

Terrors and Great Signs from Heaven

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The Synoptic Gospels each include an account of what is known as “The Olivet Discourse” (Matt. 24; Mark 13; Luke 21:10-38). For those who may be unaware, the Olivet Discourse contains the signs and warnings given by Jesus relating to the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem by Rome. As with any event in the life of Jesus recorded in the Gospels, unique details occur in each that may not be mentioned by another. Such is the case with this unique sign recorded by Luke in his account of the Olivet Discourse:

And there will be great earthquakes, and in various places plagues and famines; and **there will be terrors and great signs from heaven.**

Luke 21:11 (Emphasis Mine)

What did Jesus mean by this ominous warning of terrors and great signs from heaven? One possibility may be found in some of the historical accounts of the events leading up to, and including the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. For example, consider these interesting words from Jewish historian, Josephus:

Besides these, a few days after that feast, on the twenty-first day of the month Artemisius, 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, 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 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, and after that they heard a sound as of a great multitude, saying, "Let us remove hence."**

Josephus (Wars:VI,V, 38 Emphasis Mine)

In this same section of his writings, Josephus also records a star resembling a sword which stood over the city of Jerusalem, and a comet that continued a whole year.

Consider also these words from the Roman historian, Tacitus:

Prodigies had occurred, but their expiation by the offering of victims or solemn vows is held to be unlawful by a nation which is the slave of superstition and the enemy of true beliefs. **In the sky appeared a vision of armies in conflict, of glittering armor.** A sudden lightning flash from the clouds lit up the Temple. The doors of the holy place abruptly opened, a superhuman voice was heard to declare that the gods were leaving it, and in the same instant came the rushing tumult of their departure.

Tacitus (Roman historian in the 1st century), Histories, Book 5:

Neither Josephus or Tacitus were inspired writers. Neither had anything to gain politically or religiously by recording such events. They were writing history, not Scripture. Maybe such events sound unbelievable. Are they any more unbelievable than seas parting, raising the dead, walking on water, or feeding a multitude with minimal supplies? Remember, we are dealing with a prophecy spoken by Jesus Himself:

And there will be great earthquakes, and in various places plagues and famines; and **there will be terrors and great signs from heaven.**

Luke 21:11 (Emphasis Mine)