

DISAPPEARING ACT

An Historical, Philosophical & Spiritual Perspective on Eclipses

By Judith Goldberg, MFA



*"Zeus, father of the Olympians, made night from mid-day,
hiding the light of the shining Sun, and sore fear came upon men."*

Archilochus — Greek poet on the eclipse of April 6, 647 B.C.

Darkness at Noon

One of my daughter's favorite reads in pre-school was a little gem of a picture book called "Someone is Eating the Sun" (Ruth Sonneborn, 1974) In this Chicken Little spin-off, Hen is startled by a darkening midday sky and notices that a piece of the sun is missing. She summarily spreads the alarm that the sun is being eaten. As the "bite" gets bigger, so does pandemonium in the barnyard, until a wise old turtle finally dispels the rumor. By the time light and order are restored, young readers have absorbed a basic lesson in eclipses.

A child's growing awareness of the functioning of his environment, in many respects parallels the growing sophistication of our scientific understanding over centuries. Ancient peoples throughout Asia, the Indian Subcontinent and even parts of Africa and Europe, believed that eclipses were caused by a dragon devouring the Sun or Moon. The term for eclipse in the Chinese language is *shih* which also means *to eat*; a solar eclipse is *zhishi* or *sun-eat*, a lunar eclipse, *yueshi* or *moon eat*.

Eclipses inspired fear and awe in our early ancestors, who regulated their lives by the motions of the sun, moon and stars. The skies were orderly and dependable, except for the occurrence of an eclipse. During those times, chaos reigned, accompanied by much begging and praying for the return of the Sun or Moon. Rituals such as the banging of brass kettles, beating of drums, and shooting of flaming arrows, were employed to scare off the responsible celestial serpent.

Cast in Stone

Prehistoric monuments all over the globe were built as astronomical observatories by ancient peoples. Stonehenge, in England, is undeniably the most famous of these. In the 1960s, Boston

University Astronomer Gerald Hawkins discovered dozens of celestial alignments at Stonehenge that match the rising and setting points of the sun, moon and fixed stars at various times of the year. Strong evidence exists that certain structural elements in this and in dozens of other monuments were also designed to predict eclipses.

Eclipses follow cyclical patterns. They occur in pairs, on consecutive new and full moons, at six month intervals, and only when the Sun, Moon and Earth are aligned on the ecliptic, an imaginary line in space circumscribing the apparent orbit of the sun around the earth. The Moon wanders north and south of the ecliptic during the course of each month. In prehistoric art, this movement is often represented by a wavy line or a serpent, perhaps giving rise to the naming of the moon's nodes (points in the northern and southern hemispheres where the moon's orbit crosses the ecliptic) as the serpent's head and tail.

The King is Dead

Historically, in all cultures, eclipses were thought to be bad omens. Their accurate prediction was often considered a matter of life and death. Solar eclipses were deemed particularly lethal to rulers, the Sun being a symbol of kingship. In 2134 B.C. two royal astronomers, were beheaded for failing to perform the eclipse rites that would protect the Chinese Emperor — also known as the 'Son of the Sky'— from the celestial dragon. The death of Empress Suiko of Japan was attributed to the total eclipse of April 10th, 628 A.D. *The Anglo Saxon Chronicles* for May 1, 664 A.D. record, "In this year the Sun was eclipsed ... and Earcenbryht, the King of the Kentish people died." Emperor Louis of Bavaria, son of Charlemagne, supposedly died of fright during the 5 minutes of eclipse totality he witnessed in 840 A.D. As late as the 17th Century England, John Milton wrote in *Paradise Lost*: "The Sun in dim eclipse disastrous twilight sheds on half the nations, and with fear of change perplexes monarchs."

Wars have been won and lost because of eclipses. The most famous eclipse of classical times occurred on May 28, 585 B.C. in the midst of a battle between the Medes and the Lydians. According to Greek historian Herodotus, when "the day was turned into night", both sides immediately ceased hostilities. Conversely, Thucydides tells of the demise of Athens due to a delay in the departure of a military expedition against the Syracusians. Soothsayers had prescribed that they remain in port thrice nine days following a lunar eclipse.

The Good Book

The Bible is filled with prophetic eclipse references, e.g. "*The sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood*, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the lord." (Acts 2:20) "Immediately after the tribulation of those days, *the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light*;" (Matthew 24:2) "And on that day," says the Lord God, "*I will make the Sun go down at noon, and darken the Earth in broad daylight*." (Amos Chapter 8, Verse 9 - Old Testament) This reference to the eclipse of June 15, 763 B.C. is confirmed by an Assyrian historical record known as the *Eponym Canon*. Clearly, eclipses were considered "Acts of God", be it Zeus, Jehovah or the dragon god.

The best known biblical eclipse occurred during the crucifixion: "Now from the sixth hour until the ninth hour, *there was darkness over all the land*. And about the ninth hour, Jesus cried out with a loud voice saying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Two Romanian

astronomers were able to pinpoint the time and date of the crucifixion because records show that a solar eclipse occurred on Friday afternoon, April 3rd in 33 AD. The heavens were mirroring the loss of He who said “I am the light and the way”. Synchronistically, Pope John Paul II, whose official title as pontiff was “Christ’s representative on earth”, was born under a solar eclipse (May 18, 1920) and buried during a rare annular total eclipse (April 8, 2005).

The Shadow Knows

Eclipse lore may seem like quaint superstition, however, the legacy of negative imprinting remains within the collective psyche. Eclipses still pack a punch. Two metaphorical eclipse themes are prevalent. First, eclipses exemplify the archetypal battle between light and darkness, e.g. good vs. evil, enlightenment vs. ignorance or “being in the dark”, Heaven, realm of celestial light and Hell, the underworld. In modern psychological terms the conscious and the subconscious minds are containers for light and dark. The blockage of light reveals what’s hiding in the shadows.

Eclipses cast long shadows, both literally and figuratively. The physical shadow falls on the earth in all areas where the eclipse is visible. Catastrophe, the symbolic shadow, often follows in the path of an eclipse. To whit, on August 18th of 1999, Turkey suffered a deadly earthquake on the heels of the August 11th total eclipse of the sun. Following the quake, new revelations of illegal, substandard construction practices, responsible for the needless deaths of thousands, created a national scandal.

The second concept, *to eclipse* can be defined as *to make less outstanding or important by comparison* (per Webster’s Dictionary). Additionally, eclipses reflect symbols of the signs of the zodiac in which they occur. For example, within days after the October 3rd, 2005 annular solar eclipse in Libra (sign of the peacemaker), a massive earthquake eclipsed a decades long war between India and Pakistan over disputed territory in Kashmir. The old adversaries were forced to cease hostilities and cooperate in rescue operations.

Heading North

Third, eclipses reflect symbols of the astrological axis on which they occur. A pair of eclipses in September of 2006—a Pisces lunar on the 7th and a Virgo solar on the 22nd, just before the Autumn Equinox, brought Virgo/Pisces issues to the fore. The moon’s nodes entered Pisces (North) and Virgo (south) on June 23rd 2006 and remained there until December 18th 2008. Symbolically, the nodes represent our evolutionary path. The South Node represents the past, and the North, the future. Nodes in our birth charts are personal, while the transiting nodes speak to the collective experience. The Nodes urge us to leave behind what no longer serves us (South) and embrace the new (North). Eclipses trigger this process.

Revelations

Space.com, carried this commentary on the lunar eclipse of September 7th 2006: “Unfortunately, North Americans will be completely shut out of this event, as it will be happening during the daytime when the Moon is below the horizon...For soldiers in *Iraq and Afghanistan*, the entire eclipse will be visible from start to finish beginning a few hours after moonrise.” Washington experienced the repercussions of this eclipse by proxy, as revelations of gross mismanagement (South Node in Virgo ruled) of the war surfaced. A timely tell-all expose hit bookstores on October 3rd. In “State of Denial”, Bob Woodward takes readers behind the scenes, into

Rumsfeld's "shadow government" and lays bare the arrogance and incompetence within the DOD. Descriptions of the bloated, ineffectual, entrenched bureaucracy (also Virgo ruled) are especially appalling. Those not wishing to plough through all 526 pages can listen to an abridged audio CD or read an excerpt in NEWSWEEK (Oct 9 2006) that captures the essence of the book.

Philanthropist, George Soros, interviewed on "Charlie Rose" (PBS October 13th) made this bold statement, "We must repudiate the war on terror" he said, "because it has diverted our attention from everything else that we need to be doing." Some causes he named that have been "eclipsed" are global warming, HIV AIDS, disaster relief, and genocide.

Amazing Grace

By contrast, even in this imperfect world, there are some rare and inspiring moments. Enter the Pisces North Node. Dateline NBC aired three remarkable stories on Friday October 7th. The subject matter appeared, on the surface, to be the usual sensationalistic fare—aftermath of the Amish school shooting, and interviews with families of two murdered teens. However, instead of the predictable anger, all parties were preaching forgiveness—a cornerstone of Piscean spiritual philosophy. Members of the Amish community forgave gunman, Charles Roberts, attended his funeral and prayed for his wife and children, even including them as beneficiaries of a charitable fund set up to help victims' families. In a letter of gratitude to Amish Elders, Roberts' widow, (quoted in a segment of NBC News, October 15, entitled "Amazing Grace") stated "your compassion is reaching out beyond your community and changing the world".

In Dateline's second feature, parents of slain schoolgirl, Emily Keyes, spoke about the "*I Love You Guys Foundation*", established as a memoriam "*to restore and protect the joy of youth through educational programs...in collaboration with families, schools and communities*" They also initiated a campaign in their hometown of Bailey Colorado called "*random acts of kindness for Emily*." In segment three, Craig Scott, whose sister, Rachel, had been the first to die in the shooting rampage at Columbine High School, said in an interview that his "most important step was to forgive the gunmen, and that doing so set him free".

Light Reappears

The North Node in Pisces encourages us to embrace a kinder, gentler way of life. Its lessons of forgiveness, compassion and grace are full of wisdom. Pisces dissolves boundaries--between ourselves and others; our separate selves and our Creator. All great spiritual traditions (Pisces ruled) teach that the Spirit of God lives within us as our inner light. We are being summoned to counteract the darkness by shining our own light into the world. Doing so illuminates the path for others to follow. We are the light and the way!

