

# The Sixth Seal of Revelation According to Ellen White

*Ministers should present the sure word of prophecy as the foundation of the faith of Seventh-day Adventists. The prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation should be carefully studied, and in connection with them the words, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." ~ Ellen G. White (GW 148; Ev 196)*

The validity of Seventh-day Adventist theology hinges on the unique Adventist interpretation of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation due to the affirmation of the prophetess Ellen White, who claimed to have seen these teachings in vision from God. In her early years, Ellen was part of the Millerite movement, which was particularly popular in New England, but which also had exerted an international influence through its publishing ventures. Not surprisingly, many of White's interpretations dovetail with the views of the Millerites, a group who falsely predicted the Second Coming of Christ would take place on October 22, 1844.

Modern SDA evangelists "wow" their audiences with their E. G. White-endorsed mastery of prophecy, and the trust obtained via prophetic topics is then leveraged to enhance acceptance of the distinctive doctrinal points of Adventism.

This article will focus on Ellen White's "inspired" interpretation of Revelation 6:12-17, which is part of the sixth seal. Here is the biblical passage (KJV):

"And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood; And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind. And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?"

The sixth seal predicts a great earthquake, a darkening of the sun, a bloody moon, and the falling of the stars—all leading to the tribulation when the wicked will cry for the rocks and mountains to fall on them.

## Earthquake

The earthquake of the sixth seal was identified by the Millerites as the Lisbon earthquake of 1755,<sup>1</sup> and this identification persists because it was endorsed by Ellen G. White:

“The revelator thus describes the first of the signs to precede the second advent: ‘There was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood.’ Revelation 6:12. These signs were witnessed before the opening of the nineteenth century. In fulfillment of this prophecy there occurred, in the year 1755, the most terrible earthquake that has ever been recorded. Though commonly known as the earthquake of Lisbon, it extended to the greater part of Europe, Africa, and America” (GC 304).

How could the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 be the apocalyptic earthquake depicted by John in Revelation 6? While the Lisbon quake devastated a large area, extending all the way to North Africa,<sup>2</sup> most of the globe remained unaffected by this great sign of Christ’s return. The Lisbon quake had an estimated magnitude of 8.7, costing approximately 70,000 lives. For comparison with other major earthquakes, the 1556 earthquake in Shensi, China, was the most deadly, killing 830,000. The 1960 Chile earthquake scored a 9.5 magnitude, the highest ever recorded. Two notable recent earthquakes, Sumatra (2004) and Haiti (2010) took 227,898 lives and 222,570 lives, respectively.<sup>3</sup> Surely the Lisbon quake was not nearly as significant as Ellen White suggests. There is nothing particularly outstanding about the Lisbon disaster, nor is there any proximity between the Lisbon earthquake and the end of time.

## Blood Moon and Dark Day

The Millerites were also impressed by stories of a dark day that occurred May 19, 1780.<sup>4</sup> According to SDA historian C. Mervyn Maxwell, the dark day, primarily affecting

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<sup>1</sup> “The signs given by our Savior to precede his coming, synchronize with the events under the sixth seal. On the opening of this seal there was a great earthquake. The greatest earthquake of which we have an account in modern history, occurred on the 1st of November, 1755, and extended to every quarter of the globe. It was felt in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America--from Greenland on the north, to the extreme south. In the single city of Lisbon in Spain [should be Portugal], 30,000 lives were lost [actually, less than half that number died], every church and convent in the city, and almost all the public buildings, with about one fourth of the house were destroyed; after which, fires broke out and raged for nearly three days, so that the city was completely desolated. This event would seem then to mark the opening of the sixth seal” – Joshua V. Himes, “The Sixth Seal,” *Signs of the Times, and Expositor of Prophecy*, Oct. 11, 1843, p. 64 (accessed from *Ellen G. White Writings: Comprehensive Research Edition CD-ROM*, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> C. Mervyn Maxwell, *God Cares*, vol. 2 (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1985), 194-195.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Geological Survey, “Historic World Earthquakes” <http://earthquake.usgs.gov/earthquakes/world/historical.php> (accessed Aug. 2, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Josiah Litch, *Prophetic Expositions*, vol. 1 (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1842), 151-52 (accessed from *Ellen G. White Writings: Comprehensive Research Edition CD-ROM*, 2008).

New England and the mid-Atlantic states, was preceded by nearly a week of gloomy skies, followed by a “coppery red” moon on the night of May 18.<sup>5</sup> The next day, a red sun was visible in the morning, but an enormous “black cloud” drifted across New England.<sup>6</sup> “The center of the darkness kept moving, so that its intensity was typically felt in a place for two or three hours. At varying times in the afternoon it lifted considerably . . . .”<sup>7</sup>

Regarding the dark day of 1780, Ellen White stated, “Twenty-five years later appeared the next sign mentioned in the prophecy [Rev. 6:12]--the darkening of the sun and moon” (GC 306). She added, “May 19, 1780, stands in history as ‘The Dark Day.’ Since the time of Moses no period of darkness of equal density, extent, and duration, has ever been recorded” (GC 308).

According to the biblical text, the sun will become “black as sackcloth”; the moon will become like blood (Rev. 6:12). Is the dark day of 1780 a reasonable description of what the Bible predicts? Dr. Maxwell acknowledges that forest fires in New England and Canada are the likely cause of the dark day.<sup>8</sup> From Maxwell’s description, it appears that smoke from forest fires combined with a cloudy day to create varying degrees of darkness in New England. Of course, daylight was normal over the rest of the globe, but God-fearing New Englanders attached divine significance to the event, not understanding its natural origins or its limited scope. In any event, the red sun and overcast conditions seen on the dark day of 1780 certainly don’t match the biblical assertion that the sun will become “black as sackcloth.”

### **“Stars” Falling**

A meteor shower visible in New England on November 13, 1833, was interpreted by many Millerites as the penultimate event of the sixth seal,<sup>9</sup> coming just prior to an upheaval of heaven and earth. Ellen White’s endorsement of the meteor shower as a fulfillment of the sixth seal solidified Millerite speculation as the standard Adventist interpretation:

“In 1833, two years after Miller began to present in public the evidences of Christ's soon coming, the last of the signs appeared which were promised by the Saviour as tokens of His second advent. Said Jesus: ‘The stars shall fall from heaven.’ Matthew 24:29. And John in the Revelation declared, as he beheld in

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<sup>5</sup> C. Mervyn Maxwell, *God Cares*, vol. 2 (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1985), 196.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid..

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>9</sup> Joshua V. Himes, *Signs of the Times, and Expositor of Prophecy*, vol. 3, Sept 14, 1842, p. 186 (accessed from *Ellen G. White Writings: Comprehensive Research Edition* CD-ROM, 2008).

vision the scenes that should herald the day of God: ‘The stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind.’ Revelation 6:13. This prophecy received a striking and impressive fulfillment in the great meteoric shower of November 13, 1833. That was the most extensive and wonderful display of falling stars which has ever been recorded” (GC 333).

The falling “stars” of November 13, 1833, are also problematic as a fulfillment of the sixth seal. Because this event occurred during the Millerite movement, it garnered a great deal of attention as a possible sign from God. However, the phenomenon observed in 1833 was actually the Leonid meteor shower, which can be seen each November if one is in the right location.<sup>10</sup> The November 1833 display was simply a rare, spectacular, but predictable event that was misunderstood at that time. People believed that stars were falling when they were actually seeing a meteor shower. Thus, the event of November 1833 does not match the biblical description of actual falling stars. In addition, the 1833 event has no proximity to actual end-time events. Finally, the meteor shower of 1833 wasn’t globally visible as a warning to all humanity; instead, reverence for this event projects the United States-centric outlook of early Adventism—fossilized by prophetic fiat.

## Conclusion

Based on the visions of Ellen White, SDAs believe that the sixth seal covers human history from the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 to the time of God’s wrath. However, a plain reading of the sixth seal points toward a unified, cataclysmic outpouring of divine judgments, beginning with an earthquake shaking the entire planet, and followed by the blackening of the sun, a blood moon, the falling of the stars, and the upheaval of heaven and earth. The predicted events of the sixth seal should be both globally impactful and in close chronological proximity to the end, given the dramatic result of the sixth seal. After the sixth seal judgments, “the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains....,” acknowledging the sovereignty of God. Notice that the rulers “of the earth” (along with everyone else) acknowledge God, meaning that the sixth seal judgments must garner global attention. A now-obscure 1755 earthquake, followed by an even more obscure hazy day in 1780, followed by an inconsequential meteor shower in 1833, are certainly not captivating in today’s news cycle. When the sixth seal is actually broken, we can be certain that the attention of the entire world will be riveted upon God.

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<sup>10</sup> C. Mervyn Maxwell, *God Cares*, vol. 2 (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1985), 198-200.

Adventist prophetic interpretation may seem impressive on the surface—until one digs far enough to reveal the highly questionable conjectures undergirding many SDA prophetic teachings. These conjectures are well illustrated by the improbability of Adventist teaching regarding the sixth seal. If the Adventist interpretation of the sixth seal is incorrect, then attendees at their prophecy seminars should be wary about other SDA prophetic interpretations. If Ellen White’s visions misled her about the sixth seal, then she is definitely not a prophet, and definitely not a reliable guide to scripture.