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# PAROUSIA FULFILLED – SYMBOLISM & METAPHORS

By Kenneth N Higgs

*Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. (Matt 24:29-30)*

## INTRODUCTION:

Jesus spoke these words to his disciples in AD 30, not to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. He was revealing to them the terrible wrath of God, which would soon come during the last generation of Old Covenant (OC) Israel, in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. This prophecy is very ominous and dramatic, but, was Jesus actually prophesying that stars would literally 'fall' from the sky; that the sun would literally cease shining; that the moon would literally go dark? Was he predicting the literal destruction of the physical planets and universe?

This New Testament (NT) passage uses apocalyptic words and imagery that also occur in Old Testament (OT) prophecies, in passages like *Isaiah 13:10, Ezekiel 32:7-8, Amos 8:9 and Joel 2:30-31* (to name just a few). Most of those prophecies were fulfilled hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, yet none of them resulted in the 'literal destruction of the physical planets and universe'. Something else was meant by those dramatic and ominous-sounding words.

When reading the Holy Bible, it is important to recognise the type of language used in a passage. Robert M. Bowman Jr observed that: "*the Bible is a large collection of ancient books written in other languages by people living in other cultures.*"<sup>1</sup>

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We need to appreciate the historical context and 'audience relevance' as Ed Stevens notes:

*The fundamental task of a Biblical interpreter is to discover exactly what the original author intended to communicate to his original audience at the specific time and place under that specific set of circumstances (i.e., "Audience Relevance").*<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, he says:

*The Bible contains all kinds of language (figurative, literal, historical, symbolic, apocalyptic, typological, poetic, hyperbolic, parabolic, etc.). Each type should be interpreted "according to its own particular genre" (or kind of literature).*<sup>2</sup>

In this article we look at OT Symbolism and Metaphors, in order to better understand the meaning of the apocalyptic language used in the New Testament (NT).

J. Stuart Russell says that:

*Prophecy is of the nature of poetry, and depicts events, not in the prosaic style of the historian, but in the glowing imagery of the poet... What is grand in nature is used to express what is dignified and important among men, ---the heavenly bodies, mountains, stately trees, kingdoms or those in authority. . . . Political changes are represented by earthquakes, tempests, eclipses, the turning of waters and seas into blood.*<sup>3</sup>

Here are some examples of imagery, symbolism and metaphors in OT prophecy.

## SYMBOLISM OF SUN, MOON AND STARS

A common metaphor in scripture is “*the sun, moon and stars*”. Gary De Mar notes that:

*The Old Testament is filled with solar, lunar and stellar language depicting great political and social upheaval. The rise of kingdoms is compared to the brightness of **the sun, moon and stars**... When a nation is described as falling – coming under the judgement of God – it is compared to the **sun and moon going dark** and **stars falling from the sky**.<sup>4</sup>*

De Mar also quotes John Foster, author of “The Gospel-Narrative” (1847):

*“In ancient Hieroglyphic writings **the sun, moon and stars** represented empires and states, with their sovereigns and nobility. The eclipse of these luminaries was said to denote temporary national disasters, or an entire overthrow of any state... Thus Isaiah describes the destruction of Babylon, and Ezekiel that of Egypt”.<sup>5</sup>*

Although there are many OT examples of fulfilled prophecies about “*the sun, moon and stars*”, none resulted in literal astral collapse or global destruction. Let us look at some of these prophecies.

### Genesis 37:9 – Joseph's dream

*Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, “Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, **the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.**” (Gen 37:9)*

When Joseph described his dream about the “*sun, moon and stars*”, it offended his father and older brothers, because the dream portrayed them (“sun, moon, and eleven stars”) as bowing down to Joseph, one of the youngest sons. Jacob was not happy:

*... his father rebuked him and said to him, “What is this dream that you have dreamed? **Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?**” (Gen 37:10)*

The bowing “*sun, moon and stars*” was a metaphor depicting the complete upheaval of authority relationships in Jacob's family. The second youngest son was claiming that, one day, he would be in authority over his father, mother and older brothers. History records that 20 years later Joseph was second Pharaoh in Egypt and his brothers indeed bowed down to him, and came begging of him for food during the seven years of famine.

### Isaiah 13:10

*For the **stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light;**  
the **sun will be dark** at its rising,  
and the **moon will not shed its light.***

This passage is using symbolism to describe the complete upheaval and destruction of ancient Babylon. Two hundred years after Isaiah's oracle, in 539 BC, this oracle was fulfilled when God judged Babylon, by stirring up the Medes (*Isa 13:17*) to invade and destroy them. Even a dispensational scholar, John A. Martin, acknowledges that this passage is using symbolism:

*(Is 13:10) describes the total turnaround of the political structure of the Near East... The same would be true of the **heavens trembling** and the **earth shaking** (v.13), figures of speech suggesting all-encompassing destruction. <sup>6</sup>*

Russell notes the similarity of this oracle to Jesus' sermon on the Mount of Olives:

*the imagery employed in this passage is almost identical with that of our Lord. If these symbols therefore were proper to represent the fall of Babylon why should they be improper to set forth a still greater catastrophe -- the destruction of Jerusalem? <sup>7</sup>*

#### Ezekiel 32:7-8

*When I blot you out, **I will cover the heavens**  
and make their **stars dark**;  
**I will cover the sun with a cloud**,  
and the **moon shall not give its light**.  
All the bright lights of heaven  
will **I make dark** over you,  
and put **darkness on your land**,  
declares the Lord God.*

This passage is part of Ezekiel's lament for Egypt. The Lord was about to judge Pharaoh and his people, using "the sword of the king of Babylon" (v.11) to overthrow Pharaoh and destroy the nation of Egypt.

#### Amos 8:9

*"And on that day," declares the Lord God,  
"I will make **the sun go down at noon**  
and **darken the earth in broad daylight**."*

God called Amos, a shepherd of Tekoa, to "Go, prophesy to my people Israel" (Amos 7:15) (ie: the northern kingdom) during the reign of king Jeroboam II. Israel was polluted with idol worship and corruption (see 2 Kings 17). God urged them to repent but they ignored him and tried to silence Amos, so the Lord pronounced judgement upon them: "The end has come upon my people Israel." (Amos 8:2); "All the sinners of my people will die by the sword." (Amos 9:10). The Lord sent the armies of Assyria to overthrow king Jeroboam and destroy Israel. The disaster was so severe that it was like the sun going down at noon and the earth being darkened in broad daylight. The northern kingdom (known as Israel) was destroyed forever.

#### Joel 2:30-32

*And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. **The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood**, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem **there shall be those who escape**, as the Lord has said, and among **the survivors** shall be those whom the Lord calls.*

The Lord sent Joel to prophesy to Judah and Jerusalem (the southern kingdom) about judgement coming on the day of the Lord in the last days. The darkened sun and blood moon are metaphors describing the total upheaval and destruction that would come upon Judah and Jerusalem. The existing order and authorities would be overthrown and obliterated.

In NT times (Acts 2:14-21), the apostle Peter referred to this same scripture passage to explain the phenomenon of signs and wonders seen on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem in AD 30.

Michael Biehler draws our attention to "those who escape"; "the survivors" (v.32):

*After the sun goes dark and the moon turns to blood, **there will be survivors in Jerusalem**. So he is not speaking of the end of the universe. <sup>8</sup>*

## SYMBOLISM OF DAY OF THE LORD

Another apocalyptic metaphor used in the OT is: “*day of the Lord*” referring to divine justice falling upon wicked nations, and their kings and people:

### Isaiah 13: 6, 9 & 13

6 *Wail, for the **day of the Lord is near**;  
as destruction from the Almighty it will come!*

...

9 *Behold, the **day of the Lord comes**,  
cruel, with wrath and fierce anger,  
to make the land a desolation  
and to destroy its sinners from it.*

...

13 *Therefore I will make the heavens tremble,  
and the earth will be shaken out of its place,  
at the wrath of the Lord of hosts  
in **the day of his fierce anger**.*

We have already seen (Isaiah 13:10) how Isaiah prophesied against Babylon The verses above show how that prophecy was couched in terms of the “*day of the Lord*”. **Note: the physical planet was not destroyed.**

### Jeremiah 46:10

*That day is the **day of the Lord God of hosts**,  
a **day of vengeance**,  
to avenge himself on his foes.  
The sword shall devour and be sated  
and drink its fill of their blood.  
For the Lord God of hosts holds a sacrifice  
in the north country by the river Euphrates.*

This passage is part of Jeremiah's prophecy against Pharaoh Neco and the nation of Egypt, “*which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon defeated in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah*” (v.2).

### Ezekiel 30:3

*For the day is near,  
the **day of the Lord is near**;  
it will be a **day of clouds**,  
a time of doom for the nations.*

This is part of Ezekiel's lament for Egypt, which was about to be overthrown, in the “*day of the Lord*”, which was fulfilled when God sent the armies of Babylon in 587-586 BC.

### Zephaniah 1:7-14

7 *Be silent before the Lord God!  
For the **day of the Lord is near**;  
the Lord has prepared a sacrifice  
and consecrated his guests.  
8 And on the **day of the Lord's sacrifice**—  
“I will punish the officials and the king's sons  
and all who array themselves in foreign attire.  
9 On **that day** I will punish  
everyone who leaps over the threshold,  
and those who fill their master's house  
with violence and fraud.  
10 “**On that day**,” declares the Lord,*

*“a cry will be heard from the Fish Gate,  
a wail from the Second Quarter,  
a loud crash from the hills.*

...

**14** *The **great day of the Lord is near,**  
near and hastening fast;  
the sound of the **day of the Lord is bitter;**  
the mighty man cries aloud there.*

Zephaniah prophesied in the days of Josiah, king of Judah (southern kingdom), and denounced the rulers and people for their idolatry, injustice and corruption. He warned them that the “*day of the Lord*” would come, when God would punish and destroy them. This was fulfilled in 586 BC, when the armies of king Nebuchadnezzar defeated Judah, and destroyed Jerusalem (including the temple), and carried the king and his sons and most of the people into exile and slavery in Babylon. **Note: planet Earth was not destroyed.**

## SYMBOLISM OF HEAVENS AND EARTH

Another common metaphor in scripture is the phrase: “*the heavens and the earth*”. For example:

### Genesis 1:1

*In the beginning, God created **the heavens and the earth.***

Stevens explains that “*the heavens and the earth*”:

*was the Old World Order (Gk. **kosmos**) that had been in place since the beginning (Gen 1:1), the orderly arrangement of the whole universe, including the unseen spiritual realm and the visible earthly realm. That orderly world (Gk. **kosmos**) was corrupted by the Fall of Adam and destined to perish, to be replaced with a new world order set up by the Messiah.<sup>9</sup>*

Stevens also notes:

*... in many contexts, the phrase heavens and earth has the connotation of a world order or orderly arrangement (Gk. **kosmos** cf. Acts 17:24; Rev 11:15; 13:8; 17:8), or an administration of world affairs (Gk. **oikonomia** cf. Eph 1:10; 3:9; 1Tim 1:4).<sup>9</sup>*

### Judges 5:4

*Lord, when you went out from Seir,  
when you marched from the region of Edom,  
the **earth trembled**  
and the **heavens dropped,**  
yes, the clouds dropped water.*

After they defeated the Canaanite king and his army, the prophet Deborah sang with Barak about the awesome power of God, using apocalyptic metaphors: “*earth trembled and the heavens dropped*”.

### 2 Samuel 22:8

*Then the **earth reeled and rocked;**  
the **foundations of the heavens trembled**  
and quaked, because he was angry.*

King David worshipped the Lord in this song, using metaphors to describe the way God delivered him from powerful enemies, like Saul and the Philistines. The imagery of “*earth reeled*” and “*heavens trembled*” refers to the overthrow of the previous evil rulers and their kingdoms, **not literal destruction of planet Earth and the solar system.**

Isaiah 13:13

*Therefore I will make **the heavens tremble,**  
and **the earth will be shaken out of its place,**  
at the wrath of the LORD of hosts  
in the day of his fierce anger.*

This passage is part of Isaiah's oracle against Babylon, using apocalyptic language to prophesy the total destruction and overthrow of Babylon by the Medes. This was fulfilled in 539 BC.

Joel 3:16

*The Lord roars from Zion,  
and utters his voice from Jerusalem,  
and **the heavens and the earth quake.***

This passage is part of Joel's prophecy about the last days of OC Judah and Jerusalem. On the Day of Pentecost Peter said that this prophecy was being fulfilled in his day (Acts 2:16-21)... "*the last days*".

## SYMBOLISM OF CLOUDS AND DARKNESS

"Coming on clouds" and "thick darkness" is often used in the OT as emblems of God's awesome power in judgement against his enemies, as we see in the following examples:

2 Samuel 22:12

*He made **darkness** around him his canopy,  
**thick clouds**, a gathering of water.*

This verse is part of David's song using metaphors to describe the way God delivered him from his enemies.

Psalm 97:1-2

*The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice;  
let the many coastlands be glad!  
**Clouds and thick darkness** are all around him;  
righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.*

Psalm 104:3

*he makes the **clouds his chariot;**  
he rides on the **wings of the wind;***

Isaiah 19:1 – an oracle concerning Egypt

*Behold, the Lord is **riding on a swift cloud** and comes to Egypt;*

Jeremiah 4:13 – Disaster from the North (Assyria)

*Behold, he **comes up like clouds;**  
**his chariots like the whirlwind;**  
his horses are swifter than eagles—  
woe to us, for we are ruined!*

Ezekiel 30:3 – Lament for Egypt

*For the day is near,  
the day of the Lord is near;  
it will be **a day of clouds,***

*a time of doom for the nations.*

Daniel 7:13 – Daniel's vision about the Son of Man

*and behold, with **the clouds of heaven** there came one like a son of man,*

Nahum 1:3 - An oracle concerning Nineveh

*His way is **in whirlwind and storm**, and **the clouds** are the dust of his feet.*

Zephaniah 1:15

*A day of wrath is that day,  
a day of distress and anguish,  
a day of ruin and devastation,  
a **day of darkness and gloom**,  
a **day of clouds and thick darkness**,*

This passage is part of Zephaniah's prophecy, discussed earlier, regarding God's punishment on Judah and Jerusalem for their idolatry, injustice and corruption.

Stevens notes that clouds can also denote a theophany (God-appearance). For instance:

*Every day in the wilderness with the glory cloud by day and the fiery pillar by night, was a God appearance to His people. When Solomon dedicated the temple, the Glory Cloud showed up and visibly overshadowed the temple and dwelt there.<sup>10</sup>*

## OTHER EXAMPLES OF SYMBOLISM

There are many other examples of OT prophecies using symbolism and metaphors to describe God's judgement on wicked nations.

Micah 1:3-4 - An oracle concerning Samaria and Jerusalem

*For behold, the Lord is coming out of his place,  
and will come down and **tread upon the high places of the earth**.  
And **the mountains will melt** under him,  
and **the valleys will split open**, like wax before the fire,  
like waters poured down a steep place.*

The prophet Micah proclaimed the word of the Lord in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. In this passage, he uses the symbolism of God 'treading on the high places of the earth', 'mountains melting' and 'valleys splitting', to describe the judgement of God which actually fell on Samaria and Jerusalem, the respective capitals of Israel and Judah, to punish them for idolatry, injustice and immorality.

Isaiah 34: 3-4 – Judgement on Bozrah and Edom

*the **mountains shall flow with their blood**.  
All **the host of heaven shall rot away**,  
and **the skies roll up like a scroll**.  
All **their host shall fall**,  
as leaves fall from the vine,  
like leaves falling from the fig tree.*

The prophet Isaiah proclaims God's coming judgement on Bozrah, the capital of Edom for their enmity to the people of Israel including their support for Babylon. He uses apocalyptic hyperbole of 'mountains flowing with blood', 'skies rolling up' and 'their host falling'.

With regard to the fate of Bozrah and Edom, Bible History Online says that:

*After an existence as a people for above seventeen hundred years, **they have utterly disappeared, and their language even is forgotten for ever.** In Petra, "where kings kept their court, and where nobles assembled, **there no man dwells; it is given by lot to birds, and beasts, and reptiles.**"<sup>11</sup>*

Russell observes:

*... if the fate of Bozrah might properly be described in language so lofty, why should it be thought extravagant to employ similar terms in describing the fate of Jerusalem?<sup>7</sup>*

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## CONCLUSION:

The New Testament is full of dramatic, ominous passages describing the parousia return of Christ (a.k.a. "Second Coming"), using symbolism and metaphors like: 'stars' falling; 'sun' and 'moon' darkening; 'heavens' and 'earth' burning and melting; 'death' and 'destruction' everywhere.

Futurists mistakenly believe that these passages predict a future final destruction of all mankind, as well as the physical Earth and solar system. Such doomsday views are based on wooden literalism, which ignores the fact that the Hebrew scriptures of the OT often used 'apocalyptic' language to describe devastating political and social and religious upheavals.

Prophets, like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos and Joel used hyperbole and figurative language... symbols and metaphors, to describe the awesome majesty and power of God when he 'came' to judge and punish wicked, idolatrous nations, like Israel (destroyed by Assyria); or Egypt (destroyed by Babylon); or Babylon (destroyed by Persia).

In like manner, NT prophecies are couched in the same sort of hyperbole and figurative language, **which is not intended to be taken literally**. Just like OT prophets, Jesus and his apostles used Hebrew symbolism and metaphors to convey the awesome majesty and power of God, which was about to fall upon the last wicked and perverse generation of Israel: even those who crucified him. The Son of Man was about to 'come on clouds of heaven' to destroy his enemies (OC Israel) and to establish his forever New Covenant kingdom of grace (the New Jerusalem). This was finally accomplished in the Roman siege and destruction of Jerusalem AD 67-70.

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## REFERENCES

Unless otherwise stated, all Bible verses in this study are from the English Standard Version Bible, Bible Gateway – ESV Bible, viewed online March 2018 at: <https://www.biblegateway.com>

Unless otherwise stated, **bold** fonts and underlining appearing in quotes are mine, used for emphasis.

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