of the Biblical Archaeology Society, ran an article entitled, “Is Jesus’ Crucifixion Reflected in Soil Deposition?” Williams was allowed to add a postscript to it clarifying his position and charging *Discovery News* with having “grossly misrepresented our work.” Ultimately, he explained himself in an almost New Age type feature length documentary entitled *Crucifixion Quake*, but the reaction to his work revealed just how aggressive opponents of faith can be toward anything

that serves to reinforce the claims of Scripture.

Conclusion

If the sediment layers Williams and Migowski identified at Ein Gedi do in fact show evidence of the earthquake and its after-shock as described in Matthew it doesn’t prove that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. Each of us must confront the inspired text of Scripture, evaluate its claims, consider the evidence, and choose to believe in things we were not present to witness. **“Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God”** (Rom. 10:17). What studies of geology or archaeology show is that the accounts of Scripture are not framed in some make-believe fantasy world that comes from the imagination; they are set in a real historical context with real people and real places. This should encourage the believer and challenge the skeptic not to reject faith so quickly.



Olsen Park Church of Christ