

## **Mountains and islands were moved out of their places**

by Douglas E. Cox

In the opening of the sixth seal, the great earthquake and the events following are taken to be literal by some, and non-literal by others. Some of those who support a figurative interpretation point out that inconsistencies and contradictions are introduced, if the events are literal. The mountains mentioned in Revelation 6:14 must remain, since in verses 15 and 16, men hide in the rocks and dens of the mountains.

### **Isaac Newton**

The metaphor of a scroll being rolled together applies to the scientific revolution. When the two spindles of a scroll are rolled together, they cease rotating. No further rotation can occur while the spindles are together. This aptly portrays the scientific revolution in astronomy. After the discoveries of Sir Isaac Newton were published around the world in the eighteenth century, men everywhere abandoned the old idea of a rigid firmament revolving around the earth each day, carrying the stars. The diurnal rotation was assigned to the earth. The heavens ceased their revolutions permanently; all the planetary spheres of the Ptolemaic system vanished forever.

Stars falling to earth like figs from a fig tree that is shaken by a strong wind may depict the effects of the scientific revolution and the enlightenment upon the Church. Jesus used a fig tree to represent the Church. [Luke 13:6-9; 21:29-32] The fig tree casting its unripe

fruit may depict Christians who turn aside and abandon their faith. In Ephesians 4:14, winds represent false doctrines, and "a mighty wind" may represent powerful doctrines.

The great earthquake is best understood figuratively, as in prophecy, the land of promise represents the truth of the gospel. The earthquake pictures the shaking of the belief systems of men. Faith in the Church and in the Bible was shaken in the enlightenment.

Mountains and islands being moved out of their places represents prophecies and promises of Scripture being misinterpreted, and misunderstood. Interest in prophetic interpretation flourished in the decades after the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. The variety of interpretations increased. Opposite positions were proposed such as those represented by dispensationalism on the one hand, and preterism on the other. Shifts in the interpretations of prophecy is represented by mountains moving from their positions.

Interpretation of the sixth seal by various commentators are presented below.

**John Chappel Woodhouse** (1749-1833) wrote on Rev. 6:14: [1]

Mountain–Island: These are places of greatest security in times of hostile invasion; the mountain is difficult of access, by reason of its height and steepness; the island, from its surrounding waters. Therefore, under these images, the securest places are represented as no longer affording safety during this dreadful visitation.

**Albert Barnes** (1798-1870) wrote: [2]

The removal of mountains and islands: And every mountain and island were moved out of their places. This would denote convulsions in the political or moral world, as great as would occur in the physical world if the very mountains were removed, and the islands should change their places. We are not to suppose that this would literally occur, but we should be authorized from this to expect that, in regard to those things which seemed to be permanent and fixed on an immovable basis, like mountains and islands, there would be violent and important changes. If thrones and dynasties long established were overthrown; if institutions that seemed to be fixed and permanent were abolished; if a new order of things should rise in the political world, the meaning of the symbol, so far as the language is concerned, would be fulfilled.

**Henry Alford** (1810-1871) wrote: [3]

"and every mountain and island were moved out of their places"  
the whole earth is broken up by a change as total as any of those previous ones which have prepared it for its present inhabitants

**R. H. Charles** (1855-1931) wrote: [4]

The Sixth Seal—its plagues and the ensuing pause during which the faithful Israelites are sealed to secure their safety.

—These woes are still in the future. They are not in our author the immediate heralds of the end, as in the Gospels. The end cannot come till the great persecution and martyrdom of the faithful have taken place. With the text compare Mark xiii. 8, 24-25; Matt. xxiv. 7, 29; Luke xxi. 11, 25-26, xxiii. 30. The woes, therefore, are not to be taken in their full significance. This is manifest from the fact that after the stars of heaven had fallen, the heaven been removed as a scroll, and every mountain and island had been removed out of their places, the kings of the earth and the mighty, the bond and the free, the kings of the earth and the mighty, the bond and the free, could hardly be described as hiding themselves in the caves and rocks of the earth and imploring the mountains to fall upon them.

On the last part of v. 14 Charles says, "the words are not to be taken literally." [5]

**Richard C. H. Lenski** (1864-1936) wrote on Rev. 6:12-14: [6]

For those who will study Matt. 24:29 and II Pet. 3:10, 12 little comment will be needed. Here we have one picture of the end. The figures used are simply figures. Quaking, sun, whole moon (i.e., full moon), heaven, stars, mountains and islands are to be understood literally. The dispute over whether this cataclysm is to be dated before or after what the futurists call the Great Tribulation and what they call the Rapture is unimportant. Here we get only one glimpse of the end of the world.

Mauro seeks to symbolize: the great shaking = social upheaval; the sun = supreme governmental authority that is blotted out as was the case at the time of the French Revolution; the mountains = conspicuous nationalities; the islands = lesser communities. But what about the moon and heaven? What is here portrayed is not repeated upheaval in the course of history but, as all other pertinent history shows, the cataclysm at the end of the world.

**H. A. Ironside** (1876-1951) wrote: [7]

It is therefore not a world-wide, literal earthquake that the sixth seal introduces, but rather the destruction of the present order – political, social, and ecclesiastical – reduced to chaos; the breaking down of all authority, and the breaking up of all established and apparently permanent institutions.

We may see, I believe, a foreshadowing of this in what has so lately taken place in Russia; the overturning of the throne, the blotting out of the Romanoff

Dynasty, the wrecking of all industrial and social order, the fearful orgies of fanatical Bolshevism, blood-red anarchy everywhere holding sway, making wild promises of liberty while destroying every safeguard against the unrestrained brutality of beastlike men.

Take as but one horrible instance the attempted abolition of marriage (that which God Himself instituted, at the very beginning of human history, for the sanctity and blessing of His creatures), and the substitution of the degrading custom of forcing all women to be common property, taken by whoever may desire them, and all children born in these abominable conditions to be taken from their parents and reared as children of the State.

**Charles D. Alexander** (1904-1991) wrote: [8]

The displacement of mountains and islands is hardly the end of the world, else there would be no geography in which to fit them.

The terror of the kings and captains, the rich and poor, the bond and free, at the stupendous cosmic ruin, so that they cry to the rocks to fall upon them and the hills to cover them, is scarcely relevant to a situation when heaven and earth are passing away in one great moment, and there are no rocks or mountains to heed the cry of the inhabitants.

As usual John borrows his figures from the Old Testament. The dimming of sun and moon, the falling of stars, the removal of mountains and islands, the cry of the wicked for the hills to cover them – these are familiar Old Testament figures of the dissolution of empires, and the passing away of systems, powers, tyrannies.

The mountains and islands being moved out of their places represent the consequent disorder among the nation as the central, controlling power for the time being is destroyed.

**James Burton Coffman** (1905-2006) quoted various other authors. He wrote: [9]

"Here we have one picture of the end; all of the language is figurative." All discussion of whether these passages are to be understood figuratively or literally are beside the point. "That day will spell the end of the entire universe as we know it." "The atomic age has opened our eyes to the fact that such extreme language may be fulfilled with horrible literalness."

**Richard T. Ritenbaugh** wrote: [10]

The Mountains and Islands Move: As a result of the great convulsion of the earth, massive land transformations occur, shifting mountains on land and undersea. Obviously, such a violent shaking will create unprecedented destruction and loss of life. As the conclusion of the sixth seal's disturbances, this displacement of terra firma is the calamity that most terrifies earth's inhabitants. Suddenly, nothing is stable—not even the earth under their feet!

"Fall on Us!"

The effect of these cosmic signs from God is to produce terror in earth's populace, triggering humanity's strong drive to preserve itself. Despite mountains moving, men and women of every origin, status, and creed—from king to slave—flee for the caves under the mountains in a vain attempt to hide themselves from God (Revelation 6:15). This is reminiscent of Isaiah 2:19, a prophecy of the Day of the Lord: "They shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, from the terror of the Lord and the glory of His majesty, when He arises to shake the earth mightily."

John sees these fearful people speaking to the mountains and rocks, commanding them to hide them from the sight of God the Father and from the "wrath of the Lamb" (verse 16). Their cry, "Fall on us!" is not a death wish or a suicidal means to avoid God's judgment but a hope that the mountains will cover and conceal them. "Fall on us and hide us" is typical Hebrew parallelism, as can be seen from an Old Testament parallel in which Israelites "shall say to the mountains, 'Cover us!' and to the hills, 'Fall on us!'" (Hosea 10:8).

It is somewhat startling that earth's sinners correctly identify these catastrophic events as evidences of God's wrath. We are used to them being termed "natural disasters" and in no way a result of God's intervention in humanity's affairs. Yet, this time, these cataclysmic signs are indeed "acts of God," and men know it. Such a succession of disturbances can be nothing other than divine anger.

**Gregory K. Beale** referred to Isaiah 34:3-4, 5-6, 12; then he wrote: [11]

Together with this influence Joel 2:31 (3:4 in MT; = Acts 2:20) stands behind the picture in 6:12b of the sun being darkened and the moon becoming like blood (although for the former depiction see also Joel 2:10; 3:15; Isa. 13:10; Matt. 24:29; Mark:13:25). And likening the darkening of the sky to "sackcloth" was suggested by Isa. 50:3: "I will clothe the sky with darkness, and I will make its covering as sackcloth. . ."

There is debate over whether the description is literal or figurative. If it is literal, then the scene is that of the final dissolution of the cosmos, though some taking

a literal view see the breakup of the earth as part of a long-drawn-out tribulation period (e.g., see the view of R.L. Thomas referred to below in the comments on 6:17). But if the scene is figurative, it could denote some temporal judgment or the last judgment.

The likelihood is that the portrayal is figurative, since five of the determinative OT background passages mentioned above refer to the historical end of a sinful nation's existence occurring through divine judgment, in which God conducts holy war by employing one nation to defeat another in war. Furthermore, the additionally formative texts of Matt. 24:29; Mark 13:25; and Acts 2:20 have the same figurative significance and are based on one or more of these five OT texts. However, Isaiah 24 and Joel 3:15-16 may concern the final, universal judgment, although the two portrayals could be literal or figurative (cf 1 En. 80; 4 Ezra 5:4-5; Sib. Or. 3:796-805). "The first heaven and the first earth passed away" in Rev. 21:2 could suggest that 6:12-14 is likewise literal. On the other hand, the reference to "stars," "mountains," and "islands" as symbols of human and divine powers in the LXX, the Jewish writings, and the Apocalypse itself would point further to a figurative interpretation (on which see below).

Therefore, as in the OT, these cosmic descriptions for God's judgment of sinners whereby he conducts holy war and defeats them, except now the judgment is not merely against an individual nation but against the whole world of unbelievers.

All commentators agree that the cosmic phenomena of 6:12-14 connote judgment as in the OT and other NT contexts, but they disagree whether this is merely a temporal tribulation before the actual, final judgment and end of the cosmos or whether it is the last judgment itself and the very end of the world. That the scene depicts figuratively the inauguration of the last judgment, not trials preceding that judgment, is indicated by the following considerations.

(1) The actual legal pronouncement and execution of this judgment is implicit in that it is expected directly after the description in v 17 (as 20:11-15 bears out). We have already argued that 6:12-14 is a figurative sketch of the final judgment of the world because of its logical function in the immediate context, especially in relation to 6:9-11.

(2) Context more broadly, that is, our understanding of the structure of the Apocalypse as a whole, also points this way (see pp. 108-51 above).

(3) Various phrases in 6:12-14 are found later in the book in descriptions of the final judgment. For example, . . . ("a great earthquake occurred") in 6:12a is repeated (. . . ["[it was] so great an earthquake"]) in 16:18, where the final destruction of the cosmos is pictured. In 11:13 . . . probably functions in the same way. Likewise, . . . ("every mountain and island were moved from their

places") in 6:14b uniquely corresponds to ... ("every island fled and [every] mountain was not found") in 16:20, which continues the last judgment scene of 16:17-19.

## References

1. John Chappel Woodhouse. *The Apocalypse: or Revelation of Saint John, translated; with notes, critical and explanatory* . 1805. p. 171.
2. Albert Barnes. *Notes explanatory and practical on the Book of revelation* . Knight and Son, 1853. p. 221.
3. Henry Alford. *The Greek Testament Volume IV* . pp. 621-622.
4. R. H. Charles. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Revelation of St. John, Vol. 1* . p. 179.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 181.
6. Richard C. H. Lenski. *The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation* . Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943, 2008. pp. 239-240.
7. H. A. Ironside. *Lectures on the Book of Revelation* . 1920.
8. Charles D. Alexander. *Revelation Spiritually Understood*
9. James Burton Coffman. *Commentary on the Whole Bible*
10. Richard T. Ritenbaugh. Forerunner, "Prophecy Watch," December 2004
11. Gregory K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* . p. 397-398.