

SIGNS AND WONDERS

A COSMIC JOURNEY THROUGH THE SCRIPTURES

by Fleur Dorrell

Nature is extremely important throughout the Bible as it signals God's creative presence and power in time and space.

In the dominant pagan religions, the people consulted astrologers to understand the stars and invoked their gods to change the weather, usually for safe travel, a good harvest or fertility, and with mixed success! Yet, the Scriptures depict the one true God as commanding all the natural elements and using this cosmic power to convey different aspects of divinity. From floods, destruction and earthquakes to rainbows, fires and clouds; from moons, eclipses and comets to the beauty of the constellations - these signs and wonders signify both God's immanence and transcendence.

God calls specific people and spirits at different times and places to fulfil his mission. From Noah, Moses and Abraham to the Prophets, Archangels and Mary, these servants of faith challenge the people with their actions and beliefs. They work with the natural and supernatural spheres in obedience to God. Their journey is part of our journey as they lead us to Christ.

Creation of the world and the Exodus

In **Genesis 1** God divides the world into two spheres – heaven and earth. The Spirit hovers over the earth just as it will later hover over Mary at the Annunciation, Jesus at his baptism and the apostles at Pentecost. We do not know where the Spirit comes from or where it will blow says **John 3:8**. God sends the sign of the rainbow to renew the created order as Noah and his family step out of the Ark onto dry land.

After 40 tough years, God led the people out of Egypt, through the Red Sea by means of a pillar of cloud at day and of fire at night. In the New Testament, the wonder of the crossing of the Red Sea becomes both an allegorical sign of Christ's victory and of the wonder of our re-birth in Christian baptism today.

Seen and Unseen

Throughout the Bible the mystery of God is expressed as both presence and absence, the history of salvation both conceals and reveals Divine identity. Some images recur perhaps because of their ability to escape definition. So God appears in flames such as with Moses and the burning bush (**Exodus 3:1-22**) and in the fiery furnace with the martyrs Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego (**Daniel 3**). On Pentecost Day the Holy Spirit appears as tongues of fire above the apostles' heads (**Acts 2**).

God visits Elijah in a breeze outside his cave (**1 Kings 19:1-18**) and hides in several clouds with Moses and his people (**Exodus 33:9-10; 40:34** and **Leviticus 16:2**). Clouds and mountains are vehicles for conveying messages such as at Mount Sinai (**Exodus 19,20; Numbers 3; Deuteronomy 11:29; Joshua 8:33; Nehemiah 9:13-14**), and at the Mount of Olives (**2 Samuel 15**). Mount Carmel is where Elijah defeats the priests of Baal and Yahweh wins the day (**1 Kings 18:17-46**).

Jesus among the Mountains

Mountains are where Jesus teaches the Beatitudes in **Matthew 5** and where the devil tries to tempt him (**Matthew 4:7; Luke 4:1-13**). Jesus chooses the 12 disciples on a mountain (**Luke 6:12-16**), and it is the place of his Transfiguration within a cloud (**Matthew 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36** and **2 Peter 1:16-18**). Jesus prays on various mountains (**Matthew 14:23; Mark 6:46; Luke 6:12; 22:39; John 6:15**) and heals many people (**Matthew 15:29-31**).

But he tells the Samaritan woman that the day will come when she and all believers will worship in spirit and in truth and no longer in Temples or Holy Mountains like her Mount Gerizim (**John 4:19-21**). Clouds become signs of presence and hiddenness as Elijah disappears through them taken up into heaven in the fiery heavenly chariot (**2 Kings 2:11**). And ever since, they have become a symbol of the mystical journey of the soul to God. Jesus ascends to Heaven through the clouds (**Acts 1:9-12**). Elsewhere he predicts the end times while sitting on the Mount of Olives and of his coming on the clouds of heaven (**Matthew 24** and **Revelation 1:7**).

Eclipses and earthquakes

Light and darkness are consistent themes throughout the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation and most especially in John's Gospel, but it is at the crucifixion of Jesus that the world descends into total darkness with an eclipse (**Matthew 27:45; Mark 15:33** and **Luke 23:44**). Earthquakes are signs of disaster as well as triumph such as Ezekiel's prophecy on the destruction of Gog (**Ezekiel 38:18-20**). Jesus' death and resurrection begin with two earthquakes in Matthew's Gospel (**Matthew 27:51-56; 28:2-3**).

Celestial beings

Celestial beings come in many types and forms in Scripture including as the sun which rises and sets each day (**Ecclesiastes 1:5**) and the moon which divides day from night (**Genesis 1:16** and **Psalms 136:9**). Then there are the stars in the night sky (**Genesis 1:14-15**) which are praised (**Psalms 8:3-4; 19:1; 136:7-9; 147:4**), marvelled at (**Job 38:7; Isaiah 40:26**), and categorised (**1 Corinthians 15:41**). The constellations of the Great Bear, Orion and the Pleiades which we can identify in the night sky today, are named and looked upon in awe as signs of the Creator's power (**Job 9:1-10** and **Amos 5:8**).

Three messengers reveal that Abraham and Sarah's descendants will be as numerous as the stars (**Genesis 26:4**) while Mary will be crowned with 12 of them (**Revelation 12:1**). Three wise men from the East followed a star to Bethlehem until it settled where Jesus was born (**Matthew 2:1-12**) and this star had been predicted way back in time (**Numbers 24:17**).

Archangels

References to the three main Archangels: Michael, Gabriel and Raphael are found in **Tobit 12:15; Isaiah 63:9** and **Revelation 1:4, 20; 3:1; 8:2,6**.

Michael is the angel who led the forces of Heaven in casting out Satan when he rebelled against God (**Daniel 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 9; Revelation 12:7-9**).

Gabriel appeared to the Prophet Daniel to explain a vision from God (**Daniel 8**) and announced to the priest Zechariah that he would have a son, John the Baptist, to be the forerunner of the Messiah (**Luke 1:1-24**). Gabriel's most important mission on earth was to the Virgin Mary, at the Annunciation (**Luke 1:26-38**).

In the Book of Tobit, Raphael guides Tobias, the son of Tobit on his journey to restore financial stability to their family, to heal his father from blindness, and to free his kinswoman Sarah from a possessive demon, resulting in the blessing of a happy marriage and long life. Unlike other archangels in the Bible, Raphael appears first in disguise as a human being and with a different name, only revealing who he really is at the end of the book.

Christian tradition has identified Raphael's healing powers with the angel who stirred the waters in the Pool of Bethesda (**John 5:2-9**).