

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #47:

SUN, MOON, AND STARS: MYSTERIOUS BIBLE SYMBOLS

By John Temples

What does the Bible mean when it speaks of the sun and moon going dark, stars falling from heaven, and the earth (and even heaven) shaking?

Several times in the Bible, there are fantastic images of the sun, moon and stars going dark; stars falling from heaven; destructive earthquakes; and mountains moving out of their places. Many people (and commentators) assume these are descriptions of actual physical events at the end of time. However, these are **not** references to actual physical events, but rather are standard prophetic symbols of judgments of God on empires, governments, institutions, and leaders.

In both Old and New Testament prophetic writings, sun, moon, and stars are symbols of earthly rulers and leaders of various ranks, and earthquakes symbolize the shaking and/or removal of existing institutions and nations. Here are some quotes from religious authorities affirming this:

- “Great earthquakes, and the shaking of heaven and earth, are put for the shaking of kingdoms.” (Adam Clarke, commentary on Isaiah 24:23.)
- “The heavenly bodies are often employed in the sacred writings to denote the princes and kings of the earth.... They are general poetic expressions designed to represent rulers, princes, and magistrates of all kinds.” (Albert Barnes, commentary on Isaiah 24:23.)
- “The darkening of the sun, moon and stars is a figure often encountered in the Scriptures. It carries the meaning of the destruction of all of the great leaders and public officials of a nation or kingdom.” (Burton Coffman, comments on Ezekiel 32:1-10.)

Here is a list of several references showing this usage:

1. GENESIS 37:9-10.

- a. “Then [Joseph] dreamed still another dream and told it to his brothers, and said, ‘Look, I have dreamed another dream. And this time, the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars bowed down to me.’ So he told it to his father and his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to

him, ‘What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall your mother and I and your brothers indeed come to bow down to the earth before you?’”

- b. Jacob interpreted his son’s reference to “the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars” to mean himself, his wife, and Joseph’s brothers—the chiefs and pre-eminent members of the clan.

2. ISAIAH 13:9-13.

- a. “Behold, the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with both wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate; and He will destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be darkened in its going forth, and the moon will not cause its light to shine. I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will halt the arrogance of the proud, and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible.... Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth will move out of her place, in the wrath of the Lord of hosts and in the day of His fierce anger.”
- b. What is the subject of this weighty pronouncement? Note Isaiah 13:1—“The burden [judgment of God] *against Babylon*....”
- c. And verse 19 shows that the subject of verses 9-13 is still Babylon: “And *Babylon, the glory of kingdoms*...will be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.”
- d. The stars, the sun, and the moon represented the rulers of Babylon. Their ceasing to give their light, along with the shaking of the heavens, signified the fall of those rulers from their lofty positions of power.

3. ISAIAH 24:19-23

- a. “The earth is violently broken, the earth is split open, the earth is shaken exceedingly. The earth shall reel to and fro like a drunkard.... Then the moon will be disgraced and the sun ashamed, for the Lord of hosts will reign on Mount Zion....”
- b. The verses prior to this text strongly suggest that this prophecy concerns the carrying away of the Jews into Babylonian captivity.

4. EZEKIEL 32:7.

- a. “When I put out your light, I will cover the heavens and make its stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give her light.”
- b. This language is describing the judgment of God upon the Pharaoh of Egypt (see verse 1).

5. JOEL 2:10.

- a. “The earth quakes before them, the heavens tremble; the sun and moon grow dark, and the stars diminish their brightness.”
- b. This language describes the result of the invasion of Israel by an army. Burton Coffman says, “We do not hesitate to interpret this as a prophecy of the invasion of Israel by the Assyrians.” (Comments on Joel 2:2.)

6. JOEL 2:28-32a.

- a. “And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions. And also on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days. And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth: Blood and fire and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord. And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”
- b. Peter quotes these words on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16-21) and applies them to the miraculous phenomena happening on that day. The phrase “in those days” is a clue, however, that Joel’s prophecy was not fulfilled in its entirety in a single day (Pentecost), but it began to be fulfilled then. Joel’s prophecy spans the miraculous age of the church, bounded on one side by the miracles of Pentecost and on the other side by the end of the Jewish state, covering a period of some 40 years.

7. MATTHEW 24, MARK 13, LUKE 21.

- a. Matthew 24:29—“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”
- b. Mark 13:24—“But in those days, after tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars of heaven will fall, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.”
- c. Luke 21:25-26—“And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men’s hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”
- d. A reading of the context of each of these parallel passages shows that Jesus was speaking of the destruction of Jerusalem, the end of the institution of Judaism, and the razing of the temple by Roman armies in AD 70. The “sun, moon, and stars” that would fall were the leaders of Israel who had rejected and crucified Christ.

8. HEBREWS 12:25-28.

- a. “See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven, whose voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised, saying, ‘Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven.’ Now this, ‘Yet once more,’ indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire.”
- b. This is most likely another reference to the fall of Jerusalem just a few years after Hebrews was written. Adam Clarke’s comments on verse 26 are: “Probably referring to the approaching destruction of Jerusalem, and the total abolition of the political and ecclesiastical constitution of the Jews; the one being signified by the earth, the other by heaven; for the Jewish state and worship are frequently thus termed in the prophetic writings.”

9. REVELATION 6:12-17.

- a. "I looked when He opened the sixth seal, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood. And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, as a fig tree drops its late figs when it is shaken by a mighty wind. Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved out of its place. And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, and said to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?'"
- b. This language is almost universally deemed by commentators to mean the end of the world; but it cannot have that meaning, for at least two reasons:
 - i. There are still people living on the earth after this event, with people being "sealed to God" after it. (See Revelation 7:1-3.)
 - ii. There are seven seals, and this is only the sixth. If this were the end of the world, there would be no seventh seal.
- c. What, then, does the language of Revelation 6 refer to? It is my view that John is describing the period in the church's history when, after two centuries of persecution, the Roman emperor Constantine completely reversed the position of the government toward Christianity. This happened early in the fourth century when Constantine came to the throne, became a friend of Christianity, and ultimately overthrew paganism, making Christianity the "official religion" of the empire. The "sun, moon, and stars" are the pagan bigwigs of the Roman Empire, who lost their positions of power under Constantine's reforms.
- d. Here are my comments on this passage from my book, *Pictures From Patmos: A Study of the Book of Revelation*: "The sixth seal begins with visions of terrible events: an earthquake, the sun ceasing to shine, the moon turning to blood, stars falling to earth, and mountains and

islands in upheaval. Men are pictured as pleading for the rocks to fall on them and hide them from the wrath of God. They cry, 'For the great day of His wrath has come' (6:17). What is this great day? Most commentators believe that it is the day of judgment, the day of the Lord's return. But this cannot be, for the following reasons: First, the fifth seal most likely depicted the era of the martyrs, which ended ca AD 311. As this study is written, we are well into the 21st century, and the end is not yet. If the sixth seal is the end of time, then a 'great gulf' of time, at least 1,700 years, is passed over in silence. Second, there are seven seals; this is only the sixth. The seventh has not yet been opened. If the sixth seal marked the end, then there would be no seventh seal. The first vision, containing the seven seals, does not end until 11:18. Third, after these great events, the earth remains and people are still seen coming to God (chapter 7). So the sixth seal cannot represent the end of time. What then does it represent? The sixth seal, we believe, depicts **the dramatic climax of the conflict between Christianity and the pagan Roman Empire in the fourth century**. All the symbols refer to the fall of governments and government leaders and drastic changes in established institutions. An earthquake is a standard prophetic symbol for upheaval in society; sun, moon, and stars stand for government leaders, prominent persons; mountains and islands symbolize kingdoms and nations."

Let me be clear: I am not saying that every time the sun, or the moon, or stars are mentioned in Scripture, they have these symbolic meanings. Obviously, in many passages the reference is to the literal celestial bodies. However, in prophetic settings, and particularly when all three (sun, moon, and stars) are mentioned, the meaning is most likely figurative, and is symbolic of earthly rulers and kingdoms.

Following is a summary of these prophetic passages we have looked at, along with their applications. Note that in every case, the dimming and/or fall of heavenly bodies and the shaking of heaven and earth, etc., do NOT refer to actual physical phenomena but rather to God's judgments on earthly rulers, nations, and empires.
–John Temples

REFERENCE	PHENOMENA	MEANING/FULFILLMENT
Genesis 37:9-10	Darkening of sun, moon, and stars	Sun, moon, and stars meant leaders/eminant persons— Jacob, his wife, and Joseph's eleven brothers
Isaiah 13:9-13	Darkening of sun, moon, stars; shaking of heaven and earth	Fall of the government of Babylon
Isaiah 24:19-23	Sun, moon, earthquake	Fall of the leaders of Israel and beginning of Babylonian captivity
Ezekiel 32:7	Darkening of sun, moon, and stars	God's judgment on the leadership of Egypt
Joel 2:10	Dimming of sun, moon, and stars; quaking of heaven and earth	Assyrian invasion of Israel
Joel 2:28-32a	Sun goes dark, moon turns to blood	Destruction of Jerusalem by Roman armies in AD 70
Matthew 24:29, Mark 13:24, Luke 21:25-26	Sun and moon are darkened, stars fall, powers of the heavens are shaken	Destruction of Jerusalem, AD 70
Hebrews 12:25-28	Shaking of heavens and earth	Destruction of Jerusalem and end of the institution of Judaism
Revelation 6:12-17	Sun turns black, moon turns to blood, stars fall from heaven, a great earthquake	Fall of Roman paganism and favorable treatment of Christianity under Constantine, ca AD 313