DID AN ECLIPSE OF THE SUN CAUSE DARKNESS AT THE TIME OF THE CRUCIFIXION OF CHRIST?

People by nature will seek a natural explanation to a supernatural event. In translating from the original Greek of the New Testament, the Moffatt version gives us Luke 23:44-45 as "By this time it was about twelve o'clock, and darkness covered the whole land till three o'clock, owing to an eclipse of the sun; . . . ." The King James version, however, states "there was darkness over all the earth . . . the sun was darkened . . . " but without assigning any particular cause. Was this actually a solar eclipse or do we properly assign a supernatural cause?

The answer can be easily determined by anyone familiar with both astronomy and the Sacred Calendar followed by the Jewish people at that time (and incidentally the same Calendar they still follow today). The Gospels all state that the events accompanying the Crucifixion took place at the season of the Passover. And Passover is very near the time of the full moon (despite a Hollywood movie showing a crescent moon at that season). Any possible eclipse of the sun would thus be at least two weeks away at the time of the new moon.

All commemorations of the Crucifixion and Resurrection today are held with reference to the lunar month and all are near the time of a full moon in spring. A solar eclipse (with the moon in front of the sun) at this time of the lunar month is impossible because the moon is in the

opposite part of the sky, 180 degrees away! Nor could it have been a lunar eclipse visible at noon, for lunar eclipses are seen only after sunset, and they do not darken the sun!

> Passover is properly the fourteenth day of a lunar month, a month that begins with the new moon (with the sighting of a faint crescent of the new moon in the western sky by an observer in the vicinity of Jerusalem). Lunar eclipses occur at mid-month; solar eclipses occur on or after the final day of the calendar month.
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> The Crucifixion of Christ was on the 14th day of Nisan, on Passover day. The 15th of Nisan, the "feast of the Passover", or "high day", would begin at sunset. The approach of this "high" sabbath made it urgent that His body be taken down from the cross and placed in the tomb before sunset. And His betrayal and death were also deliberately timed by the Jewish religious leaders so as not to be on this approaching "annual sabbath" lest there be an uproar among the people.

Now consider the historical record. An eclipse season (a 37-day period occuring twice a year during which eclipses of the sun and/or moon occur at new and full moon) did coincide with the Passover season in the years 31, 32 and 33 A.D. Lunar eclipses were produced on or after Nisan 14 in all three years, but only in 31 A.D. was a lunar eclipse clearly visible to inhabitants of Jerusalem.

> A total lunar eclipse also occurred on Passover day in 32 A.D. but was seen on the opposite side of the earth. In 33A.D. the final half hour of a partial lunar eclipse was visible (at Jerusalem) but would have gone practically unnoticed. ~~at Jerusalem~~. The sun would have just set and the slightly eclipsed moon would be rising ~~a few degrees south of~~ in the east.

Now examine the year 31 A.D. carefully. It is the correct year for the Crucifixion and the date of Nisan that year was Wednesday, April 25.

Nisan 14 had begun at sunset the evening before; thus it was Tuesday evening (after sunset) that Christ and His disciples ate the Last Supper. But it was the following evening (after sunset) on Nisan 15 that the "feast of the Passover" was to be observed. It was only this latter day which the Jewish religious leaders were keeping.

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Note the sequence of events. Darkness from noon till three--a supernatural darkness--covered these hours of Christ's suffering. ~~Then there was light again during which time John was given custody of Christ's mother Mary.~~ Death followed shortly ~~thereafter~~ after a spear wound at the hands of a Roman soldier. Joseph of Arimathea ~~then~~ requested of Pilate that he might take down Christ's body for burial prior to the now rapidly approaching annual sabbath (Nisan 15).

It is important to note here the difference between these two days. This annual sabbath or "feast day" was a commemoration of the Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt on the night of the 15th of Nisan. The previous night (Nisan 14) was also to be observed and was in commemoration of the "passing over" of the death angel and sparing of the lives of the first born Israelites in those houses where the blood of a chosen lamb had been placed on the doorposts and lintels. This lamb was a type of the Lamb of God who fifteen centuries later would shed His blood to spare mankind.

Continue the events of that Wednesday in 31 A.D. The nearly full moon rose about 6:30 p.m. just as the sun was setting. For many Jews (and Israelites) the celebration of the night of the Exodus of their ancestors from Egypt would last well into the night. As ten o'clock approached a darkening of one edge of the moon became apparent, ~~10:15 p.m.~~ this partial eclipse of the moon ~~had~~ reached its maximum by 10:45

with the earth's shadow covering about a third of the moon. An hour later the moon was once more free of the earth's shadow.

This partial lunar eclipse was visible throughout Europe, Asia and Africa as well as from the vicinity of Jerusalem. It marked the very midpoint of the lunar month and coincided with the 15th day of this particular Nisan.

> Can the day of the week be determined? Oppolzer's Canon of Eclipses makes that an easy calculation. April 25, 31 A.D. was "Julian Day" number 1732 495, a day count starting with the arbitrary date of Monday, January 1, 4713 B.C. at noon as [redacted] zero. Merely divide the "Julian Day number" for April 25, 31 A.D. by 7 and the remainder is 2, which by the rule specified for this system is Wednesday!
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> The time given by Oppolzer for the middle of this eclipse is 20:24 Universal Time, which would be 8:24 p.m. for an observer in England and about 2 hours and 21 minutes later in the night for Jerusalem which is 35 degrees farther east. Thus 10:45 p.m. was the mid-point of this lunar eclipse.

Is there also an eclipse of the sun for this 31 A.D. Passover season in Oppolzer's Canon? Yes, about two weeks later on May 10, which would be Nisan 30 on the Sacred Calendar. But the path of this solar eclipse crossed northeastward across Ceylon, Burma and China. No portion of this eclipse of the sun could have been seen from the Holy Land.

Further search shows that no spring time solar eclipse would be visible from Jerusalem between the years 27 A.D. and 33 A.D. (popularly assigned ~~dates~~ years for the Crucifixion) and that not until 38 A.D. does an eclipse path cross as near as southern Ethiopia.

The Scriptures insist (Matthew, Mark and Luke in full agreement) that darkness covered the earth from noon till three p.m., the time of Christ's death. Far longer than any proper solar eclipse caused by having the moon come briefly in front of the sun. Seven minutes is close to the maximum for such a solar eclipse, with perhaps a half hour before and after that might be termed darkness, though more properly gloom. The entire time for a solar eclipse from beginning to end can be four hours. But the darkening of the sun is gradual, requiring up to two hours. And the return of light is also gradual. This is hardly what the Scriptural account depicts.

An eclipse of the sun does not darken the whole earth, only a small area about fifty miles wide which moves rapidly eastward across the globe. Yet historians ~~of the time tell~~ wrote of a great, inexplicable darkness throughout all Europe causing panic among the people at this time. The darkening of the sun was properly considered a miracle by millions who experienced the event. It has a Scriptural counterpart in the "darkness in all the land of Egypt three days" during the time of Moses and the plagues on Egypt preceding the Exodus.

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I know of no proof of this that I can quote for accuracy of dating. H.C.H.

One can only describe, not explain, the darkening of the sun at the time of Christ's Crucifixion. At the death of the One whose fingers had framed the universe and given light to the sun to light the earth, a miraculous cessation of that light occurred. Theologian, historian and astonomer alike bear witness to it as a miracle.

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