

= Crucifixion darkness =

The Crucifixion darkness is an episode in three of the Canonical Gospels in which the sky becomes dark in daytime during the crucifixion of Jesus .

Ancient and medieval Christian writers treated this as a miracle , and believed it to be one of the few episodes from the New Testament which were confirmed by non @-@ Christian sources . Pagan commentators of the Roman era explained it as an eclipse , although Christian writers pointed out that an eclipse during Passover , when the crucifixion took place , would have been impossible ; a solar eclipse cannot occur during a full moon .

Modern scholarship , noting the way in which similar accounts were associated in ancient times with the deaths of notable figures , sees the phenomenon as a literary invention that attempts to convey a sense of the power of Jesus in the face of death , or a sign of God 's displeasure with the Jewish people . Scholars have also noted the ways in which this episode appears to draw on earlier biblical accounts of darkness from the Book of Amos and the Book of Exodus .

= = Biblical account = =

The oldest biblical reference to the crucifixion darkness is found in the Gospel of Mark , written around the year 70 . In its account of the crucifixion , on the eve of Passover , it says that after Jesus was crucified at nine in the morning , darkness fell over all the land , or all the world (Greek : ??? g?n can mean either) from around noon (" the sixth hour ") until 3 o 'clock (" the ninth hour ") . It adds , immediately after the death of Jesus , that " the curtain of the temple was torn in two , from top to bottom " .

The Gospel of Matthew , written around the year 85 or 90 , and using Mark as a source , has an almost identical wording : " From noon on , darkness came over the whole land [or , earth] until three in the afternoon . " The author adds dramatic details , including an earthquake and the raising of the dead , which were stock motifs from Jewish apocalyptic literature : " The earth shook , and the rocks were split . The tombs also were opened , and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised . "

The Gospel of Luke , written around the year 90 and also using Mark as a source , has none of the details added in the Matthew version , moves the tearing of the temple veil to before the death of Jesus , and explains the darkness as a darkening of the sun :

It was now about noon , and darkness came over the whole land [or , earth] until three in the afternoon , while the sun 's light failed [or , the sun was eclipsed] ; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two .

It appears that the Luke Gospel originally explained the event as an eclipse . The majority of manuscripts of the Gospel of Luke have the Greek phrase " eskotisthe ho helios " (" the sun was darkened ") , but the earliest manuscripts say " tou heliou eklipontos " (" the sun 's light failed " or " the sun was in eclipse ") . This earlier version is likely to have been the original one , amended by later scribes to correct what they assumed was an error , since they knew that an eclipse was impossible during Passover . One early Christian commentator even suggested that the text had been deliberately corrupted by opponents of the Church to make it easier to attack .

The account of the crucifixion given in the Gospel of John is very different . It takes place on the day of Passover , the crucifixion does not take place until after noon , and there is no mention of darkness , the tearing of the veil , or the raising of the dead .

= = Later versions = =

= = = Apocryphal writers = = =

A number of accounts in apocryphal literature built on the accounts of the crucifixion darkness . The Gospel of Peter , probably from the second century , expanded on the canonical gospel accounts in

creative ways . As one writer puts it , " accompanying miracles become more fabulous and the apocalyptic portents are more vivid " . In this version , the darkness which covers the whole of Judaea leads people to go about with lamps believing it to be night . The fourth century Gospel of Nicodemus describes how Pilate and his wife are disturbed by a report of what had happened , and the Judeans he has summoned tell him it was an ordinary solar eclipse . Another text from the fourth century , the purported Report of Pontius Pilate to Tiberius , claimed the darkness had started at the sixth hour , covered the whole world , and during the subsequent evening the full moon resembled blood for the entire night . In a fifth- or sixth @-@ century text by Pseudo @-@ Dionysius the Areopagite , the author claims to have observed a solar eclipse from Heliopolis at the time of the crucifixion .

= = = Ancient historians = = =

No contemporary references to this darkness have been found outside of the New Testament . Later commentators speculated about a reference in a work by the chronicler Thallus . In the ninth century , the Byzantine historian George Syncellus quoted from the third @-@ century Christian historian Sextus Julius Africanus , who remarked that " Thallus dismisses this darkness as a solar eclipse " . It is not known when Thallus lived , and it is unclear whether he himself made any reference to the crucifixion . Tertullian , in his Apologeticus , told the story of the crucifixion darkness and suggested that the evidence must still be held in the Roman archives .

Until the Enlightenment era , the crucifixion darkness story was often used by Christian apologists because they believed it was a rare example of the biblical account being supported by non @-@ Christian sources . When the pagan critic Celsus claimed that Jesus could hardly be a God because he had performed no great deeds , the third @-@ century Christian commentator Origen responded , in Against Celsus , by recounting the darkness , earthquake and opening of tombs . As proof that the incident had happened , he referred to a description by Phlegon of Tralles of an eclipse , accompanied by earthquakes felt in other parts of the Empire during the reign of Tiberius (probably that of 29 CE) .

In his Commentary on Matthew , however , Origen offered a different approach . Answering criticisms that there was no mention of this incident in any of the many non @-@ Christian sources , he insisted that it was local to Palestine , and therefore would have gone unnoticed outside . To suggestions it was merely an eclipse , Origen pointed out that this was impossible and suggested other explanations , such as heavy clouds , drawing only on the accounts given in Matthew and Mark , which make no mention of the sun .

= = Explanations = =

= = = Miracle = = =

Because it was known in ancient and medieval times that a solar eclipse could not take place during Passover (solar eclipses require a new moon while Passover only takes place during a full moon) it was considered a miraculous sign rather than a naturally occurring event . The astronomer Johannes de Sacrobosco wrote , in his The Sphere of the World , " the eclipse was not natural , but , rather , miraculous and contrary to nature " . Modern writers who regard this as a miraculous event tend either to see it as operating through a natural phenomenon ? such as volcanic dust or heavy cloud cover ? or avoid explanation completely . The Reformation Study Bible , for instance , simply states " This was a supernatural darkness . "

= = = Naturalistic explanations = = =

The Gospel of Luke account appears to describe the event as an eclipse , and some non @-@ Christian writers dismissed it in these terms . However , the biblical details do not accord with an

eclipse : a solar eclipse could not have occurred on or near the Passover , when Jesus was crucified , and would have been too brief to account for three hours of darkness . The maximum possible duration of a total solar eclipse is seven minutes and 31 @. @ 1 seconds . The only total eclipse visible in Jerusalem in this era fell later in the year , on 24 November 29 CE at 11 : 05 AM . Around the Sea of Galilee , it would have been visible for just one minute and forty @- @ nine seconds , and would have been apparent only to those indoors .

In 1983 , Colin Humphreys and W. G. Waddington argued that the darkness could be accounted for by a partial lunar eclipse that had taken place on that day : lunar eclipses can last much longer than solar ones . Astronomer Bradley E. Schaefer , on the other hand , pointed out that the eclipse would not have been visible during daylight hours . Humphreys and Waddington speculated that the reference in the Luke Gospel to a solar eclipse must have been the result of a scribe wrongly amending the text , a claim historian David Henige describes as " indefensible " .

Some writers have explained the crucifixion darkness in terms of sunstorms , heavy cloud cover , the aftermath of a volcanic eruption , or a khamsin dust storm that tends to occur from March to May . A popular work of the nineteenth century described it as an ' oppressive gloom ' and suggested this was a typical phenomenon related to earthquakes .

= = = Literary creation = = =

A common view in modern scholarship is that the account in the synoptic gospels is a literary creation of the gospel writers , intended to heighten the importance of what they saw as a theologically significant event . Burton Mack describes it as a fabrication by the author of the Gospel of Mark , while G. B. Caird and Joseph Fitzmyer conclude that the author did not intend the description to be taken literally . W. D. Davies and Dale Allison similarly conclude " It is probable that , without any factual basis , darkness was added in order to wrap the cross in a rich symbol and / or assimilate Jesus to other worthies " .

The image of darkness over the land would have been understood by ancient readers as a cosmic sign , a typical element in the description of the death of kings and other major figures by writers such as Philo , Dio Cassius , Virgil , Plutarch and Josephus . Géza Vermes describes the darkness account as " part of the Jewish eschatological imagery of the day of the Lord . It is to be treated as a literary rather than historical phenomenon notwithstanding naive scientists and over @- @ eager television documentary makers , tempted to interpret the account as a datable eclipse of the sun . They would be barking up the wrong tree " .

= = Interpretations = =

This sequence plays an important part in the gospel 's literary narrative . The author of Mark 's gospel has been described as operating here " at the peak of his rhetorical and theological powers " . One suggestion is that the darkness is a deliberate inversion of the transfiguration ; alternately , Jesus 's earlier discourse about a future tribulation mentions the sun being darkened , and can be seen as foreshadowing this scene . Striking details such as the darkening of the sky and the tearing of the temple veil may be a way of focusing the reader away from the shame and humiliation of the crucifixion ; one professor of biblical theology concluded , " it is clear that Jesus is not a humiliated criminal but a man of great significance . His death is therefore not a sign of his weakness but of his power . "

When considering the theological meaning of the event , some authors have interpreted the darkness as a period of mourning by the cosmos itself at the death of Jesus . Others have seen it as a sign of God 's judgement on the Jewish people , sometimes connecting it with the destruction of the city of Jerusalem in the year 70 ; or as symbolising shame , fear , or the mental suffering of Jesus . Fitzmyer compares the event to a contemporary description recorded in Josephus ' Antiquities of the Jews , which recounts " unlawful acts against the gods , from which we believe the very sun turned away , as if it too were loath to look upon the foul deed " .

Many writers have adopted an intertextual approach , looking at earlier texts from which the author

of the Mark Gospel may have drawn . In particular , parallels have often been noted between the darkness and the prediction in the Book of Amos of an earthquake in the reign of King Uzziah of Judah : " On that day , says the Lord God , I will make the sun go down at noon , and darken the earth in broad daylight " . Particularly in connection with this reference , read as a prophecy of the future , the darkness can be seen as portending the end times .

Another likely literary source is the plague narrative in the Book of Exodus , in which Egypt is covered by darkness for three days . It has been suggested that the author of the Matthew Gospel changed the Marcan text slightly to more closely match this source . Commentators have also drawn comparisons with the description of darkness in the Genesis creation narrative , with a prophecy regarding mid @-@ day darkness by Jeremiah , and with an end @-@ times prophecy in the Book of Zechariah .

Roman literary sources have also been postulated , namely those on the apotheosis of the mythical king Romulus , and about the death of Julius Caesar .

= = Iconography = =

In traditional artistic representations of the crucifixion , the sun and moon sometimes appear above and to either side of the cross , in allusion to the darkening of the skies .