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Abstract Aspects of the three days of darkness following the three-hour period of intense destruction described principally in 3 Nephi include: (1) the strange absence of rain among the destructive mechanisms described; (2) the source of the intense lightning, which seems to be unaccompanied by rain; (3) a mechanism to account for the inundation of the cities of Onihah, Mocum, and Jerusalem, which were not among the cities which “sunk in the depths of the sea”; and (4) the absence in the histories of contemporary European and Asiatic civilizations of corresponding events, which are repeatedly characterized in 3 Nephi as affecting “the face of the whole earth.”

An Hypothesis concerning the Three Days of Darkness among the Nephites

Russell H. Ball

Abstract: Aspects of the three days of darkness following the three-hour period of intense destruction described principally in 3 Nephi are discussed, including: (1) the strange absence of rain among the destructive mechanisms described; (2) the source of the intense lightning, which seems to be unaccompanied by rain; (3) a mechanism to account for the inundation of the cities of Onihah, Mocum, and Jerusalem, which were not among the cities which "sunk in the depths of the sea"; and (4) the absence in the histories of contemporary European and Asiatic civilizations of corresponding events, which are repeatedly characterized in 3 Nephi as affecting "the face of the whole earth."



The above drawing illustrates one type of volcanic eruption in which intense lightning can be generated within the ash cloud above the volcano.¹ A full-color photograph of such an eruption of the Sakura-jima Volcano in southern Japan on 17 November 1987 was published in the April 1988 issue of *Discover*.² This volcano erupted more than one hundred times in 1987 and spewed molten rock and hot gases into the sky. During these eruptions a small amount of magma was released constantly, rather than all at once, as at Mount St. Helens. The surprising feature of the photo is the presence of a large number of lightning bolts in the ash cloud above the volcano. The lightning is triggered by the buildup of static electricity in the cloud of erupting ash. Friction among the swirling particles causes them to become electrically charged.

Period of Destruction and Darkness among the Nephites

The above-mentioned photo prompted me to examine 3 Nephi 8 and 9 again and to reevaluate the description of the three-hour period of destruction and darkness which followed the crucifixion of the Savior. A detailed examination of this text and related scriptures conveys quite a different story than I had previously recognized.

It is instructive to list all of the mechanisms of destruction described in 3 Nephi 8 and 9. There we find mention of

- a great and terrible tempest (3 Nephi 8:6)
- terrible thunder that shook the *whole earth* (3 Nephi 8:6)
- exceedingly sharp lightnings, such as never had been known in all the land (3 Nephi 8:7)
- earth being *carried up* upon the city of Moronihah (3 Nephi 8:10)³
- whirlwinds (3 Nephi 8:12)
- earthquakes which roughened many smooth places and caused some cities to sink, some to burn, and the buildings of some to collapse (3 Nephi 8:13–14)
- destruction for about three hours (3 Nephi 8:19)⁴

¹ I wish to thank Elise Barrett for the redrawing included here.

² Mark Kemp, "Power Surge," *Discover the World of Science* (April 1988): 40–41.

³ Landslides carry earth down, not up.

⁴ Note that even massive earthquakes like the one that devastated San Francisco last for only a minute or so.

- cities sunk in the sea (3 Nephi 9:4, 6–7)
- the burning of cities (3 Nephi 9:9–10)
- darkness to such an extent that not a glimmer of light was seen for three days (3 Nephi 6:20–22); indeed, according to the prophecy of Helaman, “darkness should cover the face of the whole earth for the space of three days” (Helaman 14:27)

Methods of destruction of the wicked are summarized in 3 Nephi 10:13–14:

- sunk and buried in the earth
- drowned in the depths of the sea
- burned by fire
- fallen upon and crushed to death
- carried away in the whirlwind
- overpowered by the vapor of smoke and of darkness (thus the atmosphere was suffocating in some places, but not generally)
- swallowed up by the opening of the earth to receive them
- In addition, the cities of Jerusalem, Mocum, and Onihah were destroyed when waters “[came] up in the stead thereof” (3 Nephi 9:7).

Note that one typical feature of thunderstorms is missing, namely heavy rains. A possible exception is the last cited reference, in which the flooding mentioned might imply heavy rains. Even in that reference, however, an unusual mechanism is involved (the waters “come up upon” the cities). Landslides, which may have dammed rivers, or which may have caused large waves to spread across lakes, could have caused water to “come up upon” some cities. The inundation of the Utah community of Thistle in 1983 is an example of this phenomenon. A landslide dammed a small river, and the lake which formed flooded the town. The city of Jerusalem was located close to the waters of Mormon; hence, it may have been flooded by one of these mechanisms. The Book of Mormon text provides no clues to the location of the cities of Mocum or Onihah.

Thus, all instances of destruction of cities by water involve either the subsidence of coastal cities into the sea, or of having waters “to *come up* in the stead thereof.” Having waters “come up” upon some cities could be accounted for either by the flooding of rivers, or by the blocking of rivers by landslides and the subsequent formation of artificial lakes.

However, explicit mention is made in 3 Nephi 8:21 of the impossibility of lighting their candles or torches or their

exceedingly dry wood. The emphasis on the existence of dry wood after the destructive events seems to rule out the flooding of rivers, since it would have followed heavy rains, a fact which seems incompatible with the emphasis on dry wood.

Thus, it seems quite clear that this period of devastation included no rain. But without rain, whence all that lightning and thunder? The answer may be provided in the sketch above of the eruption of the Sakura-jima Volcano in Japan. It can be seen that fine volcanic ash is also very effective in generating lightning. If volcanic eruptions lasted several hours, as described in 3 Nephi, the enormous amount of ash discharged would have blanketed a large region and would have produced intense local darkness.⁵

The inability to ignite the exceedingly dry wood is interesting in view of the fact that a few people are also described as dying from suffocation during the period of destruction which preceded the period of darkness (3 Nephi 10:13). This suggests that in some regions the concentration of dense volcanic gases (carbon dioxide and sulfur dioxide) at ground level was sufficient to prevent igniting of the kindling and to cause suffocation. The uncle of Pliny died of suffocation as a consequence of a volcanic eruption.

James Baer notes that volcanic eruptions could have accompanied the violent earthquake described in 3 Nephi. He notes that these would have made the atmosphere dark with dust and cinders and would have released carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, and sulfurous gases, which would have been suffocating and could have made fire kindling impossible.⁶

Another mechanism, however, seems an equally likely explanation of the inability to ignite the dry tinder. If one assumes that sparks from flint were the common method of starting fires, then the heavy ash fall could have been effective in preventing ignition. This heavy ash fall also offers a likely explanation for the terms *mist of darkness* and *vapor of darkness* used in 1 Nephi 12:4-5.

This apparently is the first time the Nephites had experienced earthquakes approaching this intensity, and they seem to have assumed incorrectly that thunder was the cause of the earthquakes: "there was terrible thunder, insomuch that it did

⁵ See Pliny's account of the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in the Appendix to this paper.

⁶ James Baer, "The Third Nephi Disaster: A Geological View," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19/1 (Spring 1986): 129-32.

shake the whole earth as if it was about to divide asunder" (3 Nephi 8:6). The roughening of smooth places, the subsidence of some areas, and the building of a "great mountain" in the place where the city of Moronihah had been (3 Nephi 8:10) are events clearly associated with very severe seismic and volcanic activity. The thunder and the shaking of the ground were actually independent, both caused by severe seismic events.

Hugh Nibley reports that sometimes an earthquake can be heard before it is felt. Nibley notes that in the Assam earthquake of 1950, one thing stressed in all reports was that an awful rumble heralded the quake, a deafening roar, louder than anything any of the witnesses had ever heard before. Nibley notes that the Book of Mormon describes the continuous sounds as "dreadful groanings . . . and . . . tumultuous noises" (3 Nephi 10:9). He also notes that in the Assam earthquake "strong winds raised the dust until visibility was reduced to a few feet."⁷ The great earthquake that completely destroyed the old capital of Guatemala in 1541 was preceded by " 'the fury of the wind, the incessant, appalling lightning and dreadful thunder' that were 'indescribable' in their violence."⁸

Joseph L. Allen, in his book, *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon*, lists the following recent major destructive activities in Mesoamerica:

1976 Massive earthquake in Guatemala/Land Southward. Guatemala has 33 volcanic mountains.

1982 Earthquake in State of Oaxaca/Land Northward.

1983 Volcanic eruption in El Chichonal in the State of Chiapas/Land Southward.

1985 Destructive earthquake in Mexico City/Land Northward.

1988 Destruction by Hurricane Gilbert/Land Southward and Land Northward.

In the 1940s in the City of Pericutin, State of Michoacan, west of Mexico City, a volcanic eruption caused the earth to cover the entire village. The only visible evidence remaining of the community is the

⁷ Hugh Nibley, "Some Fairly Foolproof Tests," in *Since Cumorah*, 2d ed., vol. 7 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 233, citing Nicholas H. Heck, *Earthquakes* (New York: Hafner, 1936; repr. 1965), 118.

⁸ Nibley, "Some Fairly Foolproof Tests," 233.

steeple of the Catholic church. This event is reminiscent of what appeared to happen to the cities of Moronihah, Gadiandi, Gadiomnah, Jacob, and Gimgimno.⁹

Baer notes that:

There is a subduction zone along the west coasts of Central and South America which has created an inland mountain range and a coastal trench. The elevation difference between the tops of the mountains and the bottom of the trench approaches 40,000 feet (about 7.5 miles). This provides a terrain in which subsidence of coastal regions would be expected during severe seismic events. (This suggests that the cities which sunk into the depths of the sea were probably located along the west coast.)

Several devastating earthquakes have occurred in this area in historic times.

The "vapor of darkness" could have been the result of volcanic activity, possibly a combination of dense clouds of earthquake-caused dust and volcanic ash and smoke.

Volcanic eruptions could have accompanied the violent earthquake described in 3 Nephi. These would have made the atmosphere dark with dust and cinders, and would have released carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, and sulfurous gases.¹⁰

Hypothesis Explaining the Destruction

This general area in Mesoamerica is quite active seismically, and large areas are covered by lava flows and volcanic ash. With this background, let us formulate a hypothesis that might explain all the events described in Helaman and in 3 Nephi.

The hypothesis is composed of the following:

- The basic cause of the destruction was a tremendous seismic upheaval.

⁹ Joseph L. Allen, *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon* (Orem, UT: SA Publishers, 1985), 230.

¹⁰ Baer, "The Third Nephi Disaster," 129–32.

- Numerous destructive mechanisms were involved, but rain was not one of them.
- The accompanying period of darkness was caused by an immense local cloud of volcanic ash.
- The unprecedented lightning was due to electrical discharges within the ash cloud.
- The intense thunder was due both to the lightning and to the rumbling of the earth due to seismic movements.
- The vapor of darkness (1 Nephi 12:5; 19:11) and the mist of darkness (3 Nephi 8:20) were volcanic ash and dust stirred up by the quaking of the ground.

When a huge ash column is ejected from a volcano, it can rise to thousands of feet. When such a column collapses back on the volcano it generates an ash surge that can travel at speeds up to one hundred miles per hour. Such a surge collapses houses, breaks through windows in rigid structures, and buries the people inside in an instant. Some of the descriptions in the Book of Mormon account are consistent with such phenomena.

A striking verb is used to describe the ending of the period of darkness.

Thus did the three days pass away. And it was in the morning, and the darkness *dispersed* from off the face of the land, and the earth did cease to tremble. (3 Nephi 10:9)

This seems to parallel the statement “I saw the vapor of darkness that it passed from off the face of the earth” (1 Nephi 12:5). The phrase “dispersed from off the face of the land” suggests a breaking up and scattering, such as would characterize the eventual dispersion of an ash cloud. This verse also indicates that the trembling of the earth ended only at the end of the three-day period. Thus, the volcanoes could have been pouring forth ash all that time to sustain the darkness.

The Meaning of the Phrase *Whole Earth*

An interesting secondary problem in understanding the destruction described in 3 Nephi is the question of how to interpret the phrase *whole earth* that is used to describe the phenomenon (3 Nephi 8:6, 12, 17–18). It seems clear that this phrase should be understood as “whole land,” that is, all of the area populated by the Nephites and Lamanites. Thus, the destruction was a localized rather than a global phenomenon.

The prophecy foretelling these events was, so far as we know, given only to the Nephite prophets. These events were to be preliminary to the appearance of the Savior among the Nephites. The first indications provided in the Book of Mormon as to the limited area to be affected by these phenomena follow:

And after Christ shall have risen from the dead he shall show himself *unto you, my children*. (2 Nephi 26:1)

And after the Messiah shall come *there shall be signs given unto my people* of his birth, and also of his death and resurrection; and great and terrible shall that day be unto the wicked. (2 Nephi 26:3)

Behold, in that day that he shall suffer death the sun shall be darkened and refuse to give light unto you; and also the moon and the stars; and there shall be no light *upon the face of this land*, even from the time that he shall suffer death, for the space of three days, to the time that he shall rise again from the dead. (Helaman 14:20)

And many great destructions have I caused *to come upon this land and this people*, because of their wickedness and their abominations. (3 Nephi 9:11)

Furthermore, if the three days of darkness had indeed been global, one would expect to see records of it in the literature of the Romans, the Greeks, the Chinese, and the Persians, to name some of the great civilizations of the time. However, we find this account only in the literature of the Nephites.

Imagine for a moment how the entire world population would have reacted to the unexpected and unprecedented events of three days of light and three days of darkness, separated by only thirty-four years. It does not seem credible that such events would have escaped the historian's pen in every land. Commercial traffic by land and sea would soon have confirmed to one and all that these remarkable events had occurred everywhere. Imagine the speculation that would have abounded as to their cause. Yet not a word is to be found in any history of the period. This, at least, seems a reasonable conclusion, since Mormon scholarship of a century and a half has failed to find a history of these events—events whose dates are precisely known.

From the scriptures quoted above it is evident that advance knowledge of the three days of light and the three days of darkness was made available only to the Nephites. (Such knowledge had previously been revealed to the prophets Zenos and Zenock [3 Nephi 10:16], but a knowledge of their prophecies had apparently been among the “plain and precious things” lost prior to the time of Christ. It is only through the Book of Mormon that we even know of the existence of these two prophets. However, while a knowledge of *events* was revealed to Zenos and Zenock, the appearance of the *signs* was to be limited to the Nephites.) It thus seems clear that this was a localized phenomenon, even though the phrase *whole earth* is included in the description (3 Nephi 8:6, 12, 17–18).

Mount Vesuvius erupted in A.D. 79 and buried Pompeii and Herculaneum. Pompeii was covered by a thick layer of lava and ash. Pompeii was initially excavated between 1738 and 1756. Herculaneum experienced two ash falls from the same eruption. Because of the wind direction during the first phase of the eruption, only about two inches of ash fell on the city. This minor inconvenience reassured the inhabitants, who did not flee. During the second phase, the city was buried by forty to sixty feet of hot mud, and all the inhabitants perished. Thus the fate of particular cities during such eruptions depends largely on their location relative to fault lines and volcanoes, and on the wind direction.

In other passages in the scriptures the phrase *whole earth* seems to refer to local phenomena. The account in Alma 36:7 of the appearance of the angel to Alma and the sons of Mosiah relates that the voice of the angel was as thunder “and the *whole earth* did tremble *beneath our feet*.” However, the same event is described in Mosiah 27:11 as follows: “he spake as it were with a voice of thunder, which *caused the earth to shake upon which they stood*.” This usage of the phrase *whole earth* seems to be a hyperbole, since the episode has all the earmarks of a very localized event.

This phrase is used sixty-four times in the Standard Works. Twenty-seven of these are in the Old Testament, and only one in the New Testament. The Book of Mormon uses the phrase twenty-two times. Often the context makes clear that it is intended to be taken literally, as in “God of the whole earth.” Some references permit either a broad or a narrow meaning. But in many passages the phrase clearly describes a relatively local event. The relevant references follow:

And the locusts went up over *all the land of Egypt*, and rested in all the coasts of Egypt. . . . For they covered the face of the *whole earth*, . . . and there remained not any green thing . . . through *all the land of Egypt*. (Exodus 10:14–15)

Here the phrase *whole earth* is equated with *all the land of Egypt*.

They did multiply and spread . . . from the land southward to the land northward . . . insomuch that they began to cover the face of the *whole earth* from the sea south to the sea north, from the sea west to the sea east. (Helaman 3:8)

Here the *whole earth* is bounded on four sides by seas.

There was a great famine upon the land, among all the people of Nephi. . . . For the earth was smitten that it was dry. . . . And the *whole earth* was smitten, even among the Lamanites as well as among the Nephites. (Helaman 11:5–6)

Here the *whole earth* is limited to the combined Nephite and Lamanite territories.

And now Coriantumr . . . gave battle unto them who sought to destroy him. But he repented not, neither his fair sons nor daughters. . . . There were none of the fair sons and daughters upon the face of the *whole earth* who repented of their sins. (Ether 13:16–17)

Here *whole earth* is limited at least to the people of Coriantumr.

I went about with the sons of Mosiah, seeking to destroy the church of God; but behold, God sent his holy angel to stop us by the way. And behold, he spake unto us, as it were the voice of thunder, and the *whole earth* did tremble beneath our feet. (Alma 36:6–7)

I have seen an angel face to face, and he spake with me, and his voice was as thunder, and it shook the *whole earth*. (Alma 38:7)

And as I said unto you, as they were going about rebelling against God, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto them; . . . and he spake as it were with a voice of thunder, which caused the *earth* to shake upon which they stood. (Mosiah 27:11)

These verses equate *whole earth* with *the earth upon which they stood*.

And they began to know that the Son of God must shortly appear, yea, in fine, all the people upon the face of the *whole earth* from the west to the east, both in the land north and in the land south, were so exceedingly astonished that they fell to the earth. (3 Nephi 1:17)

Here the *whole earth* is limited to the land north and the land south.

Yea, at the time he shall yield up the ghost there shall be thunderings and lightnings for the space of many hours, and the earth shall shake and tremble, and the rocks . . . shall be broken up . . . and shall ever after be found in seams and in cracks, and in broken fragments upon the face of the *whole earth*. (Helaman 14:21-22)

Darkness should cover the face of the *whole earth* for the space of three days. (Helaman 14:27)

And thus the face of the *whole earth* became deformed, because of the tempests, and the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the quaking of the earth. (3 Nephi 8:17)

In this case, compare the various expressions used in 3 Nephi 8:12, 17, and 18:

The *whole face of the earth* was changed.

The *whole earth* became deformed.

[The rocks] were broken up upon the *face of the whole earth*.

They were found in broken fragments, . . . in seams and cracks, upon *all the face of the land*.

These verses combine to suggest that the phrases *whole earth* and *all the face of the land* are synonymous.

It is clear that the expression *whole earth* is frequently used in the Book of Mormon to describe events in which the text itself identifies the events as local rather than global. In this connection there is an interesting use by Moses of the words *land* and *earth* in his description of the first appearance of the Lord to him and of the marvelous revelation he received.

As the voice was still speaking, Moses cast his eyes and beheld the *earth*, yea, *even all of it*; and there was not a particle of it which he did not behold, discerning it by the Spirit of God. . . . And he beheld many lands; and *each land* was called *earth*, and there were inhabitants on the face thereof. (Moses 1:27, 29)

If on occasion *land* and *earth* are synonymous, then in appropriate cases we may be justified in considering *whole earth* and *whole land* as synonymous.

The prophecies concerning the coming of the Savior among the Nephites and of the attendant three days of daylight and the three days of darkness and destruction were directed only to the Nephites. One should not expect the world at large to have been aware of the Savior's appearance, nor of the attendant miracles, nor should we expect to find the prophesied destruction to have been global, in spite of the occasional use of the phrase *whole earth* in descriptions of some aspects of it.

Hugh Nibley, in *The World of the Jaredites*, says,

Yet another important biblical expression receives welcome elucidation from our text: though Ether says nothing about "the whole earth" being "of one language and one speech" (Genesis 11:1), he does give us an interesting hint as to how those words may be taken. Just as "son" and "descendant" are the same word in Hebrew, and so may be easily confused, . . . so "earth" and "land" are the same word, the well-known *eret*. In view of the fact that the book of Ether, speaking only of the Jaredites, notes that "there were none of the fair sons and daughters upon the face of the whole earth who repented of their sins" (Ether 13:17), it would seem that the common *whole*

earth (*kol ha-aretz*) of the Old Testament need not always be taken to mean the entire globe.¹¹

Conclusion

Joseph Smith has presented us with a document that describes catastrophic events far removed from his own experience. A proper understanding of the period of destruction among the Nephites and Lamanites requires examining numerous rather casual comments by several Book of Mormon authors who were separated by several centuries. To me this is yet another evidence of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

This article supports the elements of the hypothesis stated above, including the puzzling presence of intense lightning-absent rain, and explains why events which at first reading appear to be characterized as global are not reflected in the histories of the several civilizations contemporary with these events.

¹¹ Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites*, vol. 5 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 173.

Appendix: Pliny's Letter to Tacitus

A comparison of the following firsthand account by Pliny of the eruption of Vesuvius is most instructive in relation to the Book of Mormon account of the destruction that preceded the appearance of the Savior among the Nephites. It is quoted below, with portions italicized to emphasize passages of special relevance to the Book of Mormon account:

"Your request that I would send you an account of my uncle's end, so that you may transmit a more exact relation of it to posterity, deserves my acknowledgments; for if his death shall be celebrated by your pen, the glory of it, I am aware, will be rendered forever deathless. For notwithstanding he perished, as did whole peoples and cities, in the destruction of a most beautiful region, and by a misfortune memorable enough to produce a kind of immortality; notwithstanding he has himself composed many and lasting works; yet I am persuaded, the mentioning of him in your immortal writings, will greatly contribute to eternalize his name. Happy I esteem those, whom Providence has gifted with the ability either to do things worthy of being written, or to write in a manner worthy of being read; but most happy they, who are blessed with both talents: in which latter class my uncle will be placed both by his own writings and by yours. The more willingly do I undertake, nay, solicit, the task you set me.

"He was at that time with the fleet under his command at Misenum. On the 24th of August, about one in the afternoon, my mother desired him to observe a cloud of very unusual size and appearance. He had sunned himself, then taken a cold bath, and after a leisurely luncheon was engaged in study. He immediately called for his shoes and went up an eminence from whence he might best view this very uncommon appearance. It was not at that distance discernable from what mountain this cloud issued, but it was found afterwards to be Vesuvius. I cannot give you a more exact description of its figure, than by resembling it to that of a pine tree, for it shot up a great height in the form of a trunk, which extended itself at the top into several branches; because, I imagine, a momentary gust of air blew it aloft, and then falling, forsook it; thus causing the cloud to expand laterally as it dissolved, or possibly the downward pressure of its own weight produced this effect. It was at one

moment white, at another dark and spotted, as if it had carried up earth or cinders.

"My uncle, true savant that he was, deemed the phenomenon important and worth a nearer view. He ordered a light vessel to be got ready, and gave me the liberty, if I thought proper, to attend him. I replied that I would rather study; and, as it happened, he had himself given me a theme for composition. As he was coming out of the house he received a note from Rectina, the wife of Bassus, who was in the utmost alarm at the imminent danger (his villa stood just below us, and there was no way to escape but by sea); she earnestly entreated him to save her from such deadly peril. He changed his first design and what he began with a philosophical, he pursued with an heroic turn of mind. *He ordered large galleys to be launched, and went himself on board one, with the intention of assisting not only Rectina, but many others;* for the villas stand extremely thick upon that beautiful coast. He hastened to the place from whence others were flying, *he steered his direct course to the point of danger, and with such freedom from fear, as to be able to make and dictate his observations upon successive motions and figures of that terrific object.*

"*And now cinders, which grew thicker and hotter the nearer he approached, fell into the ships, then pumice stones too, with stones blackened, scorched, and cracked by fire, then the sea ebbed suddenly from under them, while the shore was blocked up by landslips from the mountains.* After considering a moment whether he should retreat, he said to the captain who was urging that course, 'Fortune befriends the brave; carry me to Pomponianus.' Pomponianus was then at Stabiae, distant by half the width of the bay (for, as you know, the shore, insensibly curving in its sweep, forms here a receptacle for the sea). He had already embarked his baggage; for though at Stabiae the danger was not yet near, it was in view, and certain to be extremely near, as soon as it spread; and he resolved to fly as soon as the contrary wind should cease. It was full favorable, however, for carrying my uncle to Pomponianus. He embraces, comforts, and encourages his alarmed friends, and in order to soothe the other's fears by his own unconcern, desires to be conducted to a bathroom; and after having bathed, he sat down to supper with great cheerfulness, or at least (what is equally heroic) with all the appearance of it.

"*In the meanwhile Mount Vesuvius was blazing in several places with spreading and towering flames, whose refulgent*

brightness the darkness of the night set in high relief. But my uncle, in order to soothe apprehensions, kept saying that some fires had been left alight by the terrified people, and what they saw were only deserted villas on fire in the abandoned district. After this he retired to rest, and it is most certain that his rest was a most genuine slumber; for his breathing which, as he was pretty fat, was somewhat heavy and sonorous, was heard by those who attended at this chamber door. But the court which led to his apartment now lay so deep under a mixture of pumice stones and ashes, that if he had continued longer in his bedroom, egress would have become impossible. On being aroused he came out, and returned to Pomponianus and the others, who had sat up all night. They consulted together as to whether they should hold out in the house, or wander about in the open. For the house now tottered under repeated and violent concussions, and seemed to rock to and fro as if torn from its foundations. In the open air, on the other hand, they dreaded the falling pumice stones, light and porous though they were; yet this, by comparison, seemed the lesser danger of the two; a conclusion which my uncle arrived at by balancing reasons, and the others by balancing fears. They tied pillows on their heads with napkins; and this was their whole defence against the showers that fell round them.

It was now day everywhere else, but there a deeper darkness prevailed than in the most obscure night; relieved, however, by many torches and divers illuminations. They thought proper to go down upon the shore to observe from close at hand if they could possibly put out to sea, but they found the waves still extremely high and contrary. There my uncle having thrown himself down upon a disused sail, repeatedly called for, and drank, a draught of cold water; soon after, flames, and a strong smell of sulphur, which was the forerunner of them, dispersed the rest of the company in flight; him they only aroused. He raised himself up with the assistance of two slaves, but instantly fell; some unusually gross vapor, as I conjecture, having obstructed his breathing and blocked his windpipe, which was not only naturally weak and constricted, but chronically inflamed. When day dawned again (the third from that he last beheld) his body was found entire and uninjured, and still fully clothed as in life; its posture was that of a sleeping, rather than a dead man.

“Meanwhile my mother and I were at Misenum. But this has no connection with history, and your inquiry went no further than concerning my uncle’s death. I will therefore put an

end to my letter. Suffer me only to add, that I have faithfully related to you what was either an eye witness of myself, or heard at the time, when report speaks most truly. You will select what is most suitable to your purpose; for there is a great difference between a letter, and an history; between writing to a friend, and writing for the public. Farewell."¹²

¹² Pliny, *Letter VI*, 16, to Tacitus. I am indebted to Dr. C. Wilfred Griggs for calling my attention to this account and for providing me a copy of the text.