**Viewpoint**

[**Viewpoint: The application of cosmic signs in the Adventist tradition**](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/)

Can we continue to feature events from the distant past as signs of Christ's return?

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* **VIEWPOINT**

Seventh-day Adventists saw in the historic earth quake of Lisbon, Portugal, on November 1,1755, a fulfillment of the sixth seal of [Revelation 6:12-17](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rev%206.12-17). They further accepted the "inexplicable" darkening of the sunlight on May 19, 1780, for a few hours in some eastern states along the American seacoast as fulfilling the prediction: "The sun turned black" ([Rev. 6:12](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rev.%206.12)). The meteor shower on the morning of November 13,1833, seen across North America, was seen as a spectacular sign from heaven to warn humanity of the imminent coming of Christ. Ellen White considered this event the last of the cosmic signs predicted in [Matthew 24](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%2024) and [Revelation 6](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rev%206), and the forerunner of the coming Judgment Day. [1](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1998/09/viewpoint" \l "note1) She declared that all three upheavals in nature the Lisbon quake, the "dark day," and the meteor shower were fulfillments of Christ's predictions in [Matthew 24:29](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%2024.29) and [Revelation 6:12](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rev%206.12),[13](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Revelation%206.13).[2](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1998/09/viewpoint" \l "note2) It seemed to her a "*surety*" that she was living in the last generation on earth. [3](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1998/09/viewpoint" \l "note3)

In retrospect, can we, today (in some cases centuries after the events) maintain the same understanding of these phenomena, especially since they are no longer inexplicable supernatural happenings but are known to be the results of specific laws and predictable movements in nature?

**SIGNS IN THE HEAVENS**

Adventist expositors persistently ascribed the darkening of the sun and moon in 1780 to a supernatural cosmic end-time sign. However, later evidence indicated that the darkening may have come as the result of forest fires. The smoke had eclipsed the sun, covering 25,000 square miles in the eastern part of North America and Canada. Such a regional event lasting for only a few hours can hardly qualify as the cosmic happening prophesied in the New Testament. C. Mervyn Maxwell and others acknowledge that the so-called "dark day" of May 19,1780, was not precipitated by a direct act of omnipotent intervention but by natural causes.[4](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1998/09/viewpoint" \l "note4)

**THE APOCALYPTIC EARTHQUAKE**

The Lisbon quake in 1755, possibly 8.5 on the Richter scale, was nevertheless a regional quake, even if the shock covered 1,300,000 square miles; more than one third of Europe. The loss of life is estimated to have been between 15,000 and 30,000, coming largely from 30 churches filled that morning for All Saints' Day mass.

That earthquake had a lasting effect on eighteenth-century philosophy, culture, and science. One modern author states: "No dramatist could have established the moment of time for this catastrophe with greater effect."5 This natural disaster actually "changed the world,"*6* in the light of the prevailing philosophy of Leibnitz. "The very foundations of Western thought and culture were profoundly shaken.... The self-assured stride of the Age of Reason acquired a permanent limp after the Lisbon earthquake" (B. Walker). [7](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1998/09/viewpoint" \l "note7)

Yet scientists report that throughout the centuries earthquakes have killed "on average some 15,000 people every year." Before 1755, three earthquakes were of even greater intensity: the 1456 earthquake of Naples, Italy (30,000 dead); the 1556, Shensu earthquake in China (820,000 dead); the 1737 earthquake of Calcutta (300,000 dead). After 1755, the Tokyo quake took 200,000 lives in 1803; in 1920 the quake of Kansu, left 180,000 dead in China; and the 1923 quake of Kwanto, Japan, killed 140,000. In 1976 earthquakes caused 650,000 deaths in China alone.

On both sides of the Atlantic, however, the Lisbon quake was explained by Protestants as a sign of the approaching advent of Christ. In the light of the quake, the Anglican Church proclaimed a special day of fasting for February 6,1756. In Boston, the Lisbon quake was interpreted as a forerunner of the destruction of the world, as mentioned by Christ in [Matthew 24:7](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%2024.7). In 1756 the Congregational minister, Charles Chauncy, compared the loss of trade caused by the quake to the condition predicted in [Revelation 18](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rev%2018) and cited it as a warning to repent or experience similar judgments.[8](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1998/09/viewpoint" \l "note8) Boston Puritan pastor Jonathan Mayhew explained that the Lisbon quake was a harbinger of the woes and plagues culminating in the great last earthquake to be visited upon Babylon.[9](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1998/09/viewpoint" \l "note9)

**THE APOCALYPTIC METEOR SHOWER**

On the night of November 13,1833, an observer stated that "the stars were falling as thick snowflakes." Estimates for the fall range from 10,000 to more than 60,000 meteors per hour. The year 1833 is now regarded as the birth of meteor astronomy. Observers noticed that the meteors all seemed to stream from the constellation Leo. Gerald S. Hawkins, astronomer at Boston University, says that: "If the scientists were bewildered by the Leonid storm, we can easily imagine how the non-scientists felt. We do not know exactly how many deaths from heart failures and suicide could be directly attributed to the Leonids, but many people in the southern states were panic-stricken, thinking that the Day of Judgment had surely arrived." [10](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1998/09/viewpoint" \l "note10)

Later the American astronomer H. A. Newton of Yale discovered the natural cause of the Leonid meteor shower. Searching older records, he found that a Leonid shower had been seen practically every 33 years, starting in A.D. 902, "the year of the stars." In the same year, an Italian observer in Salerno stated that it was the fulfillment of [Luke 21:25](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%2021.25). Outstanding Leonid storms had also been recorded in the years 1202,1366,1533, 1766, and 1799. Newton suggested that the Leonids might return in 1866; he was correct: A beautiful shower of meteors radiated from the constellation of Leo that year at the rate of about 6,000 per hour. Because of this scientific prediction, there was no widespread excitement. It was shown that the Leonid storm, in various degrees of intensity, was recurring in a natural cycle along its large elliptic orbit around the sun. In 1866 Wilhelm Temple in France discovered that a comet later named the "Temple-Tuttle" comet was responsible for the meteor showers from Leo when its tail of meteor particles entered the earth's atmosphere. Because the comet passed close to Jupiter in the year 1899, the gravitational pull of this planet deflected the course of the comet so that it missed the earth, and the celestial display did not occur.

Many Adventist expositors today do not deny the natural cause of the celestial phenomena but stress the intensity of the Leonid storm of 1833.[11](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1998/09/viewpoint" \l "note11) However, on November 17,1966, a record number of meteors streaked over North America, seen best in the mountain states, with a visual rate of about 1 million per hour! [12](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1998/09/viewpoint" \l "note12) The 1992 Guinness Book of Records declares: "The greatest shower on record occurred on the night of 16-17 Nov. 1966, when the Leonid meteors (which recur every 33 years) were visible between North America and the eastern USSR."[13](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1998/09/viewpoint" \l "note13)

We must remember that many who experienced the sudden impact of those historic phenomena were deeply impressed, seeing them as the hand of God in judgment or in preparation for final judgment. These signs brought some to repentance and to an apocalyptical sense of their accountability to God. We must honor them for that and acknowledge that the signs they observed in nature some 200 years ago were not only helpful to them but were also to become preparatory or precursory to the final worldwide cosmic signs yet to arrive under the seven last plagues. Further, the signs that they saw as indicative of the nearness of Christ's second coming played a role in calling attention to the final signs yet to come. Thus they created the potential for those final signs to have a more dramatic impact on those living through them, looking for the coming of Jesus. It is only the eschatological, cosmic signs, however, which will play the role of actually ushering in the second coming of Christ.

**NEW TREND IN ADVENTIST EVANGELISM**

In light of these facts, some conservative Adventist expositors are now convinced that the traditional Adventist interpretation of these historical phenomena has lost its convincing power. Samuele Bacchiocchi, in *The Advent Hope for Human Hopelessness* (1986), omits the traditional view about 1755,1780, and 1833. The unanimous voice of conviction in Adventism regarding the prophetic significance of these phenomena has disappeared. Lost is the sense of self-evidence that used to accompany these events as supernatural signs.

On what basis, then, does traditional Adventism still defend the idea of a role in God's eschatalogical plan for these specific disasters and natural events?

The appeal today is to the timing and the sequence of such occurrences: "Their appearance in connection with the closing years of the 1260 years of papal suppression both before and after 1798." [14](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1998/09/viewpoint" \l "note14) C. M. Maxwell explains: "As a series they came in the right order and at the proper time." [15](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1998/09/viewpoint" \l "note15) "The series of signs [[Matt. 24:29](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt.%2024.29)] that were to take place 'immediately after the tribulation of those days' has evidently been fulfilled." [16](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1998/09/viewpoint" \l "note16) This conclusion is based on an exegesis of two passages: [Mark 13:24](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%2013.24) (rather than [Matt. 24:29](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt.%2024.29)) and [Revelation 12:6](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rev%2012.6). "'*But in those days*, following that distress, "the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky"'" ([Mark 13:24](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%2013.24)). "The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of *for 1,260 days*" ([Rev. 12:6](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rev.%2012.6)).

Though it is assumed to be self-evident that both passages deal with the 1260 year-days (counted from A.D. 538- 1798), that fact is not so self-evident. The context of [Mark 13:18-25](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%2013.18-25) (and of [Matt. 24:20-30](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt.%2024.20-30)) connects the "days of distress" for Christ's followers from A.D. 70 until the cosmic signs introduce the Second Advent. Nothing in the Mount Olivet forecast restricts the times of distress to 1260 years. Jesus also includes the end-time distress under the antichrist, because He referred specifically to [Daniel 12:1](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Dan%2012.1) when He announced that the coming great distress would be "unequaled from the beginning of the world until now and never to be equaled again" ([Matt. 24:21](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt.%2024.21); see also [Mark 13:19](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%2013.19)). Daniel had declared that at the end of the unprecedented "time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then," Michael would arise and the resurrection of the dead would take place (12:1, 2). Jesus referred to that end-time distress of [Daniel 12](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Dan%2012) in His prophetic discourse and therefore did not restrict "those days" of [Mark 13:24](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%2013.24) to the Middle Ages (see also [Matt. 24:22](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt.%2024.22)). Jesus thus rather indicated that the sun and the moon would be darkened after the end-time distress of [Daniel 12:1](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Dan%2012.1). This fits the description of the supernatural, world wide darkening during the last plagues in [Revelation 16](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rev%2016) (verses 10,11). There is therefore no justification for the assumption that the "days" of distress spoken of in [Mark 13:24](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%2013.24) are identical with the "1260 days" of [Revelation 12:6](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rev%2012.6).

Further, the Adventist application of the falling stars in [Mark 13:24](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%2013.24),[25](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%2013.25" \t "_blank) to 1833 is not fully consistent with its premise that the timing for the celestial signs must come within "those days," if those "days" are reckoned to be from 538 till 1798. The meteor shower of 1833 clearly came beyond those "days."

The exegesis of Jesus' reference to "those days, following that distress" ([Mark 13:24](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%2013.24)) must take into account the total picture of the days of distress, as presented in the fifth seal of [Revelation 6:9-11](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rev%206.9-11) and in 12:17; 13:15-17; 17:12-14. "White robes" are given to all who "*have come out of the great tribulation*" ([Rev. 7:14](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rev.%207.14); also 6:11). This distress is, of course, not restricted to the Middle Ages or to the 1260 years (ending in 1798). More than that, [Revelation 12:17](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rev%2012.17) points specifically to the end-time distress of the remnant church, a distress further enlarged in [Revelation 13:15-17](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rev%2013.15-17) and [17:12-14](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Revelation%2017.12-14). This distress will be cut short by Christ's divine intervention during the seven last plagues with the sudden*darkening of the entire earth* ([Rev. 16:10](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rev.%2016.10)) and the cosmic-universal earthquake ([Rev. 16:18-21](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rev.%2016.18-21)). This is impressively described by Ellen G. White in chapter 40 in *The Great Controversy* (636, 637). The future cosmic signs during the last plagues fulfill precisely the proper timing and function of "cutting short" the universal distress of God's people in the entire world.

**CONCLUSION**

A number of contemporary Adventist expositors admit the exegetical problems with the old interpretation of the cosmic signs. Today's point to the increasing global influence of the papacy and of America; to the intensification of destructive disasters in the world and to the stage-setting for the final crisis and last distress for God's people. (See Marvin Moore, *The Crisis of the End Time*, Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press" Pub. Assn., 1992, chap. 4; S. Bacchiocchi, The Advent Hope for Human Hopelessness, Berrien Springs, Midi.:, 1986, chaps. 8-10.) These books no longer articulate the traditional application of the cosmic signs. In his recent book What the Bible Says About The End-Time, Jon Paulien urges: "*We need a sane approach to current events*."[17](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1998/09/viewpoint" \l "note17) He understands our inclination to date-setting and doom-saying: "Natural disasters are so gripping that it is almost instinctive for human beings to invest them with cosmic significance."[18](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1998/09/viewpoint" \l "note18) In fact, it has become traditional to interpret the many signs of disaster in [Matthew 24](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%2024) as signs of the coming end. Paulien offers this challenging exegesis: "The famines, pestilences, earthquakes, wars, and rumors of wars are not listed as signs of the end in [Matthew 24](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%2024). Instead they are 'signs of the age,' events that would occur throughout the interim between Jesus' earthly ministry and the end. Jesus did not want those who observe such events to calculate their significance for the timing of the end. Instead, He wanted those who observe wars, earthquakes, and famines to keep watch." [19](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1998/09/viewpoint" \l "note19)

The latest Adventist exposition of [Matthew 24](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%2024) by George R. Knight explains that the role of the signs in [Matthew 24](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%2024) is to reassure us "that the faithful, covenant-keeping God has not yet finished the plan of salvation .... They are signs that the end is coming, but they are not the real signs of the end.... The pattern of [Matthew 24](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%2024) appears to be that the real signs are not signs of nearness but signs of coming."[20](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1998/09/viewpoint" \l "note20)

These results of a serious and responsible exegesis of the prophetic Word do not warrant a hasty rejection or condemnation; instead they are a call to a new reflection on the clarity of Scripture and its power to explain itself by means of its immediate and wider contexts. Traditional applications of the prophetic "signs of the age" are not part of any pillar or landmark of Seventh-day Adventism.[21](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1998/09/viewpoint" \l "note21) Truth progresses; so should we.

1. See Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, (Nampa, Idaho.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), 334.

2. Ibid., 304, 306,333, 334.

3. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898), 632.

4. C. Mervyn Maxwell, *God Cares* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1985), 2:197. Also M. E. Sprengel, in *Adventist Review*, May 22,29; June 5,1980.

5. W. Breidert, *Die Erschutterung der vollkommenen Welt*(Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), 6, own translation.

6. Ibid., 1.

7. B. Walker,*Earthquake* (Alexandria, Va.: Time-Life Books, 1982), 46,48.

8. See LeRoy E. Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1954), 3:191.

9. Ibid., 193.

10. Gerald S. Hawkins, *Splendor in the Sky* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 220.

11. See Froom, 4:1218, 1219; C. M. Maxwell, 2:201.

12. Hawkins, 222.

13. D. McFarlan, ed. (New York: Facts on File, 1991), 12.

14. Jon Paulein in *Symposium on Revelation* (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, \_\_\_), 1:237.

15. Maxwell, 1:214.

16. Ibid., 1:202.

17. (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1994), 157.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. George R. Knight,*Matthew* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1994), 236,237.

21. See Ellen G. White, Manuscript 13,1889; quoted in *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Pub. Assn., 1946), 30, 31.

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