Because I am leaving the country today and must attend to last minute preparations, brevity is required. I am grateful to Dr. Mohler for his kind remarks pertaining to both me and my book, which has recently raised quite a bit of controversy in certain evangelical circles. Although I disagree with much of what he has asserted pertaining to my treatment of the raised saints in Matthew 27:52-53, one should not doubt my respect for him and gratitude for the contributions he has made for the cause of Christ and to the Southern Baptist Convention.

An accurate interpretation of a particular biblical text is assisted by an accurate understanding of the cultural milieu in which it was written. It is unfortunate that this does not appear to be a practice of my detractors Drs. Mohler and Geisler. Their judgment that an incompatibility exists between the doctrine of biblical inerrancy and interpreting Matthew’s raised saints at Jesus’ death as apocalyptic symbols—or even to consider this interpretation as a viable way of understanding what Matthew was communicating (which is my present position)—without engaging in a thorough and sophisticated discussion of the milieu in which Matthew wrote is quite premature.

Dr. Mohler asks, “What could one possibly find in the Greco-Roman literature that would either validate or invalidate the status of this report as historical fact?” This is the wrong question. For it presupposes that Matthew intends the report of the raised saints to be understood as a historical event. So, the first question one should ask is how Matthew intended for his readers to understand this text. If he intended for us to regard the raised saints as apocalyptic symbols, then Drs. Mohler and Geisler are mistaken when regarding them as “historical fact.” It is only IF one can determine after an exhaustive study that Matthew intended for us to regard the raised saints as an event that occurred in space-time that Dr. Mohler could legitimately claim that the Greco-Roman literature offers nothing to assist us toward a correct interpretation of the text. Instead, Drs. Mohler and Geisler have pre-determined what the text means. But it is Scripture that is inerrant. Thus, we must be careful not to canonize our interpretation of Scripture so that we come to believe that it, too, is inerrant.
Article XX of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics states,

“We affirm that since God is the author of all truth, all truths, biblical and extrabiblical, are consistent and cohere, and that the Bible speaks truth when it touches on matters pertaining to nature, history, or anything else. WE FURTHER AFFIRM THAT IN SOME CASES EXTRABIBLICAL DATA HAVE VALUE FOR CLARIFYING WHAT SCRIPTURE TEACHES, AND FOR PROMPTING CORRECTION OF FAULTY INTERPRETATIONS [emphasis mine]. We deny that extrabiblical views ever disprove the teaching of Scripture or hold priority over it.”

Thus, the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics asserts that extrabiblical data can assist us in clarifying what Matthew is teaching and correct faulty interpretations.

We find a similar statement in the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy:

“We affirm that canonical Scripture should always be interpreted on the basis that it is infallible and inerrant. However, in determining what the God-taught writer is asserting in each passage, we must pay the most careful attention to its claims and character as a human production. In inspiration, GOD UTILIZED THE CULTURE AND CONVENTIONS OF HIS PENMAN’S MILIEU, A MILIEU THAT GOD CONTROLS IN HIS SOVERIGN PROVIDENCE; IT IS MISINTERPRETATION TO IMAGINE OTHERWISE [emphasis mine].

“So history must be treated as history, poetry as poetry, hyperbole and metaphor as hyperbole and metaphor, generalization and approximation as what they are, and so forth. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN LITERARY CONVENTIONS IN BIBLE TIMES AND IN OURS MUST ALSO BE OBSERVED” [emphasis mine].

Thus, the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy asserts that an inattention to the culture and literary conventions in Bible times could lead to a misinterpretation of the biblical text.

Examples in the extrabiblical literature of phenomena similar to the raised saints in Matthew 27 may provide insights pertaining to how Matthew intended for us to interpret his raised saints. When we study the literary conventions in Bible times, we identify specific language in the Greco-Roman (Virgil, Dio Cassius, Plutarch), Jewish (Josephus) and biblical (Matthew 24, Acts 2) literature that may be employed to accent an event believed to have cosmic or even divine significance. Thus, when I noticed what might be similar language in Matthew 27:52-53, the interpretive possibility I proposed in my book emerged. Couldn’t the same be said
2,000 years from now pertaining to a proper interpretation of a text in which it was asserted that “the events of 9/11 were earth-shaking” while others may wrongly interpret the statement “Hell will freeze over before Ahmadinejad converts to Christianity” as a prophecy of two events rather than as a statement of enormous improbability?

The charge that I have “dehistoricized” the text is also problematic, since it likewise presupposes that Matthew intended the raised saints to be understood as historical. But what if he intended for them to be understood as apocalyptic symbols? It would then be misguided to “historicize” them. This would be little different than regarding as historical the seven-headed great red dragon in Revelation 12:3-4 whose tail sweeps up a third of the stars and casts them to earth. I regard this description as entirely symbolic and that to regard it as a real space monster would be to “historicize” the text.

The text in Matthew 27:52-53 has puzzled many New Testament scholars for years and will continue to do so. I remain puzzled but continue to seek a better understanding of what Matthew intended to communicate here. The calls of Drs. Geisler and Mohler for me to retract my opinion that it is possible Matthew intended for his readers to understand the raised saints in Matthew 27:52-53 as apocalyptic symbols is not helpful. Instead, such premature calls stifle scholarship and authentic quests for truth. I will be happy to retract my opinion once I am convinced that Matthew’s authorial intent was to communicate that the raised saints are to be understood as an event that occurred in space-time. So far, I have found the arguments offered by Drs. Geisler and Mohler to be unpersuasive and misguided.

I am grateful to the Southeastern Theological Review for their invitation to participate in a roundtable discussion on the meaning of this text and whether the solution I proposed in my recent book is compatible with the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. It is their desire to publish that discussion within the next 60 days. I will reserve my defense and further criticisms for that discussion and want to express my gratitude to the many who have sent words of support and to those who have written in my defense on the web. It is sad—and perhaps telling—that they have been ignored by Drs. Mohler and Geisler, since some of their arguments are quite good.