



Did a Total Eclipse cause the three hour darkness at Jesus' execution?

There was a mysterious three hour darkness during the time when Jesus was being executed.

What caused this three hour darkness?

“It was now about noon and darkness came over the land until three in the afternoon because of an eclipse of the sun”—Luke 23:44,45 NAB

The way the New American Bible (NAB) renders it, as above, one would think that the cause of the three hour midday total darkness was “*an eclipse of the sun.*” If the possibility of the supernatural is excluded, an eclipse would naturally be the only possibility. Could this have been an actual eclipse? Let’s examine the gospels very carefully regarding this event:

“Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour”—Matthew 27:45 ESV

“And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour”—Mark 15:33 ESV

Matthew and Mark’s gospel accounts do not tell us why the three hour midday darkness occurred, and John’s gospel omits mention of it. Only Luke’s gospel has any sort of explanation for it:

“It was now about the sixth hour, and the sun’s light failed, so that darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour”—Luke 23:44,45 NJB

Starting right in the middle of the day, when the sunlight is the very brightest, from about noontime until about 3 PM, on the day Jesus was executed, a mysterious darkness covered “the whole land” (Greek, “*ge*”), meaning Jerusalem and the surrounding area of Judea. Three extra-Biblical ancient historians, Thallus, Phlegon, and Africanus, also mentioned this three hour period of darkness in their writings. Why did ‘*the sun’s light failed*’?

This darkness could not have been a solar eclipse, as many have imagined. Why not? Because solar eclipses only occur at new moon, such as the Great North American eclipse on

April 8, 2024. Jesus was executed **“at the time of the Passover” (John 18:39 NIV)**. When did the Passover occur?

“The fourteenth day of the first month, at twilight, is the Passover of Yahweh”—Leviticus 23:5 NJB

“The first of every month” was **“at each new moon during the year” (Numbers 28:11,14 NIV)**. The priests would **“sound the ram’s horn at the New Moon” (Psalm 81:3 NIV)**, that is, when the first sliver of the new moon was observed low in the eastern sky at sunset, the first day of the month would be announced by blowing the horns. Fourteen days from the sighting of the first sliver of the new moon is either on the day the astronomical full moon, or the day before. The point is that the day Jesus died was at the full moon, not the new moon, so there could not have been a solar eclipse on that day.

Therefore, the synoptic gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, quoted above, were not asserting that an eclipse took place on the day Jesus died. The New American Bible’s rendering **“eclipse”** at [Luke 23:45](#) is mistaken. The synoptics only reported the fact that **“there was darkness over the whole land,”** for about three hours, without any explanation why it occurred, except that Luke says, **“the sun’s light failed.”** The word Luke used for **“failed,” “eklipontos,”** simply means that the sun’s light “ceased.” Matthew the Apostle was surely an eyewitness to the events during the time of Jesus’ execution. Mark seems to have recorded eyewitness Peter’s memoirs (**1 Peter 5:13; 2 Peter 1:16**), and Luke researched, interviewed, and recorded, statements from many eyewitnesses (**Luke 1:1-3**).

Total solar eclipses can only last **7 1/2** minutes, at the absolute maximum, far less time than three hours. While partial solar eclipses can last three hours, they never completely obscure the sun’s light, so the daylight continues throughout the entire time of a partial solar eclipse. Thus, the astronomical especially, and also the historical facts, completely eliminate any possibility of a solar eclipse.

Some, without any supporting evidence, have speculated that very thick clouds, or a sandstorm, or a volcanic eruption, may have caused the three hour darkness. However, the gospels writers say nothing about any thick clouds or sandstorm or volcanic ash occurring on the day of Jesus' execution. The Old Testament reports three occasions when God's power over earth's sun was displayed:

Back during the time when the Israelites were in Egypt, **"Yahweh" (Exodus 10:21 NJB)** miraculously intervened, and **"total darkness covered all the land of Egypt for three days. No one could see anyone else or move about for three days. Yet all the Israelites had light in the places where they lived" (Exodus 10:22,23 NIV)**. This "total darkness . . . for three days" was obviously no natural phenomena. It was miraculous!

After the Israelites entered the promised land, when they were conquering Canaanite armies, to enable them to completely rout a powerful coalition allied against them, God intervened miraculously in their behalf, **"the sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day. There has never been a day like it before or since" (Joshua 10:15,16 NIV)**.

God's power over the sun was again demonstrated hundreds of years later, during the time of Judean King Hezekiah, **"the prophet Isaiah then called on Yahweh, who made the declining sun on the steps-the steps to Ahaz's room-go back ten steps" (2 Kings 20:11 NJB)**. *"This was a geographically localized miracle, nonetheless spectacular, but not involving the reversal of the earth's rotation, which would have affected the entire world"* (Ryrie Study Bible note on [2 Kings 20:11](#)).

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," including **"the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night" (Genesis 1:1,14 NIV)**. God has always had complete control over all the natural elements and phenomena in the universe that he created. Therefore, his control over sunlight during the time of Jesus' execution, would be well within his capability, even though we do not know how he caused

the three hour darkness that began at midday.