

## THALLUS AND THE DARKNESS AT CHRIST'S DEATH

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It is commonly claimed that a chronologer named Thallus, writing shortly after 52 CE, mentioned the crucifixion of Jesus and the noontime darkness surrounding it (which reportedly eclipsed the whole world for three hours), and attempted to explain it as an ordinary solar eclipse.<sup>1</sup> But this is not a credible interpretation of the evidence. A stronger case can be made that we actually have a direct quotation of what Thallus said, and it does not mention Jesus.

The darkness at Christ's death is first mentioned in the Synoptic Gospels, which all derive the claim from the same source: the Gospel according to Mark.<sup>2</sup> The Gospel according to John makes no mention of it (no reference to it appears in the account of Jesus' death in John 19 or elsewhere) nor does any other New Testament writer. For all that we know, the claim was invented by Mark, either to fulfill prophecy<sup>3</sup> or to symbolize Jesus' death as that of a great king.<sup>4</sup> The event was certainly unhistorical. The crucifixion by all accounts occurred on or near the Passover, which

1. For typical (and, as will be shown here, often erroneous) views and further references, see Robert Van Voorst, *Jesus outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 20-23; Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 84-85.

2. Mark 15.33; Mt. 27.45; Lk. 23.44-45. Some later (apocryphal) Gospels and texts (like the *Gospel of Nicodemus*) also borrow or even embellish the claim.

3. Most likely Amos 8.9 ('I will cause the sun to go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in the clear day'; v. 8 even mentions an earthquake, duly inserted by Matthew in 27.51-53), but there were many to choose from, none of which were any stranger than others the New Testament authors regarded as prophecies of their Christ: e.g. Mic. 7.8; Amos 5.20; Joel 2.31-32; Ezek. 32.7-8; Isa. 60.1-2.

4. It was common lore of the time that the sun would be eclipsed at the death of a great king: John Lydus, *Ost.* 70a; see, for example, Herodotus, *Hist.* 7.37; Plutarch, *Pel.* 31.3 and *Aem.* 17.7-11; Dio Cassius, *Hist. rom.* 55.29.3.

always took place during a full moon when a solar eclipse is impossible (the moon being then on the other side of the planet), and solar eclipses last only minutes, not three hours, and darken only a relatively narrow track along the earth, not the whole world. Such an impossible event would not fail to be widely recorded among the records and authors of the era. A more ordinary event (like a dense cloud-front passing over Jerusalem in just those three hours) is clearly not what was imagined by the Synoptic authors. Luke outright calls the event an eclipse of the sun, and Mark surely intended something as awesome.

It is in this context that the following quote is often cited, which was preserved by the ninth-century Christian chronologer George Syncellus from a now lost work by the early third-century Christian author Julius Africanus:

This event followed each of his deeds, and healings of body and soul, and knowledge of hidden things, and his resurrection from the dead, all sufficiently proven to the disciples before us and to his apostles: after the most dreadful darkness fell over the whole world, the rocks were torn apart by an earthquake and much of Judaea and the rest of the land was torn down.<sup>5</sup> Thallus calls this darkness an eclipse of the sun in the third book of his *Histories*, without reason it seems to me. For the Hebrews celebrate the passover on the 14th day, reckoning by the lunar calendar, and the events concerning the savior all occurred before the first day of the Passover. But an eclipse of the sun happens when the moon creeps under the sun, and this is impossible at any other time but between the first day of the moon's waxing and the day before that, when the new moon begins. So how are we to believe that an eclipse happened when the moon was diametrically opposite the sun? In fact, let it be so. Let the idea that this happened seize and carry away the multitude, and let the cosmic prodigy be counted as

5. Likewise mythical. The occurrence of a rock-splitting earthquake is claimed in only one source (Mt. 27.51-53, thus it is not even in Matthew's own source, Mark, nor corroborated by Luke or John) and is surely a fabrication: the complete absence of its social and material effects in the narrative of Acts is sufficient proof, but it likewise gets no notice in any other writer of the era, nor finds any archaeological support (yet material evidence of such a thing as Africanus describes would certainly be detectable now). The only earthquake confirmed for Palestine between 26 and 36 CE was 'not energetic enough to produce' visible effects of this magnitude, in contrast with another in 31 BCE already noted by Josephus and extensively confirmed in surviving physical evidence (including cracked rocks and damaged human structures), according to Jefferson B. Williams, Markus J. Schwab and A. Brauer, 'An Early First-Century Earthquake in the Dead Sea', *International Geology Review* 54.10 (May 2012), pp. 1219-28.

an eclipse of the sun according to its appearance. [Phlegon reports that in the time of Tiberius Caesar, during the full moon, a full eclipse of the sun happened, from the sixth hour until the ninth. Clearly this is our eclipse!] What is commonplace about an earthquake, an eclipse, rocks torn apart, a rising of the dead, and such a huge cosmic movement? At the very least, over a long period, no conjunction this great is remembered. But it was a godsent darkness, because the Lord happened to suffer, and the Bible, in Daniel, supports that seventy spans of seven years would come together up to this time.<sup>6</sup>

From this it is not clear what Thallus actually said. All we are told is that ‘Thallus calls *this* darkness an eclipse of the sun in the third book of his *Histories*’, which does not actually say Thallus mentioned Jesus. That inference may derive from Julius Africanus. The fact that he felt free to make such an inference from Phlegon (who, as we shall later see, did not say the eclipse lasted three hours, or that it occurred during a full moon, nor place it anywhere near Palestine—yet the remark here assumes he said all three) leaves us free to assume he did much the same with Thallus. Unless, as seems likely, this entire reference to Phlegon is an interpolation,<sup>7</sup> but even if so, the interpolator was making the same loose

6. Julius Africanus, *Chron.* 18.2 (as preserved in George Syncellus, *Chron.* 391). For a thorough and still essential and illuminating discussion of this passage, see Felix Jacoby, *Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* (Leiden: Brill, 1954), § 256 (Thallus) and § 257 (Phlegon). For a translation and commentary of Jacoby’s § 256, see Richard Carrier, ‘Jacoby and Müller on “Thallus”’, *The Secular Web* (1999) at [http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard\\_carrier/jacoby.html](http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/jacoby.html). The passage quoted here from Julius Africanus is presented and discussed by Jacoby in § 256 F1.

7. That it is likely an interpolation was astutely noticed by Martin Routh, *Reliquiae Sacrae* (1814), II, pp. 335-38. Hence I put it in brackets to show how it breaks the flow of argument and to indicate that it is uncertain from the hand of Africanus. There are various telltale signs (grammatical and rhetorical), but most indicative is the fact that Africanus is making the point that the conjunction of events (eclipse, earthquake, resurrections) is what is remarkable, yet doesn’t think to mention that Phlegon also reported a conjunction (of eclipse and earthquake), thus this remark is disconnected from the argument being made. It looks like an accidental interpolation of a later marginal note, on which phenomenon, quite common in manuscript transmission generally, see W. Hall, *A Companion to Classical Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), pp. 193-97; Robert Renehan, *Greek Textual Criticism: A Reader* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 36 (§ 32); Miroslav Marcovich, *Patristic Textual Criticism* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), s.v. ‘Interpolations’, Index; Martin West, *Textual Criticism and Editorial Technique Applicable to Greek and Latin Texts* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1973), p. 28; and Paul Maas, *Textual Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), pp. 34-35 (§ 33) and p. 14 (§ 16).

inferences, and thus so might Africanus have been. If Thallus connected an eclipse with a destructive earthquake in the same year Africanus had just calculated the crucifixion must have occurred (which year he derives prophetically from Daniel, rather than from a historical source), that would be enough to lead Africanus to conclude Thallus was talking about ‘this’ same darkness (the one Africanus had just mentioned, which also occurred alongside a destructive earthquake). We cannot claim to be certain Africanus meant anything more than that.

That alone is enough to alert us that this reference may be unreliable in the study of early Christianity and its sources and claims. But the problems multiply.

### *Dating Thallus*

We do not know when Thallus wrote. Claims are boldly made that it must have been shortly after 52 CE, but that is based solely on a conjectural emendation of a corrupted text.<sup>8</sup> In an Armenian translation of the *Chronicle* of Eusebius, a list of references is given (not preserved in the Greek) in which Eusebius says he used ‘three volumes of Thallus, in which he made a summary in abbreviated fashion from the sack of Troy to the 167th Olympiad’, which would mean from the twelfth century BCE until 109 BCE, concluding much too early for Thallus to have covered events in the first century CE.<sup>9</sup> But this passage must be referring to the same *Histories* cited by Africanus, since if Thallus had written other books on chronology or history the reference in Eusebius would have been more specific (that he just says ‘the three volumes of Thallus’ means he was certain no one would be confused as to which treatise was meant, or which Thallus), and Africanus says he found the reference to an event

8. The ‘corroborating’ claim that a Thallus is mentioned by Josephus as living in the reign of Tiberius is not only false (the text does not present the name Thallus), it is irrelevant (as no mention is made there of this person being a writer, and the name Thallus, even were it there, was common). This has long been known (see Horace Rigg, ‘Thallus: The Samaritan?’ *HTR* 34 [1941], pp. 111-19), so no historian today should still repeat these claims. For further discussion of this problem, see P. Prigent, ‘Thallos, Phlégon et le Testimonium Flavianum témoins de Jésus?’, in Frederick Bruce (ed.), *Paganisme, Judaïsme, Christianisme: Influences et Affrontements dans le Monde Antique* (Paris: Bocard, 1978), pp. 329-34; Ida Miévis, ‘A propos de la correction “Thallos” dans les “Antiquités Judaïques” de Flavius Josèphe’, *Revue Belge de Philologie et d’Histoire* 13 (1934), pp. 733-40.

9. Jacoby, *Fragmente*, § 256 T1.

at the time of Christ in the third volume of Thallus, which perfectly fits a three volume work that concluded its timeline in the first (or second) century. So it seems most likely that the Armenian text has become corrupted, and the concluding date was something other than 109 BCE.

Indeed that is what most scholars have concluded. However, it is typically claimed that the most likely correction to the text brings us a closing date at the 207th Olympiad, or 52 CE, but there is no solid basis for this conclusion. That is simply one suggestion made by one textual critic (and that two hundred years ago). In actual fact, any number of corruptions were possible (far beyond those that have happened to be suggested), and some are even more likely than this one. Apart from probability there is no principled way to choose between them—while choosing on the grounds of probability would sooner indicate an original reading of the 217th Olympiad, which ends in 92 CE, or even the 227th or 237th Olympiads, which end in 132 or 172 CE respectively.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the date 52 CE may not be right at all. The correct logic would hold that Thallus most likely wrote in the second century, since pagan notice of the Gospels is unattested before that century, and any given author is more likely to be typical than wholly exceptional. If, that is, Thallus was responding to the Gospels. But that is very unlikely.

### *What Thallus Said*

The *Chronicle* of Eusebius quotes Phlegon verbatim, the text of which is attested in Syncellus in the original Greek, but also in the Latin of Jerome, a Syrian epitome, and the Armenian. Translating from the Greek:

Jesus Christ, according to the prophecies which had been foretold, underwent his passion in the 18th year of Tiberius [32 CE]. Also at that time in other Greek compendiums we find an event recorded in these words: ‘the sun was

10. An analysis is provided in Carrier, “Jacoby.” The conjecture that produces an end-date of 52 CE requires transforming the Greek numeral ρχζ into σζ, while the conjecture that produces an end-date of 92 CE requires transforming ρχζ into σιζ, either way two errors (or even three in the former case), while a likelier error (on grounds of orthography) would be to mistake ρχζ for σκζ, which brings us an end date of the 227th Olympiad, which concludes in 132 CE, or even to mistake ρχζ for σλζ, which brings us an end date of the 237th Olympiad, which concludes in 172 CE. These are just the most likely. Any number of other errors could have occurred, giving us virtually any conceivable date. And this end date is also not necessarily the publication date (Thallus may have brought his chronology only up to a certain year, possibly decades before his own time).

eclipsed, Bithynia was struck by an earthquake, and in the city of Nicaea many buildings fell'. All these things happened to occur during the Lord's passion. In fact, Phlegon, too, a distinguished reckoner of Olympiads, wrote more on these events in his 13th book, saying this: 'Now, in the fourth year of the 202nd Olympiad [32 CE], a great eclipse of the sun occurred at the sixth hour [i.e. noon] that excelled every other before it, turning the day into such darkness of night that the stars could be seen in heaven, and the earth moved in Bithynia, toppling many buildings in the city of Nicaea'.<sup>11</sup>

We know Eusebius used a chronology of Thallus as a source, and that it was almost certainly the very same *Histories* cited by Africanus. The implications of this are decisive: if the *Histories* of Thallus mentioned the eclipse in connection with Jesus, Eusebius would certainly have quoted Thallus here to that very effect. Instead, Eusebius knows only a passage in Phlegon (the one also referenced in the extant text of Africanus, although here, notably, quoted verbatim, even though it *does not* mention Jesus, proving how more certainly Eusebius would have quoted *Thallus* verbatim if *he* had mentioned Jesus) and 'other Greek chronologers'. The latter must mean Thallus, as well as, if we take the intention to be plural, some others who repeated the same exact line—possibly compilers who, like Eusebius now, were just quoting Thallus—because Eusebius says they all recorded the event κατὰ λέξιν ταῦτα 'with this phrase'.

It is even possible (in fact, more than merely possible) that Eusebius originally wrote ἐν θαλλοῦ μὲν ἑλληνικοῖς ὑπομνήμασιν rather than ἐν ἄλλοις μὲν ἑλληνικοῖς ὑπομνήμασιν, since only two errors are required to alter the one to the other (the loss of a theta, and a confusion or 'emendation' converting an upsilon to iota-sigma, thereby transforming θαλλοῦ into ἄλλοις). In fact, the plural ἄλλοις, even if original, can mean the singular ('a Greek compendium'), since the adjective modifies the noun, and the noun is always plural (e.g. Thallus's book is the *Histories*, plural), and therefore Eusebius might in fact be quoting a single treatise, the *Histories* of Thallus, just without bothering to name him. This conclusion requires no conjectured error in the text (it can be what the text as we have it literally means). But arguing for a corrupted text (and that Eusebius actually named and was originally *explicitly* quoting Thallus) is the fact that it seems odd to say 'another Greek compendium' before you have named even one. Replace 'another' with 'Thallus's' and the passage makes much better sense.

But even if Eusebius really said (and meant) 'other' Greek writers,

11. George Syncellus, *Chron.* 394.

he must have meant Thallus among them. This conclusion follows from three undeniable premises: Eusebius is quoting some number of unnamed Greek chronologers who wrote the same line; Eusebius was using Thallus, a Greek chronologer, as a source, and almost certainly the very same book by Thallus that Africanus cited; and Eusebius does not reference or quote Thallus here in any other respect, even though he certainly would have (and thus certainly is). For if he bothered to do this for Phlegon and other 'unnamed' authors who mention the same event, he could hardly have omitted Thallus (*especially* if Thallus actually mentioned Jesus, since none of these other authors did). So we must assume he *is not* omitting Thallus, but including him among the several 'others' (or the one 'other') he quotes a line from. Therefore we can conclude that to a very high probability the passage in the third book of the *Histories* of Thallus that Julius Africanus was referring to said only this: 'The sun was eclipsed; Bithynia was struck by an earthquake; and in the city of Nicaea many buildings fell'. This means Thallus probably made no reference to Jesus, nor showed any knowledge of the Gospels (e.g. the eclipse is not said to have occurred in Palestine; and Bithynia is in Turkey, nowhere near Palestine). This would also argue for the conclusion that Thallus wrote after Phlegon (whose work is usually dated between 120 and 140 CE), as the line being quoted from Thallus appears to be an abbreviation of Phlegon, repeating the exact same sequence of eclipse of the sun, earthquake in Bithynia, and collapsed buildings in Nicaea, just with the details stripped away.

The curtness and brevity of this line is also what would be expected from a treatise that covered the history of the entire world over the enormous course of twelve centuries in only three scrolls. Whereas, by contrast, refutation of claims made in the literature of obscure cults is what would *not* be expected from such a treatise, there being neither room nor purpose for such a thing. Therefore the *Histories* of Thallus probably contained no such thing. And from the evidence of Eusebius, we can be virtually certain that it did not. Therefore Thallus should be removed from lists of writers attesting to Jesus, and Thallus's most probable floruit should be revised to the middle to late second century.