

# **Cosmic Disturbances**

By Phillip G. Kayser at Dominion Covenant Church on 2016-04-10

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## Revelation 6:12-17

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### Text - Revelation 6:12-17

12 And I saw, just when He opened the sixth seal — there was a severe earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood. 13 And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, like a fig tree drops its late figs when shaken by a strong wind. 14 And the sky was split, like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved out of its place.

15 And the kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the mighty, and every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains. 16 And they said to the mountains and the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! 17 Because the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?”<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

We have come to a section that most of my preterist and partial preterist commentaries have insisted must be purely symbolic. I beg to differ. They claim that John is using hyperbolic language and that it was not literally fulfilled. One of my commentaries says that you can't find any earthquake during this period, so it must be pure symbolic. Reasoner says, "The sixth seal can no more be interpreted literally than can the four horsemen."

But we have already seen that the spiritual realm is part of the real universe, and that there were real angelic riders who were riding real horse-like creatures in the demonic realm. So, if you mean by literal that they were real, then they are literal. If you mean by literal that they were ordinary horses and horsemen, then obviously they were not literal. So some of it depends on how you define the term. But a simple reading of the text immediately shows that he is not just talking about ordinary horses. The text is quite clear that they are extraordinary horses and horsemen from the angelic realm. But it is still real.

Now, a commentator might respond by pointing out that the apostle John started this book by telling us that he was planning to communicate with symbols. And that is true. But as I pointed out in my introductory sermons, I don't think you should approach this book as either/or: either this is a symbol

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<sup>1</sup> Translation of the Majority Text by Wilbur M. Pickering.

that does not relate to real history or it is literal and cannot be symbolic. It has always been my contention that even the most symbolic language of Scripture has some historical underpinnings. For example, when Jesus cursed the fig tree and it withered up, it was symbolic of Israel being cursed within that generation. But that doesn't mean that there wasn't a literal fig tree that was literally cursed. The rock Moses struck was a symbol of Christ, but it was still an actual rock that had literal water gushing out of it. The ten plagues symbolized God's triumph over the gods of Egypt, but each plague is still a literal event in history. And that's the way I take each of the symbols in verses 12-17.

And though Mounce is a Premillennialist, I think he is correct when he says of this passage,

We need not expect that these cataclysmic events will take place in a completely literal sense, although whatever they depict is sufficient to drive people in terror to the mountains, where they plead for death rather than face the wrath of the Lamb (vv. 15–17) — an unlikely consequence if they symbolize no more than social and political upheavals.<sup>2</sup>

I think he has the timing wrong, but I think he is correct in his conclusion. There had to have been something stupendous that happened in history to make the people flee and hide like they were doing.

So I am going to attempt to show the historicity of the symbols first and then show what it symbolized. It is my belief that each of these cataclysmic events happened in May of AD 66 just as they are described, and God caused these things to happen in order to warn his people of kingdom realities that were happening. In a sense it is the physical creation responding to heaven's movements.

## **I. The historicity of the symbols**

### **A. *Earthquakes that moved mountains and islands***

Verse 12 gives the first cataclysmic event:

12 And I saw, just when He opened the sixth seal — there was a severe earthquake,

And I think it is so cool to see the immediate response of creation to Christ's will. It is instantaneous. When He speaks, it is done. When He opened the seal, creation moves forward His plans of judgment and of grace. Don't ever

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<sup>2</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 151.

think of rain, sunshine, earthquakes, and tornadoes as being freak and random accidents. All of creation responds to God's providence. And now that Jesus is on the throne, all of creation responds to Him. Creation serves His kingdom purposes.

But how severe was this earthquake? Well, the last half of verse 14 tells us:

...and every mountain and island was moved out of its place.

One would think that an earthquake of that magnitude would be recorded in history. My preterist commentaries say that nothing of this magnitude happened in AD 66, so this must be purely symbolic. But you know me - I'm always checking to see if there is more historical evidence than the commentaries mention. So I did a search of several dozen books on the history of seismology and even more articles on that subject, and did a search of an online database of over one million books (mostly focusing on science or history), and I came up with a rather well documented earthquake in AD 66 that was reported throughout the entire Roman empire.

Keep in mind that we don't have a lot of history from this period, so I find it remarkable that there are as many references to this earthquake as there are. And this earthquake didn't just seem to follow one fault line. The little evidence that we have seems to indicate that there was at least an interaction of the Aegean and Anatolian micro-plates with the African and Eurasian tectonic plates. It was very widespread.

I've put a map into your outlines of the whole Mediterranean region that was affected, from Africa in the south to the Aegean Plate in the middle and the Anatolian Plate in the north - up where Turkey currently is. And I won't quote from all of the books that reference this AD 66 earthquake, but I will spend a bit more time on this because you won't find it in the commentaries. And I have footnoted the references if you want to search this out a bit more.

One of the technical articles that I found very helpful is from a journal called, *Science of Tsunami Hazards*. It is written by George Pararas-Carayannis. He shows that of the 613 historically documented earthquakes in the Mediterranean region from the time of Christ to the present, the four biggest earthquakes were in the years AD 66, 365, 800, and 1303. It doesn't mean that there weren't ones earlier than that, but those were the biggest four. And if you know anything about the other massive earthquakes that weren't ranked as the biggest four, you realize that those four must have been incredibly massive.

His guess was that the tsunami that hit Crete as a result of the earthquake did

not exceed 9 meters high (or 30 feet high) simply because of the extensive crustal upthrust. It could have been a lot more if the terrain had been shaped differently. But he demonstrates how all four of those earthquakes very literally made mountains and islands either rise or fall. And we will get to that in a bit and look at supporting evidence from other sources. But there is no reason we cannot take verse 14 literally. The earthquake that shook every mountain and moved every island does symbolize something, but right now we are just looking at the historicity of it.

But I want to encourage you not to take this too far in the opposite direction. As I go through each of these symbols, I am going to be demonstrating that they cannot possibly be talking about the dissolution of the world - the way many Amillennialists and Premillennialists take it. Why do I say that? For several reasons. One is that it takes this paragraph completely out of order. But more importantly, it ignores the immediate context - verses 15-17 are the result of verses 12-14, and those verses speak about men hiding as a result of the earthquake, the sky receding like a scroll, the stars falling to the earth, etc. They are scared by it, but they are not killed by it. And the next chapters speak of more history following in sequence. Whatever these stunning events were, they were not the end of history. Now, before I show the scientific documentation of the moving of islands and mountains, let me talk about some of the historians who spoke of this earthquake.

Josephus is usually my main go-to historian because he was present through most of the war. And he references this earthquake. It's true that he only makes a passing reference to it. He seemed to be far more preoccupied with the spectacular signs in the heavens, which we will look at in a bit. I too would have been more wowed by the heavens opening up and fiery chariots pouring through the portal and flying towards Jerusalem. That would have been far more terrifying than the earthquake, so I can see why Josephus focused on the heavenly signs. But in any case, after referring to natural and supernatural heavenly signs, Josephus says, "they felt a quaking, and heard a great noise..." He doesn't say what the earthquake noise sounded like. He just said that it was great. He dates the earthquake to Pentecost of the year that the Jewish rebellion began, which would be Spring of AD 66 (War 6:299). And since he was a witness of the war, and he gives the month and day, we will use that AD 66 earthquake as an anchor point and try to see how widespread the shaking of the earth was.

But his dating fits my exegetical mapping of the time sequence of chapters 6-11, so that's encouraging. Too many commentaries try to fit the text into historical events. That's backwards. You do your exegesis first and then see

if history fits in. The Bible alone is inerrant, so you figure out the time sequence from exegesis alone, and then you try to see if there is any historical evidence that fits. And there is.

We know that Laodicea was leveled by this earthquake in AD 66, and that it was not rebuilt for another 160 years.<sup>3</sup> What is significant about Laodicea is that it had been ruined by a massive earthquake six years earlier in AD 60, and yet was sufficiently wealthy that it was able to rebuild itself within four years. So there is a major contrast between the previous huge earthquake that we looked at in chapter 3 and that the city recovered from in four years and this earthquake that it didn't fully recover from till the reign of Marcus Aurelius. Actually, it started to be half-heartedly rebuilt under Hadrian, who ruled from 117-138, but it was not fully rebuilt until some time in the reign of Marcus Aurelius, who ruled from AD 161-180. So that is just one of many hints of the *magnitude* of this earthquake.

By the way, this is one of several proofs that the book of Revelation was written no later than AD 66. If the city of Laodicea was completely destroyed in AD 66 and abandoned, then there would be no city to write to in AD 95 - the date that some people give to the book of Revelation. It doesn't make sense for John to write an epistle to the church in Laodicea and call them rich and wealthy and self-sufficient if the city was not rebuilt until the second century. Eusebius says that Colossae and Hierapolis were also ruined by that earthquake, though I haven't been able to verify to what extent.<sup>4</sup> So that also adds to the difficulty in believing in a late date. Ken Gentry has written a fabulous book on the dating of Revelation, and while he gives overwhelming evidence that supports what I just said, he wasn't aware of this proof. A lot of the studies came out after he published his book. But if you were putting marks on a map, you would have an earthquake star in Jerusalem, and three documented stars on the mainland way up north in Turkey.

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3 Though many scholars cite Tacitus to prove that the earthquake in Laodicea happened in 60 AD, Bishop Lightfoot shows how that was a different earthquake. J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Lightfoot's Commentaries on the Epistles; Accordance electronic ed. Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2006), n.p. The same debate can be seen among historians of seismology, with men like Gutenberg and Sieberg arguing strongly for an AD 66 date. (See notes to seismological studies below.) As will be seen by our converging exegetical evidence, the AD 66 date is quite strong. There are a number of scholars who see this earthquake as having occurred in AD 66 based on an ancient reference to the tomb of Dictys being opened by the earthquake in the 13th year of Nero's reign (AD 66). See Sigrid Deger-Jalkotzy, Irene S. Lemos, *Ancient Greece: From the Mycenaean Palaces to the Age of Homer*; (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 337. See also the numerous references in footnote 8 which all date the earthquake to AD 66, via the solid reference to Dictys' tomb being opened by that earthquake.

4 See Bishop Lightfoot, previous footnote. See Thayer's dictionary under *Λαοδικεία*. See Karen ní Mheallaigh, *Reading Fiction with Lucian: Fakes, Freaks and Hyperreality*, p. 155.

But there are other places that you would need to put stars on the map. Several historical studies by seismologists have found evidence of earthquakes and tsunamis affecting every portion of the Mediterranean map that I have given to you, including islands. All of the tectonic plate regions I have put on the map seem to have been affected. But there is a fair bit of evidence of an earthquake in Greece and Italy, a receding of the sea by one mile from Crete followed by a tidal wave, volcanic activity in the region, islands being shaken, and at least one new island being formed - all in the Spring of AD 66.<sup>5</sup>

Papadopoulos and Vassilopoulou, both of whom are experts in ancient seismology, mention a massive earthquake in AD 66 that totally destroyed the cities on the island of Crete and created tidal waves.<sup>6</sup> And they base that on historical references that tie it to the thirteenth year of Nero, which would be AD 66. Another book documenting earthquakes and tsunamis over a 4000 year period speaks of the volcano of Santorini erupting in AD 66 and the islands in the Aegean Sea being shaken and later being inundated by a tidal wave.<sup>7</sup> So already we have bunch of stars. I think you are getting the feeling that this earthquake was indeed very severe and very widespread.

The ancient writer, Lucius Septimius, also says that this earthquake was felt in the island of Crete, and that it was so violent that it opened the ancient tomb of Dictys - a tomb that had survived numerous earthquakes. And it is actually an interesting story. The fissure that opened the tomb opened it wide enough that shepherds saw a box inside and went in to plunder the tomb,

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5 G. A. Papadopoulos, A. Vassilopoulou, "Historical and Archaeological Evidence of Earthquakes and Tsunamis Felt in the Kythira Strait, Greece," in *Tsunami Research at the End of a Critical Decade*, Volume 18 of the series *Advances in Natural and Technological Hazards Research*, pp 119-138. This is available for \$29.95 at [http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-94-017-3618-3\\_10](http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-94-017-3618-3_10) Sergey L. Soloviev, Olga N. Solovieva, Chan N. Go, Khen S. Kim, Nikolay A. Shchetnikov, *Tsunamis in the Mediterranean Sea 2000 B.C.-2000 A.D.*, p. 26.  
<http://www.drgeorgepc.com/Tsunami365ADeEastMedSea.html> In a 1980 study on seismic activity, Antonopoulos said,

According to Philostratus, when Apollonius of Tyana visited Leben near Phaestos in Crete, a strong earthquake shook the island and the sea at Leben retreated about one mile. A few days later, he says, the news arrived that on the very same day of the earthquake and just at the same hour of midday an island rose out of the sea between the islands of Thera (Santorini) and Crete (Vita Apollonii, lib. iv, cf. 34).

J. ANTONOPOULOS, "Data from investigation on seismic Sea-waves events in the Eastern Mediterranean from the Birth of Christ to 500 A.D. Part 1," Dept. of Civil Engineering, University of Patras, Patras (Greece), p. 146. Received on July 1st, 1980.

6 G. A. Papadopoulos, A. Vassilopoulou, "Historical and Archaeological Evidence of Earthquakes and Tsunamis Felt in the Kythira Strait, Greece," in *Tsunami Research at the End of a Critical Decade*, Volume 18 of the series *Advances in Natural and Technological Hazards Research*, pp 119-138. This is available for \$29.95 at [http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-94-017-3618-3\\_10](http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-94-017-3618-3_10)

7 Sergey L. Soloviev, Olga N. Solovieva, Chan N. Go, Khen S. Kim, Nikolay A. Shchetnikov, *Tsunamis in the Mediterranean Sea 2000 B.C.-2000 A.D.*, p. 26.

thinking it was filled with treasure. They were sadly disappointed when they opened the metal box because all that they saw inside was wooden tablets with writing on it that they couldn't understand. They took the writing to their master, who in turn showed it to an aristocrat. The Roman aristocrat recognized the importance of the find and sent the documents on to Nero, who had them translated into Latin and Greek. It turned out that this guy Dictys was an eye witness of the Trojan wars who recorded everything on wood and had the history buried with him. So it was a colossal find. But in any case, that earthquake took place at the same time as the earthquake in Israel, Laodicea, Colossae, and Hierapolis.<sup>8</sup> I have a couple dozen scholarly books that link a massive earthquake to this year.

Another seismologist shows evidence that all the islands of the Ionian and Aegean Seas, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Western Mediterranean Basin were impacted.<sup>9</sup> So the stars that we are placing on documented accounts of this earthquake are beginning to pile up.

But what is meant by the *moving* of islands and the moving of mountains? Is that simply hyperbole, as many commentaries claim? I don't think so. Earlier I referenced the seismologist who said that the four biggest earthquakes in the region were the ones in AD 66, 365, 800, and 1303. And he is not dogmatic on whether it is the first two or all of them contributed to this, but he was dogmatic that the mountains and islands were moved upward or downward by each of those quakes. The structure of the plates almost guarantees it. And his conclusions are not only based on the science of tectonics but also have been verified by archeology. So it is my opinion that we can take verse 14 literally. Let me read a couple of quotes from his conclusions of the various complicated studies. He says,

Tectonic collisions and Alpine Orogenesis resulted in further complex geotectonic deformations that created the Hellenic Orogenic Tectonic Belt, the long range of

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8 For more details on the story of Dictys and the dating of the earthquake in AD 66, see Sigrid Deger-Jalkotzy, Irene S. Lemos, *Ancient Greed: From the Mycenaean Palaces to the Age of Homer*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 337. Yoel L. Arbeitman, Allan R. Bomhard (eds.), *Bono Homini Donum: Essays in Historical Linguistics in Memory*, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1981), p. 764. Sir Arthur Evans and Joan Evans, *The Palace of Minos: A Comparative Account of the Successive Stages of the Early Cretan Civilization as Illustrated by the Discoveries at Knossos, volume 4, issue 2*, (MacMillan and Company, 1935), p. 673. John Robert Morgan, Meriel Jones (eds.), *Philosophical Presences in the Ancient Novel*, (Groningen: Groningen University Library, 2007), p. 138. See *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, (Boston: Ginn & Co, 1893), p. 151ff. New International Encyclopedia, volume 6,\* article under "Dictys" (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co, 1914). Karen ní Mheallaigh, *Reading Fiction with Lucian: Fakes, Freaks and Hyperreality*, p. 155. Harrassowitz, *Near Eastern Studies: Dedicated to H.I.H Prince Takahito Mikasa on the Occasion of His Seventy-fifth Birthday*, (1991), p. 57. Miriam T. Griffin, *Nero: The End of a Dynasty*, (New York: Routledge, 1984), pp. 147ff.

9 <http://www.drgeorgepc.com/Tsunami365ADeEastMedSea.html>



mountains that traverse the western side of the Aegean microplate. These tectonic processes continued to stress and fold the earth's upper crust in the region, thus forming more islands, more mainland mass and lifting the mountains of Greece to greater heights. The active tectonic interaction and collision of the converging African and Eurasian plates along the entire eastern Mediterranean margin resulted in multiple subduction zones, post-orogenic basins, accretionary margins, Neogenic crust shortening and extreme seismicity and volcanism - processes that continue to the present...

...there have been numerous scientific and archaeological field investigations of raised shorelines and submerged ancient harbors of the Eastern Mediterranean that are indicative of major crustal displacements associated with significant earthquakes...

... Field studies of salt deposition and of erosional features indicate that the upward crustal displacements raised the land by as much as 6.66 meters on the average above the ancient sea level (corrected for eustatic sea level variation). Maximum uplift in one area was as much as 9.9 meters.<sup>10</sup>

For those of you who don't like the metric system, that reference to 9.9 meters means that the land was lifted by 32.48 feet. That is not insignificant. That would be a moving of islands and mountains on a scale that would have been terrifying.

Anyway, this article gives example after example of the changes to the features of the mainland and various islands of the Mediterranean. In Crete, he points to two massive tsunami deposits, one pointing to AD 66 and the other pointing to AD 365. So even though all of these papers are secular attempts to look at the history of seismic activity in the Mediterranean, they give confirmatory evidence to verse 14 - not that the evidence is needed. I believed all of these things happened in AD 66 long before I discovered any of this stuff - simply from exegesis.

Now, let me explain that it is likely that the "every mountain" and "every island" is a reference to geological changes only in the Roman empire, and not necessarily in China or other regions of the world. But who knows? Maybe God willed to have them moved too. But in terms of the geography of this book and the language that John uses here and in the Gospel, I tend to think it is referring just to the Roman empire. So that's the first major cosmic disturbance that resulted from Jesus opening the sixth seal. He is a Sovereign that you don't want to mess with. When His hand moves in judgment, the very earth responds.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

## **B. Celestial anomalies**

The next cosmic disturbance relates to sun, moon, and stars. Verses 12-13:

and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood.  
And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, like a fig tree drops its late figs when  
shaken by a strong wind.

Keep in mind that even the most literalistic Premillennialist does not believe that the term "star" has reference to what *modern* scientists call "stars." Technically, the closest star is our sun, and it could hardly fall to the earth, and still allow the rest of verses 15-17 to continue to happen. Earth would be melted long before the sun traveled the 93 million miles that it is distant from us. Scientists say that our sun is just a medium sized star and yet 1.3 million earths would fit inside the sun. In any case, according to our passage (if you take it as normal language - what I refer to as literally) the sun continues to exist while the stars are falling to the earth. Yes it becomes dark for a time, but it continues to exist. So at least that star didn't fall to the earth. The next nearest star, Alpha Centauri, is 25.6 trillion miles away, and even if it came at the speed of light toward the earth, it wouldn't be able to get to earth at the same time as any other stars, which are multiplied trillions of miles away. We would be toast long before those stars came to earth, and in any case, the sun would not be dark nor the moon blood colored. They wouldn't exist. Everything would be vaporized if multiple scientific-type stars fell to the earth. It doesn't even make sense to talk about them falling to the earth. So put out of your mind the dissolution of the universe. If this was intended to describe the dissolution of the universe, then you can't take these verses literally because people continue to exist and talk and hide after the stars have already fallen to the earth. Do you see the problem? So my AD 66 interpretation is actually much more literal than the typical Dispensationalist interpretation. And my interpretation can account for every phrase and time sequence, whereas their's cannot.

The fact of the matter is that any dictionary will tell you that the Greek word for star, ἀστέρες, refers to any small light in the sky, whether planets, stars, or meteorites. If they were alive today and saw a modern satellite crossing the sky, they would refer to it as an ἀστέρες, or star. They had other descriptors to define what *kind* of star they were referring to, whether a comet, a planet, a sun, or a meteorite. They knew the difference, but they were all called stars. And any of the ancients knew that when you were referring to stars falling to the earth, you were not referring to planets falling to the earth, but to meteorites falling to the earth. Does that make sense?

So, back to our passage, if we are to interpret these words in their plain and

ordinary sense, they were fulfilled to a "t" in the first century. One time I saw a meteorite display in Ethiopia that was so thick that it lit up the sky. A lot of people are skeptical of that if they haven't seen it. But there have been numerous documented citations. E. P. Woodward describes a particularly brilliant display of meteorites in 1833 that was documented and could not be chalked up to exaggeration. He says,

They fell in countless thousands, were visible throughout the whole Northern Hemisphere, alarming people on both continents, and they were variously described as "a rain of fire," a "celestial bombardment," "a luminous network of fire," "too wonderful and too surprising to describe," "a maze of radiance," and like expressions. A full description of both Aurora and Falling Stars is contained in "The Great Consummation."

Taking all these facts into consideration, the most earnest "literalist" could not demand a more exact fulfillment of Christ's prediction that there should be "signs in sun and moon and stars."<sup>11</sup>

Not only was that the year for Haley's Comet, but Josephus speaks of numerous signs in the sky (what he calls portents), such as a sword hanging over Jerusalem. Many have puzzled over that sword. Was it simply a supernatural light (that's the way I take it), or was it a formation from the meteorites that kept falling that year? In 1998 there was a massive meteorite shower over Italy that made a light in the sky that resembled a sword. I put a picture of it in your outline. Could it have been something like that? Who knows? But with two comets being prominently on display in AD 65-66, the debris from the comets could very well have filled the sky. So there is no problem taking the falling stars literally.

What about the moon becoming like blood? Some time ago you saw a blood red moon here in Omaha, didn't you? The blood red moon was a common feature, so its occurrence in AD 66 is not difficult to explain.<sup>12</sup> NASA's eclipse table<sup>13</sup> shows that this blood red moon may well have been due to an eclipse that happened in that year. But it could have been due to any number of atmospheric conditions that can produce a red moon. That phrase is very easy to explain.

What about the darkening of the sun? We have three historians who spoke of

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<sup>11</sup> E. P. Woodward, *Christ's Last Prophecy Concerning the Destruction of Jerusalem, And His Own Second Advent*, (Portland, Maine, Safeguard and Armory, 1998), n.p. (ebook).

<sup>12</sup> There was a partial eclipse on June 26 and a penumbral eclipse on December 20 of that year. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_1st-century\\_lunar\\_eclipses](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_1st-century_lunar_eclipses) Likewise, atmospheric conditions could easily explain the red color of the moon.

<sup>13</sup> NASA's main eclipse site is here: <http://eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/eclipse.html> Their lunar table for the first century can be found here: <http://eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/LEcat5/LE0001-0100.html>

the sun being darkened during the reign of Nero. Unfortunately, none of them specify day, month, nor year for the occurrence or the occurrences. But in looking through NASA's data on solar eclipses, the only solar eclipse to take place in that year was on June 11 and December 5, and both are too late to fit the exegetical time line, though the June 11 one would be close. But I'm convinced that it wasn't a solar eclipse. That wouldn't have brought fear to those people they knew astronomy.

The Russian scholar Velikovksy has his own explanations based on meteorite dust. Another scholar has it related to the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, but I don't agree with his dating of the eruption in AD 66. I think it happened in AD 79. So I have dismissed all of those theories.

Could it have been natural phenomenon? Yes. But I have no problem in saying that it was a supernatural darkness such as happened at the crucifixion or at other times in history. The historian Tacitus was familiar with solar eclipses, but I find it interesting that he did not describe the darkenings of the sun under Nero as eclipses. Rather, he records "a thick succession of portents" that occurred in Nero's last years. A "portent" is a supernatural event that Tacitus thought occurred to signal a disaster. He says, "Then the sun was suddenly darkened and the fourteen districts of the city were struck by lightning."<sup>14</sup> Some people apply that here, but his dating is rather nebulous (it could have been earlier), so it is hard to pin down that specific darkening of the sun to a specific year. But to the skeptics who don't believe in supernatural darkening of the sun, I would say that ancient historians did speak of them, and this one may have been one of the "thick succession of portents" that Tacitus speaks of.

The bottom line is that if the text says that the sun was darkened during this period, then I have no reason to doubt it. The darkening of the sun that occurred in a couple of years *is* clearly referenced by ancient historians. And this particular darkening *may* be what Tacitus refers to, though we don't know.

### ***C. The sky receding like a scroll (v. 14) and men fearing "the face of Him who sits on the throne" (v. 16)***

But we come now to the cosmic disturbance that generates the most skepticism. It is the opening up of the sky and the appearance of a theophany. Verse 14 says,

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<sup>14</sup> Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *Annals*, Book XIV, 13. A. J. Church and W. J. Brodribb (translators), *Annals of Tacitus*, (London: MacMillan & Co, 1876), p. 262.

...And the sky was split, like a scroll being rolled up,...

And verse 16 shows what the men saw in the sky that frightened them. Once heaven was opened, they must have seen Christ and His armies, because verse 16 says,

...hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!

When they are talking to the mountains to please hide them, it shows a bit of irrationality - it shows that they are scared out of their wits. And the phrase, "hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne," implies that they can see His face. They see something that was terrifying. And various ancient non-Christian historians describe a terrifying sight that fits the evidence of Matthew 24 and of this passage. Actually, the ancient histories have an appearance of Christ and His armies three times - once in AD 66 at the beginning of the war, once in AD 68 when Nero dies, and once again in AD 70 when the temple is destroyed. I'm just going to deal with this first one.

Let's look at the timing first. The timing of this paragraph fits the words of Matthew 24, which says "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven..." Well, the timing of these verses occurs immediately after the three and a half year tribulation against Christians by the Jews. These events ended Jewish persecution - at least the official Jewish persecution, because Israel broke covenant with Rome and Rome came to fight against Israel. So Revelation 6:12-16 occurs immediately after the Great Tribulation of verses 9-11 (which are AD 62 to early AD 66), and chapter 7:1-8 talks about the remaining Jewish Christians being preserved through the next three and a half years of the Great Wrath against Israel. There is no more tribulation for them. So the timing is very precise.

So let's look at the fulfillment. The first reference to this opening of the sky and appearance of a man in the heavens is by a non-Christian Jewish writer by the name of Yosippon. This ancient work was just recently translated out of Hebrew into English, so it is a fairly new find. Sepher Yosippon describes what Jews saw just before the outbreak of the war. He starts with Passover of AD 66 and then moves on to describe our event at Pentecost. He says,

For one year before Vespasian came, a single great star shining like unsheathed swords was seen over the Temple. And in those days when the sign was seen it was the holiday of Passover and during that entire night the Temple was lit up and

illuminated like the light of day, and thus it was all seven days of the Passover. All the sages of Jerusalem knew that it was a malevolent sign, but the rest of the ignorant people said that it was a benevolent sign.

Then he describes what happened in May of AD 66. He says,

...Now it happened after this that there was seen from above over the Holy of Holies for the whole night the outline of a man's face, the like of whose beauty had never been seen in all the land, and his appearance was quite awesome.<sup>15</sup>

So this non-Christian Jew is describing this appearance of a theophany in the shape of a man of stupendous size in the sky, and having a beauty that was awe-inspiring. What happens as a result? He goes on to say,

Moreover, in those days were seen chariots of fire and horsemen, a great force flying across the sky near to the ground coming against Jerusalem and all the land of Judah, all of them horses of fire and riders of fire. When the holiday of Shavuot came in those days, during the night the priests heard within the Temple something like the sound of men going and the sound of men marching in a multitude going into the Temple, and a terrible and mighty voice was heard speaking: "Let's go and leave this House."<sup>16</sup>

This unbelieving Jew would have no reason to make this kind of stuff up - especially since it could be used by Christians to prove the truth of Christ's spiritual coming to judge Israel. I think it is an incredibly strong testimony coming from a Jewish historian.

An ancient Christian historian from the fourth century wrote a history of this war that was based on earlier Jewish histories (plural) that he had in his possession. He said,

Also after many days a certain figure appeared of tremendous size, which many saw, just as the books of the Jews have disclosed, and before the setting of the sun there were suddenly seen in the clouds chariots and armed battle arrays, by which cities of all Judaea and its territories were invaded. Moreover in the celebration itself of the Pentecost the priests entering the interior of the temple at night time, that they might celebrate the usual sacrifices, asserted themselves at first to have a felt a certain movement and a sound given forth, afterwards even to have heard shouted in a sudden voice "we cross over from here."<sup>17</sup>

So this historian talks about older Jewish eyewitnesses and writings (plural)

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15 Steven B. Bowman (Translator), *Sepher Yosippon, A Medieval History of Ancient Israel* (from the critical Hebrew edition of David Flusser, translated by Steven B. Bowman), prepublication manuscript. The publisher of intent is Harvard Loeb Classical Library.

16 *Ibid.*

17 Pseudo-Hegesippus, chapter 44, online text, public domain, translated from the Latin by Wade Blocker. This section corresponds to pages 391-394 in the Latin critical text edited by Vincente Ussani, *Hegesippi qui dicitur historiae libri V*, found in the *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* series, volume 66, (Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1932).

that also spoke about an incredibly tall figure in the sky who had fiery chariots following him in battle array. Those ancient Jewish histories are now lost, but this Christian historian had them in his possession. This was no doubt Christ, coming to judge Israel within one generation, just as He had promised.

Another non-Christian Jew, who witnessed most of the war, is Josephus. He said,

War 6:289 (6.5.3.289) Thus there was a star resembling a sword, which stood over the city, and a comet, that continued a whole year.

War 6:290 (6.5.3.290) Thus also, before the Jews' rebellion, and before those commotions which preceded the war, when the people were come in great crowds to the feast of unleavened bread, on the eighth day of the month Xanthicus [Nisan], and at the ninth hour of the night, so great a light shone round the altar and the holy house, that it appeared to be bright day time; which light lasted for half an hour.

War 6:291 (6.5.3.291) This light seemed to be a good sign to the unskillful, but was so interpreted by the sacred scribes, as to portend those events that followed immediately upon it.

War 6:296 (6.5.3.296) So these publicly declared, that this signal foreshowed the desolation that was coming upon them. Besides these, a few days after that feast, on the twenty-first day of the month Artemisius [Jyar],

War 6:297 (6.5.3.297) a certain prodigious and incredible phenomenon appeared; I suppose the account of it would seem to be a fable, were it not related by those that saw it,

War 6:298 (6.5.3.298) and were not the events that followed it of so considerable a nature as to deserve such signals; for, before sunsetting, chariots and troops of soldiers in their armor were seen

War 6:299 (6.5.3.299) running about among the clouds, and surrounding of cities. Moreover at that feast which we call Pentecost, as the priests were going by night into the inner [court of the] temple, as their custom was, to perform their sacred ministrations, they said that, in the first place, they felt a quaking, and heard a great noise,

War 6:300 (6.5.3.300) and after that they heard a sound as of a great multitude, saying, "Let us remove hence."

Now, I am spending quite a bit of time on this passage because there tends to be a lot of skepticism on this point. The first century Roman historian,

Tacitus, also records many of these same miracles. I'll read one section:

Prodigies had occurred, which this nation, prone to superstition, but hating all religious rites, did not deem it lawful to expiate by offering and sacrifice. There had been seen hosts joining battle in the skies, the fiery gleam of arms, the temple illuminated by a sudden radiance from the clouds. The doors of the inner shrine were suddenly thrown open, and a voice of more than mortal tone was heard to cry that the Gods were departing. At the same instant there was a mighty stir as of departure. Some few put a fearful meaning on these events, but in most there was a firm persuasion, that in the ancient records of their priests was contained a prediction of how at this very time the East was to grow powerful, and rulers, coming from Judaea, were to acquire universal empire.<sup>18</sup>

So Tacitus shows how the Jews tried to explain this away and put a positive spin upon it. Even the Christ-hating Jewish Mishna speaks of this event (Midrash Rabbah, Lamentations 2:11). But I am going to give you one more quote - this one from the fourth century Christian historian, Eusebius. Eusebius had access to early historical records that have since been lost. But he was a Christian. I think we can trust him. He says,

But not many days after the feast, on the twenty-first of the month of Artimisius, a wonderful spectre was seen, which surpasses all belief. And indeed, that which I am about to tell would appear a prodigy, were it not related by those who had seen it, and unless the subsequent miseries had corresponded to the signs. For before the setting of the sun there were seen chariots and armed troops on high, wheeling through the clouds around the whole region, and surrounding the cities. And at the festival called Pentecost, the priests entering the temple at night according to their custom, to perform the service, said they first perceived a motion and noise, and after this a confused voice saying, "Let us go hence."<sup>19</sup>

If you are skeptical that each of the events in these verses could happen in history, then you might as well be skeptical of the ten plagues of Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, Peter walking on the water, Stephen seeing the heavens being opened and seeing Jesus standing in heaven. That last opening of heaven and appearance of Jesus is recorded right in Acts. But the same Christians who believe it happened in Acts are skeptical that it could happen again in AD 66.

But here is the caution: we shouldn't believe Revelation because we find quotes from historians that these events did indeed occur. We should believe them because the text of Scripture says that they would happen. And when you trace out the sequence of events from chapter 4 to chapter 11, this event had to happen in AD 66, and it just so happens that we have lots of historical

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<sup>18</sup> Tacitus, *The Histories: A New Translation*, by Kenneth Wellesley. London: Cox & Wyman Ltd, and Penguin Books Ltd, 1972. Book 5, Section 13.

<sup>19</sup> Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus*, Translated by Christian Frederick Cruse, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1971), Book 3, Chapter 8, Sections 5-6.



witnesses that it did happen.

## **II. What was symbolized by these historical events**

But let's go through everything one more time and see what the meaning of the symbolism is. Verse 12 begins with a phrase we have commented on a lot. It says, "And I saw, just when He opened the sixth seal..." Jesus opens the seals, which means that Jesus is the Lord of history. I have commented on that sufficiently in the past that I don't think I need to say more.

### **A. Earthquakes that moved mountains and islands**

But it goes on to say, "...there was a severe earthquake..." We've already dealt with the historical earthquake. But Haggai 2:6-7 and verses 21-22 predicted a spiritual earthquake that would happen in the first century just before the kingdom was established and that would begin the process of removing all the old creation and gradually bringing in the new creation. Well, Hebrews 12 quotes that passage from Haggai and using the present tense and the word "now" says that the spiritual shaking of the Old Covenant is happening now and we are receiving the kingdom now and this process of shaking will eventually leave nothing except that which cannot be shaken. Hebrews 12 was written in AD 66, just before this event. And in the next chapter Hebrews tells the Jewish Christians to not cling to Jerusalem, but to be willing to go outside the camp and receive the kingdom of Christ. He says, "For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one which is about to come" (Heb. 13:14). It's the Greek word μέλλω - about to. He's warning the Jewish Christians that they better flee Jerusalem because Christ's coming in judgment was imminent. There was a convergence of things about to happen in the book of Hebrews and in the book of Revelation that speaks of the definitive passing away of the Old Covenant so that the New Covenant that Jesus set up with His blood might remain forever. But Hebrews 12 symbolizes all of that with an earthquake.

### **B. Celestial anomalies**

What about the celestial anomalies of meteorites, sun being darkened, and the moon no longer shining? G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson do a fabulous job of tying every one of those symbols with almost identical language in the Old Testament that spoke of the overthrow of rulers or kingdoms. You may remember the vision that Joseph had of the sun, moon, and stars bowing down to him. And his father Jacob immediately caught the drift and asked rather crossly:

What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall your mother and I and your brothers indeed come to bow down to the earth before you?

So it can represent human leaders. And there are many other Scriptures that various commentaries cite that show that sun, moon, and stars are often symbolic of earthly rulers as well as angelic rulers, principalities, and powers. Beale says,

There is debate about whether the description depicts an actual dissolution of the cosmos (allowing room for metaphorical language to describe this dissolution) or whether it is a purely figurative description of the fall of ungodly kingdoms. The OT often uses such language in a hyperbolic manner to depict the fall of kingdoms: note the defeats of Babylon (Isa. 13:10-13), Edom (Isa. 34:4), Egypt (Ezek. 32:10-13), enemy nations of Israel (Hab. 3:6-11), and Israel itself (Joel 2:10,30-31)... Other examples in the OT of figurative cosmic disruption language include 2 Sam. 22:8-16... figuratively referring to David's victory over his enemies...<sup>20</sup>

And various other commentaries show how the sun, moon, and stars are connected with the Old Covenant festivals, and that this is symbolic of the overthrow of the Old Covenant ceremonial system. I think they all go together. The fig tree especially links the judgment to Israel, since the fig tree was the symbol of Israel, and the late figs symbolic of its late and spoiled history. But the overall vision appears to be much wider than simply Israel. I believe Hebrews would interpret all of this as the overthrow of Israel and of the whole Old Covenant system and temple at a minimum, and probably includes the New Covenant taking over the kingdoms of man. Within two years Rome will fall apart and undergo violent judgment and within three and a half years, Jerusalem will be destroyed. So part of the symbolism is the ending of the Old Covenant and part of it refers to the overthrow of the enemies of the church.

But who stands behind those enemies? All the way through this book we see that demonic armies stand behind those enemies. And since Scripture links sun, moon, and stars to the angelic and demonic realm, it shows a revolutionary change that is even happening in the realm of angels.

### ***C. The sky receding like a scroll (v. 14) and men fearing "the face of Him who sits on the throne" (v. 16)***

And that ties in this symbolism with the next point - with the sky receding and men fearing the face of Him who sits on the throne. Christ reveals Himself and John will return to this time period in chapter 12, describing in

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<sup>20</sup> G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (eds), *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), p. 1105.

more detail what happened in AD 66. In chapter 12 he will say that this appearance of Christ resulted in a huge battle between Michael and his good angels and Satan and his bad angels, and Satan was cast out of heaven to earth. From AD 66 and on Satan and his demons could not longer have access to heaven to accuse the brethren before God's throne.

This means that in AD 66 a revolutionary change has happened in Christ's kingdom. Heaven is cleansed from the presence of sin and evil. And all those quotes from secular historians that I gave to you was probably heaven's armies chasing the demonic armies and routing them. And as this book moves forward we will see that Satan's territory will be progressively squeezed into smaller and smaller regions until he is finally cast out of the earth completely in chapter 20. Because chapter 12 deals with this in detail, I won't say more about it now. But I think you see that it represents a change that is so significant that it justified the use of the staggering events we have already looked at in order to symbolize an equally staggering change in heaven and in world history.

So if you are tallying events in the Revelation timeline, AD 66 is the year that John wrote Revelation (probably some time between January and March); this was also the year that the Great Tribulation ends in the land of Israel, the time when Satan and his angels are cast out of heaven, the time when Israel breaks covenant with Rome and stops offering sacrifices to Rome, the time when civil war starts killing more Jews than the Romans do, and also the beginning of God's Great Wrath against Israel. It is the first of three times when Christ appears in the sky. This is not the Second Coming as Full Preterists insist, but it is His spiritual coming in judgment on Israel. Jesus had said,

Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.” (Matt. 16:28)

The Second Coming will be different. It will be a permanent coming to earth and a merging of heaven and earth. Revelation will deal with that later, but even though this is a spiritual coming, it is not insignificant. Liberals constantly mock the Bible, saying that Jesus had repeatedly promised to come in judgment within one generation and within the lifetime of the apostles, and they were all dissatisfied. The liberal claim is that that both Jesus and the apostles were mistaken and the promised coming never happened. It is one of their proofs that the Bible is not infallible.

But it did happen, and even secular history records that it did happen just as Jesus promised. So this is not an inconsequential issue. The inerrancy of

Scripture is at stake. When Jesus says that it would happen within one generation, we can take His word for it. When the apostle John said that it would be "soon," we can take His word for it.

## **Conclusion**

There are two more things that I want to comment on, and the first is the fear of these people. They saw these fearful signs and it scared them and made them flee from Him. You can understand why people would be terrified and flee from the face of Christ if they were determined to be rebels and to continue to reject Him. But we who are redeemed need not fear Him. If you have cast your sins upon Christ at the cross and you have by faith received His imputed righteousness, you are secure in Him. You need not fear His judgments. You have the seal of protection on your foreheads just as the first century Christian Jews of chapter 7 had that seal and could not be harmed by God's wrath. When God justified you, it is as if He covered you in a flame-proof suit and you are secure from His fiery judgments.

The second thing that I want to comment on is that evidence alone will not save anyone. These first century Jews had plenty of evidence that Jesus was who He said He was. They saw His miracles, including the feeding of the thousands that Rodney preached on recently. They knew He was raised from the dead. They saw the apostles doing miracles and claiming that they did those miracles through the power of the risen Christ. James preached that the Son of God was about to come in judgment on Israel. Yet the Jews jeered the Romans every time they lobbed a catapult stone at the walls, saying, "The Son is coming." That is S-O-N a reference to Jesus coming. Josephus records this mocking. They were self-consciously rejecting that message of Christ's imminent coming in judgment.

And here they visibly see Jesus fulfilling His words that He would come within one generation and slay the unbelieving Jews. But it didn't make them believe. When they didn't instantly die, they got over it and continued their rebellion. In verse 16 they are even convinced that Jesus is indeed sitting on His throne and that He is indeed the Lamb, but they still don't trust Him. They run from Him rather than running to Him. In fact, Josephus tells us that he was amazed at how quickly the Jews got over these miraculous signs and went on with life as usual. Knowing the truth about Jesus does not save a person. They have to be regenerated before they can believe. These people knew that Jesus was king and Jesus was Lamb, yet they persisted in their rejection.

In Luke 16 Jesus told the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man

went to hell and Lazarus went to Paradise. And the lesson from Christ is powerful. Let me read it from Luke 16:24-31

Luke 16:24 “Then he [the rich man] cried and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.’ 25 But Abraham said, “Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. 26 And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.’

Luke 16:27 “Then he said, ‘I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father’s house, 28 for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.’ 29 Abraham said to him, “They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.’ 30 And he said, “No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ 31 But he said to him, “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.’ ”

And you can see that here. Even though they saw that Jesus had risen from the dead, that He was the Messiah, that He was already sitting on His throne, and that He was the Lamb who could take away the sins of all who would believe in Him, they still not repent and believe. That's the way of the human heart. We call that total depravity or total inability.

And by the way, you cannot chalk this up to being a Jewish problem, as some people have done. Take a look at chapter 9 and you will see that this is true of even the Romans. Chapter 9:20-21.

But the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons, and idols of gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk. 21 And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.

So even the worst judgments do not bring people to repentance unless God's grace is at work. But to anticipate next week, God's grace can convert the most hardened Jewish unbelievers - persecutors like Saul of Tarsus, who became the apostle Paul. And in the next section of chapter 7 we will see that God's grace can convert men from every nation, even though they once worshipped idols and demons. There is no one that is too hard for God's grace to save.

And as we seek to advance Christ's kingdom here on earth, we need to realize that no matter how much love we show or no matter how much evidence we might give, people will not repent and believe unless God

regenerates them. Is that not a good reason for prayer? I think it is. What is impossible with men is possible with God. Ours is the duty, the results are in God's hands. And it is such a privilege to be among those whom God has taken and changed from enemies into friends. May we not get discouraged, but rather may we find it a great joy to serve the One who sits upon the throne and the Lamb who has redeemed us. Amen.