

STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Adult Bible Equipping Class
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SIGNS IN THE HEAVENS: What do the Stars Really Tell Us?

INTERPRETING ASTRONOMICAL SIGNS

1A. Overview of astronomical sign texts

- 1b. Seventeen passages in the OT contain references to astronomical phenomena.
- 2b. Not all of these passages reference the Day of Yahweh. In fact, the phrase appears in conjunction with only nine of these texts.
- 3b. In contrast, the phrase “day of Yahweh” occurs 19x in the OT. Obviously not all of these references talk about astronomical signs.

PASSAGE	DESCRIPTION	DOY REFERENCE
Isa 13:10	Sun/moon/stars darkened	Isa 13:6, 9
Isa 24:23	Sun/moon confounded in Yahweh's presence	
Isa 34:4	Host of heaven/ sky rolls up like scroll	
Jer 4:23-28	Heavens dark/no light	
Jer 13:16	Judah anticipates light Yahweh will bring darkness	
Ezek 32:7-8	Heavens/stars/sun darkened and covered with clouds	
Joel 2:2	Darkness/gloom/cloud/ thick darkness	Joel 2:1
Joel 2:10	Sun/moon/stars grow dark	Joel 2:11
Joel 2:30-31	Wonders in sky/on earth Sun darkened Moon turned to blood	Joel 2:31

Joel 3:15	Sun/moon/stars darkened	Joel 3:14
Amos 5:18, 20	Darkness not light	Amos 5:18(x2), 20
Amos 8:9	Sun down at noon Earth dark at daytime	
Mic 3:6	Night/darkness Sun goes down on prophets	
Hab 3:11	Sun/moon fixed/go away at Yahweh's presence/glory	
Zeph 1:15	Darkness/gloom/cloud/ thick darkness	Zeph 1:14(x2)
Zech 14:6	No light/luminaries dwindle	Zech 14:1

2A. Questions that drive the interpretations of astronomical signs

Astronomical signs comprise a relatively small percentage of the OT and don't appear at first glance to play a significant role in major OT themes. Additionally, they are not easy to interpret. This is probably why there is a lack of detailed study. Why spend inordinate amounts of time unraveling an issue with little to no overall significance?

1b. What is the nature of these signs?

This refers to the literary function of these signs. Are they figurate in nature, e.g., metaphor, hyperbole, and are intended by the author to communicate something *nonliteral*? Or, are they literal in nature and represent an actual cosmological event that will occur?

2b. When will/did these signs occur?

This has to do with fulfillment. Does the text give reference to when these "signs" occurred or will occur? Were they historically linked to key events, i.e., the fall of Babylon, Egypt, Judah, Israel, etc.? Or will they occur at a future time? Or, will they occur at all?

3b. How many functions do these signs have?

This has to do with what these signs communicate, whether figuratively or literally. Do these signs have a single message they communicate to the reader/observer? Or is it possible that these signs communicate multiple things?

3A. Examples of How Astronomical Signs are Interpreted

As with interpretation, context is always the road upon which meaning derives. This means that each passage referencing astronomical signs will be guided by the context in which the passage occurs.

1b. Isaiah 13:10

For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not flash forth their light; the sun will be dark when it rises and the moon will not shed its light.

1c. Context

Isaiah 13 is part of a larger series of pronouncements concerning certain Gentile nations surrounding Judah (Isa 13-23).

- 2d. Each pronouncement declares Yahweh's imminent judgment on the nations.
- 3d. Each pronouncement shows Judah (the original recipients) that, despite Judah's current political situation, Yahweh is sovereign over the world.
- 4d. Each pronouncement justifies the "Zion-centered picture of history" painted in chapters 1-12.¹

2c. Fulfillment

The passage under consideration is found in the first pronouncement against Babylon and describe in vivid detail the downfall of Babylon and the reasons for her judgment (Isa 13:1-14:27).

1d. The Fall of Babylon in 539 B.C.

Some identify this pronouncement as referring to the destruction of Babylon by the Medes in 539 B.C. The difficulty with this is that Babylon fell to Cyrus so anti-climactically that it really doesn't match the destructive language of the text.

2d. The Fall of Babylon in 689 B.C.

Some see this passage as describing the earlier destruction of Babylon by Assyria.

3d. Eschatological Fulfillment

Others argue that no historical event matches the biblical account here and see this as describing an eschatological judgment.

4d. Progressive/Double Fulfillment

¹ Alec J. Motyer, *The Prophecies of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 134.

Still others try to see double-fulfillment—an historical fulfillment in the fall of Babylon as well as an eschatological fulfillment.

3c. Difficulties

The difficulty in interpreting the passage involves the unmistakable universality of the language in 13:1-16.

- 1d. Apart from identifying “Babylon” in 13:1, the text is suspiciously ambiguous until the mention of the “Medes” (13:17).
- 2d. The name “Babylon” is anciently associated with human pride and rebellion against God (Gen 11:1-9), making scholars believe that Babylon was intentionally placed first as a symbol of any world power that opposes God.
- 3d. The text mentions “the day of Yahweh” (13:6, 9), making it seem that this judgment is universal and not simply an historical judgment against one particular nation.
- 4d. This same kind of language can be found in John’s description of the fall of Babylon in Revelation 17-18.

4c. Interpretations

All these factors contribute to the difficulty in interpreting the meaning of the astronomical signs in 13:10. If this text describes an historical fall of Babylon, did these signs occur literally, or are they figuratively describing the immensity of the judgment? If the text describes a future event, should we expect these signs then?

1d. General Judgment

This is a core interpretation of the darkness that sees the language of darkness as generally depicting God’s wrath. This interpretation lends to both figurative and literal meanings.

2d. Theophany

Some interpreters have picked up on the specific language used and noted the similarity with descriptions of Yahweh’s presence on earth at Sinai. They see this as indicative of Yahweh coming down to personally judge the world.

3d. Judgment Against Nature

This expands on the meaning of judgment by seeing God as removing the heavenly bodies and thus undermining the security that man experiences by the regularity of the sun and moon.

4d. Withdrawal of Divine Blessing

This sees God as withdrawing the beneficial light of the sun, and thus pictures God as removing his blessing in creation from mankind.

5d. Curse of Egypt

This view suggests that the mention of darkness would cause Judah to recall God's judgment of darkness on Egypt and how he made a distinction between his people and his enemies.

6d. Polemic Against Solar/Lunar Cults

This interpretation considered whether the darkening of the heavenly bodies may function polemically to symbolize the judgment of the solar and lunar cults that had formed in Judah at the time.

7d. Complete Destruction

This view sees the astronomical signs as figurative and functioning to communicate in general the complete destruction of the world. Since both the heavens and the earth are involved (see 13:13), then Isaiah simply aims to communicate that God's judgment will involve complete destruction.

8d. Universal Destruction

This is similar to the previous view, except that the involvement of the heavens and the earth is viewed as indicating that God's judgment will be worldwide and universal, rather than located to a specific nation.

9d. Political Upheaval

This viewpoint suggests that the astronomical signs symbolize the downfall of political powers (often represented by the heavenly bodies).

10d. Reversal of Creation

This interpretation simply sees the darkening of the heavenly bodies as a figurative way of saying that God is undoing his creation in judgment. Just as he made the lights during creation, he is taking them away in judgment.

2b. Amos 5:18-20

Alas, you who are longing for the day of Yahweh, for what purpose will the day of Yahweh be to you? It will be darkness and not light. . . . Will not the day of Yahweh be darkness instead of light, even gloom with no brightness in it?

1c. Context

The prophet Amos talks about the Day of Yahweh particularly as it related to the fate of northern Israel.

- 1d. The nation was experiencing a period of increased prosperity under Jeroboam II, but it was plagued with covenant treachery and compromise. Their political success bred arrogance and a false sense of security, while hypocritical religion and absence of justice, equity and compassion revealed their lack of spiritual life.
- 2d. Israel's attitudes culminated in a distorted view of the Day of Yahweh. They believed there was no reason to repent and follow Yahweh, and that he would come and vindicate Israel's false religious hopes.
- 3d. Amos 5:18-20 acted as a chilling reminder that Israel was not exempt from being objects of God's wrath during the Day of Yahweh.

2c. Interpretations**1d. Judgment**

The contrast between light and dark suggests to most commentators that this passage is figurative for judgment in general or more specifically for the deportation of Israel by Assyria in 722 B.C.

2d. Deuteronomy 28:29

Darkness has a covenantal connection with the promised curse that would come upon Israel for disobedience to the covenant. Just as Egypt had come under the curse of God in darkness, so now Israel would come under a similar curse of darkness for covenant treachery.

3d. Other ancillary Interpretations

- 1e. Theophany
- 2e. Reversal of Creation
- 3e. Plagues of Egypt

3b. Joel 2:30-31

I will display wonders in the sky and on the earth, blood, fire, and columns of smoke. The sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood before the great and awesome day of Yahweh comes.

1c. Context

The principle concern of Joel is to relate the current catastrophe of his day, i.e., a devastating locust invasion that swept through Judah, with the imminent revelation of the eschatological Day of Yahweh.

- 1d. Joel began by describing the devastation of the locust invasion and the subsequent starvation and drought of the day (1:1-20).
- 2d. He then transitions into a description of another invader—a human invader—that, much like the locusts of his day, would wreak havoc in the land (2:1-11). This judgment is described as the Day of Yahweh.
- 3d. Joel clarifies for his readers that their deliverance from the Day of Yahweh is conditioned on their heart-felt repentance from their sin (2:12-17). The blessing that would come from their restoration would involve immediate relief from the current threat (2:20), an increasingly fertile land (2:21-27), and the eventual pouring out of the Spirit upon the covenant people (2:28-29).
- 4d. Yet certain astronomical activity would also mark that time (2:30-31).

2c. Difficulties

The language used in chapter 1 clearly refers to the current locust invasion that occurred during Joel's time. But the language of chapter 2 can be taken in different ways.

1d. Locust Invasion

Some see the entirety of chapters 1-2 as describing a locust invasion, where chapter 2 begins to use anthropomorphism in order to dramatize the threat.

2d. Human Invasion

Others see chapter 2 as describing a true human army that moves in a manner like the locusts moved through the land. But even then, the question is whether Joel is describing an historically-near event (a potential invader like Assyria) or an eschatological event.

3c. Interpretations

Joel's description of astronomical activity is unique, breaking from the typical imagery and including a novel element—a blood-red moon. In addition, his inclusion of the phrase “blood, fire, and columns of smoke” has multiplied the number of proposed interpretations.

1d. Theophany

The signs of blood, fire, smoke, and the darkening of the heavenly bodies is typical theophonic language describing Yahweh's physical presence among his people. Thus, within the context, these signs demonstrate God's powerful work on behalf of his people.

2d. Eclipse

The descriptions of a blood-red moon are strikingly similar to the phenomena that result from a lunar eclipse, suggesting that the text describes an eclipse that the ANE mind would interpret as the removal of divine providence for those under God's judgment.

3d. Smoke/Sandstorm

Others posit that while an eclipse might explain the lunar activity in the text, it doesn't explain the obscuration of the sun, since both cannot occur together. However, both might be explained by the columns of smoke that come from the burning landscape, and the red moon could result from a sandstorm.

4d. Plagues of Egypt

The description of darkness mixed with the reference to blood has caused some to suggest that Joel is harkening back to the days of God's plagues on Egypt.

5d. Blessing

While Joel had initially used astronomical signs to indicate God's judgment on his people, borrowing the language from passages such as Isaiah 13:10, now he fuses that with the positive descriptions of solar imagery found in Malachi 3:2, 23. Thus, for God's enemies, the signs depict judgment, while for God's people they are transformed into a sign of blessing.

3A. Evaluation and Summary of Interpretations

These interpretive examples are just a sampling of the various interpretations of the 16 passages involving cosmological phenomena. But they expose several issues.

1b. Interpretive Problems

One thing these passages expose is the immense interpretive problems that plague the text. It is often difficult for the interpreter to discern what is figurative vs. literal, and often the answer to that question flows from the interpreters decision on whether the text describes near-historical events vs. events that will take place in the far future.

2b. The Primacy of Amos 5:18-20

It is the opinion of many commentators that Amos was the first prophet to talk about the Day of Yahweh and to use darkness imagery in his descriptions of that day. Since commentators tend to interpret Amos' descriptions of darkness as figurative rather than literal, it leads them to consider all the other references to astronomical signs in the OT as simply figurative expansions of the darkness theme.

3b. Core Interpretive Elements

Certain core elements appear repeatedly within virtually every discussion of these astronomical signs. All three elements are interrelated in some way in the Day of Yahweh, and all dominate the discussions of the passages.

1c. Judgment

2c. Creation

3c. Theophany