

STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Adult Bible Equipping Class
Anchorage Grace Church
2014

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SIGNS IN THE HEAVENS: What do the Stars Really Tell Us?

THE FULFILLMENT OF ASTRONOMICAL SIGNS

1A. Introduction

- 1b. In the previous study, we aimed to answer the first of three interpretive questions related to astronomical signs. We concluded that, although figurative language is certainly *possible*, it is not a necessary conclusion. So, with that question addressed we move on to the second of these questions:
 - 1b. ~~What is the nature of these signs (i.e., literal or figurative)?~~
 - 2b. When will/did these signs occur (i.e., historical or eschatological fulfillment)?
 - 3b. How many functions do these signs have?
- 2b. Perhaps the most significant factor leading readers to a metaphorical interpretation is the difficulty explaining how and when these signs might otherwise have been literally fulfilled.
 - 1b. Although Sandy does not admit it explicitly, he seems to suggest this conclusion by interpreting Acts 2 as a complete fulfillment of Joel 2:28-31 and arguing that those who prefer to see Acts 2 as a partial fulfillment (leaving the astronomical signs for a later time) are simply “begging the question.”¹
 - 2b. Indeed, trying to explain how such signs might have been fulfilled historically in passages like Isaiah 13:10, Ezekiel 32:7-8, Joel 2:10, and Amos 8:9 leads one to understand these passages as either entirely future or entirely metaphorical.
 - 3b. Some interpreters try to tie these passages to natural phenomena like solar eclipses, but this presents even greater problems.

¹ D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares & Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 152, 247n21.

- 1c. Eclipses would only explain passages composed in and around a period when an eclipse occurred and was observable to the writer's audience.²
- 2c. Eclipses may explain the origin of the imagery used in the texts, but it does not explain their fulfillment since these images are connected very specifically to certain events in the text (i.e., the fall of Babylon, Egypt, Judah, and Israel).³
- 4b. However, there is another way that we can explain how darkness imagery functions in these texts and how it relates to the Day of Yahweh.

2A. The Function of Stock Language

- 1b. "Stock language" or "stereotypical language" is generic language that grew out of the culture and was used by writers both inside and outside of Israel as a means of communicating in a generic way the message they were communicating.
- 2b. Stock language came in multiple forms:
 - 1c. *Language of Destruction*
 - 1d. When the ANE suzerainty treaties (i.e., the Hittite and Assyrian treaty models) developed, certain stereotypical language was used to describe the destruction that would befall a vassal for treaty violations.
 - 2d. Stock treaty curses included such language as describing a cursed city as:
 - 1e. Objects of horror
 - 2c. Populated by wild animals
 - 3e. Overthrown like Sodom and Gomorrah
 - 4e. Attacked by divinely summoned enemies
 - 5e. Desolate
 - 6e. Uninhabitable

² Two eclipses occurred during the lifetime of Amos, the first on February 9, 784 B.C. and the second on June 15, 763 B.C. Donal R. Sunukjian, "Amos," in *BKC*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Ministries, 2004), 1448; Gary V. Smith, *Amos*, Mentor Commentary (Geanies House, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 1998), 344.

³ The occurrence of an eclipse which could not be observed in the region to which the prophet writes hardly explains the necessity of such an announcement.

⁴ Homer Heater Jr., "Do the Prophets Teach that Babylon will be Rebuilt in the *Eschaton*?" *JETS* 41, no. 1 (Mar 1998), 33-36.

7e. Scattered about

8e. Without any joyous sounds

3d. Since the Mosaic Covenant is patterned after these kinds of treaties, we also see this kind of “stock” language used in the treaty sections of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28.

4d. So in some instances, certain OT curse texts may not be intended to convey an entirely literal meaning, but may instead be drawing from “stock” or “stereotypical” language of covenant curses.

6d. In order to determine if a text uses stereotypical language, we need to compare the passage to the rest of the OT and NT to determine whether the language is generic or specific in its descriptions.

2c. *Divine-Warrior Language*

1d. The language used in Exodus to describe the Sinai event (e.g., clouds, thick darkness, flashes of lightening, etc.) became a language toolbox for later writers to draw from when describing God’s actions in the world.⁵

2d. When biblical writers portrayed God as either fighting for or against his people, they utilized Sinai imagery as stock language for divine activity.

3d. The point of the language was *theological* rather than literal. They wanted to make a theological statement.

4d. Books like the Psalms and Habakkuk draw off of stock Sinai imagery in order to convey theological meaning.

3c. *Stock Astronomical Imagery*

1d. Scholars have proposed a similar explanation for astronomical imagery in the Day of Yahweh.

2d. Garrett suggests that the phrase “clouds and thick darkness” in Joel 2:2 (cf. Zeph 1:15) is a “stock metaphor for the day of the Lord.”⁶

3d. Smith, Ward, and Brewer identify these terms as part of the “prophetic vocabulary.”⁷

⁵ Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid, *God is a Warrior*, Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 13-88.

⁶ Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, NAC (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1997), 335.

⁷ Smith, Ward, and Brewer, *Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Obadiah and Joel*, 122.

- 4d. Allen calls them “stereotyped, well-known language.”⁸
- 5d. This kind of language is especially frequent when a prophet announces the downfall of a city or a nation.
 - 1e. Babylon (Isa 13:10)
 - 2e. Edom (Isa 34:4)
 - 3e. Egypt (Ezek 32:7-8)
 - 4e. Israel (Amos 8:9)
 - 5e. Judah (Joel 2:10, 30-31)
- 6d. All this suggests that astronomical imagery was a type of stock language that prophets.
- 7d. *The question is whether interpreters should completely disregard any expectation of literal heavenly signs in all their details.*
- 8d. The answer to that question lies in the nature of the prophetic perspective.

3A. **The Nature of Prophetic Perspective**

- 1b. “Prophetic perspective” (i.e., telescoping) is an important element in prophetic literature.
- 2b. It refers to statements or predications which anticipate both a near and a far fulfillment, yet don’t clearly delineate between the two.
- 3b. Illustrations:

- 1c. Mountain Ranges

When you look at a vast mountain range, the peaks appear to the observer to be the same distance away. In reality, however, some peaks are near and others are far. So in prophetic perspective, a prophet may speak of events or make predictions that to the reader appears to be one event, but in reality the prophetic is describing two different events separated by time.

- 2c. Stars

When you look into the night sky, you observe stars that appear to be the same distance away. But in reality some stars are relatively close to earth while others are in fact much farther away. Likewise, the prophets speak of events which ap-

⁸ Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 68.

pear at first reading to be referring to the same event when in reality the prophet was speaking of two different events, one finding fulfillment in the near future and other in the far future.

- 4b. When it comes to the Day of Yahweh, Mayhue writes, that “the near/far fulfillment is a logical corollary to the law of time relationship. It allows for a multiple fulfillment of the prophetic expectation. In the study of the DOL [the Day of the Lord], it unlocks some otherwise confusing Scriptures.”⁹
- 5b. Mayhue goes on to argue that the phrase “Day of the Lord” is simply a generic biblical phrase that was used to describe events occurred in the immediate future (to the prophet) but also looked forward to a future and final “Day of the Lord,” but at times he prophets spoke of both in the same breath.
- 6b. This explains why the prophets could refer to the fall of Babylon, Egypt, Israel, and Judah equally as the Day of Yahweh.
- 7b. However, it doesn’t explain why astronomical signs show up so consistently in these passages. Thus, I’ll propose an alternative explanation.

4A. Astronomical Signs and Prophetic Perspective

1b. Israel’s Exodus

- 1c. Israel’s exodus from Egypt and subsequent wilderness wanderings was so foundational to Israel’s historical and theological development that later writers used it “to provide a theological framework for understanding the present.”¹⁰
- 2c. Passages like Joshua 3-4 and Micah 7:15-17 use exodus imagery to pack their statements with theological meaning.
- 3c. Isaiah 43:16-21 is the most well-known of these texts, where the prophet used exodus imagery to describe Israel’s return from Babylonian captivity:

Thus says Yahweh, who makes a **way through the sea** and a **path through the mighty waters**, who brings forth the **chariots and the horse, the army and the mighty man (they will lie down together and not rise again;** they have been quenched and extinguished like a wick): “Do not call to mind the former things, or ponder things of the past. Behold, I will do something new, now it will spring forth; will you not be aware of it? I will even make a roadway in the **wilderness**, rivers in the **desert**. The beasts of the field will glorify me, the jackals and the ostriches, because I have given **waters in the wilderness and rivers in the desert, to give drink to My**

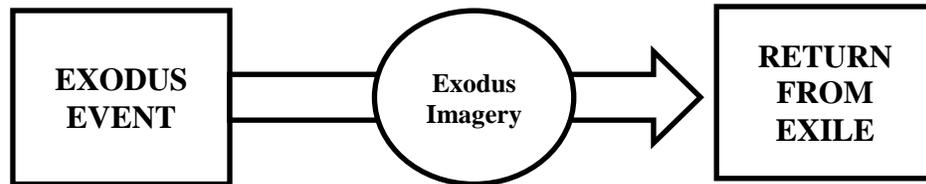
⁹ Richard L. Mayhue, “The Prophet’s Watchword: Day of the Lord,” (Th. D. diss., Grace Theological Seminary, 1981), 29.

¹⁰ Peter Enns, “Exodus Route and Wilderness Itinerary,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 279.

chosen people. The people whom I formed for myself will declare my praise.

- 4c. By using this type of imagery, Isaiah effectively fills Israel's return with intense theological significance. It is not simply a return from exile. It is a *new exodus*, something "new" (43:19) that "will overshadow anything God did in the past."¹¹
- 5c. Thus, language from Israel's past (exodus) is used to construct a theological grid for understanding a future event (return from exile).

Return from Exile + Exodus Imagery = 2nd Exodus



2b. Astronomical Signs

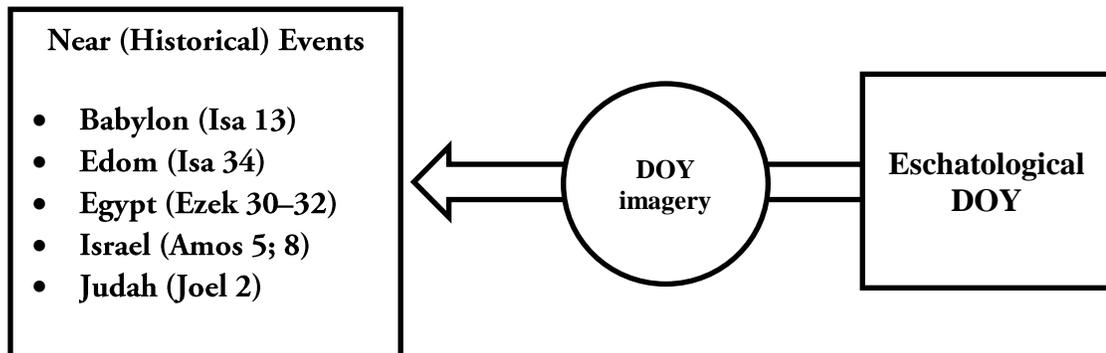
- 1c. The prophets use astronomical imagery in much the same way, but in this case the direction is reversed.
- 2c. The prophets instead take events and language that pertains to a future eschatological event (the Day of Yahweh) and use it to infuse current or near-current events and experiences in Israel's life (fall of Babylon, Egypt, Israel, and Judah) with theological significance.
- 3c. In so doing, these near events take on greater meaning, though they remain distinct from the event to which they point.
- 4c. Allen writes that in the imagery of Joel 2:2, the prophet "sees an adumbration of Zephaniah's words coming true, for it was Zephaniah who developed into a somber melody the motif of darkness which Amos had so inexorably attached to the Day (Amos 5:18-20). Joel cites it, doubtless knowing that it would bring to his hearers' minds the whole gamut of associations that belonged to the *Dies Irae*. It is essential to Joel's purpose that he should not be original. His deliberate aim is to make a deep impression by using stereotyped, well-known language to show that in the present situation venerated prophecies were on the verge of fulfillment. His newness lies in the application of the old words."¹²
- 5c. Thus astronomical signs serve a dual role:

¹¹ Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets*, 104.

¹² Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 68.

- 1d. In the far view, they picture real, literal phenomena that will characterize the Day of Yahweh.
- 2d. In the near view, they provide vivid imagery through which certain cataclysmic events in Israel's present and near-future can be understood theologically as they relate to the expected Day of Yahweh.

Historical Event + DOY Imagery = DOY (Like) Event



- 6c. This is why the collapse of Egypt (Ezek 30-32) and Babylon (Isa 13) as well as the exile of Israel (Amos 5, 8) and Judah (Joel 2) can include depictions of heavenly activity which did not literally occur during those events.
- 7c. They were intended to alert the reader that the event under consideration had a significance derived from something greater and even more significant.
- 8c. Motyer writes, “In some sense the prophets saw significant historical events as the day of the Lord.... In each case, however, neither in prospect nor in retrospect was the day of the Lord fully realized. The prophets simply had in mind that these were events of such a dire nature that they exemplified a reality that would be fully demonstrated when the day finally came.”¹³
- 9c. Thus these historical events serve as foreshadows or *types* of an eschatological event to which these near events inevitably point and from which they gain their meaning.
- 10c. Using astronomical imagery—derived from real signs that will occur in the Day of Yahweh—serves to orient the near event within this line and establish a pattern that will characterize the far, final event.
- 11c. As Caird comments concerning Joel 2-3, “This local manifestation of God’s judgment has the power to call the nation to repentance because it is seen as an anticipation of the universal judgment to come. So the foreground scene [Ju-

¹³ J. Alec Motyer, “Zephaniah,” in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Maker Academic, 1998), 918.

dah's judgment] fades into a telephoto panorama of all nations gathered in the Valley of the Lord's Judgment."¹⁴

- 12c. Thus, the prophets used astronomical imagery as stereotypical language of the Day of Yahweh—not because the signs won't literary take place, but because they were infusing historical events (the fall of nations) with theological meaning derived from real events that would take place in the eschatological future.

¹⁴ G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 260.