STUDIES IN THE

OLD TESTAMENT

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

THE NATURE OF ASTRONOMICAL SIGNS

1A. **Review of Interpretive Questions**

Building off of the previous study, this section aims to answer the first two of the following three questions. Of course, the answers to these questions are complex and interrelated, so sometimes it will be difficult to discuss them in isolation. Nevertheless, that's the goal of the current study.

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?

2A. **The Nature of Astronomical Signs**

Old Testament scholars are much more aware now of the important role that metaphor plays in prophetic literature. Whereas there was once a tendency to over-literalize the words of the prophets, with the advent of modern literary criticism, they are much more sensitive to the purpose and power of prophecy. However, it has also led to blurring the lines in identifying what is and is not a metaphor.

1b. **Overview of Figurative Language**

1c. Metaphor is part of a genre of language known as *figurative* language.

2c. Figurative language is probably best summarized as the process of *semantic transformation*—i.e., transforming meaning.

3c. "Any figure of speech involving semantic change (and not merely syntactic change, like inversion of normal word order) consists of some transformation of a *literal* meaning. The author provides, not his intended meaning, *m*, but some function thereof, *f(m)*; the reader's task is to apply the inverse function, f^{-1}, and

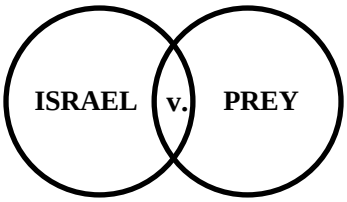
so to obtain $f^{-1}(f(m))$, i.e., the original meaning. When different functions are used, different tropes [meanings] result. Thus, in irony, the author says the *opposite* of what he means; in hyperbole, he *exaggerates* his meaning; and so on."[1]

4c. In other words, instead of simply stating his intended meaning using literal language, an author uses a particular form of figurative language (i.e., *function*) in order to communicate his intended meaning. The reader must then (1) identify the type of figurative language used, and then (2) interpret that figurative language appropriately, in order to arrive at the author's intended meaning.

2b. **Defining Metaphor**

1c. Lackoff and Johnson describe metaphor this way: "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another."[2]

2c. Watson suggests that metaphor results from the semantic overlap between two words or ideas which share some sort of commonality. Thus, when the prophet says, "Why has he [Israel] become a prey?" (Jer 2:14), he draws on the overlapping concept of "vulnerability" between Israel and the inherent meaning of "prey." This makes the metaphor almost like a simile, but a little more direct than simple comparison.



(v.: vulnerability)

3c. Black, on the other hand, identifies the basic transformation feature of metaphor as "either *analogy* or *similarity*." Thus, when metaphor is used, the author intends to indicate something similar or analogous between the principle and secondary subject.

4c. Historically, philosophers regarded metaphor as the stepchild of language. They prized clear and logical expression, and metaphor was to them a messy substitute for what could have easily been said literally.

5c. Vanhoozer writes, "Aristotle . . . pictured the 'proper' relation of language to the world in terms of predication. Language is meaningful and true when what

[1] Max Black, *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962), 35.

[2] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 5.

is said corresponds to the way things are. S is P (subject-predicate). Aristotelian logic deals with the relations between proper states of this kind. . . . Figurative speech, on the other hand, plays havoc with the laws of logic."[3]

6c. As history progressed, however, people began to recognize that metaphor accomplished much more than simply coloring and decorating an otherwise literal statement. ***It actually creates meaning*.**

3b. How Metaphor Works

1c. There are three parts to a metaphor: (1) the principle subject; (2) the secondary subject; (3) the context/frame.

2c. In metaphor, set within a context/frame, the principle subject interacts with the secondary subject, resulting in extending the meaning of the principle subject beyond its normal range.

3c. Thus, in the simple metaphor, "Man is a wolf," the principle subject (man) interacts with the secondary subject (wolf), resulting in the creation of new meaning for the principle subject. *The concept of "man" takes on new depth and significance as the writer invites the reader to view "man" through the filter of "wolf."*

4c. Metaphor makes a definitive statement regarding an idea. The common concepts that the writer and reader associate with the two subjects interact together to create new meaning that fundamentally changes the way the reader thinks about man.

5c. Of course, in order for the reader to arrive at the author's intended meaning, he has to share the same thoughts and ideas about the two subjects. The author and reader must have a "shared strategy"—a shared perception of the meaning of "man" and the meaning of "wolf."

6c. For instance, the statement "Yahweh roars from Zion" (Amos 1:2) rests on the basic metaphor, YAHWEH IS A LION. Does the prophet intend to convey the same ideas as one who says, "King Richard is a lion!"? In the latter, the medieval view of a lion denoted bravado and courage But in the former, the ANE view saw a lion as a predator that posed a serious threat. *In order to understand Amos' intended meaning, the reader must share or at least understand his conception of "lion"*.

[3] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 127.

4b. Identifying Metaphor

It's obvious, then, that the reader must be able to properly identify a metaphor when he sees one in order to arrive at the writer's intended meaning. But how can we spot metaphor and distinguish it from a literal statement?

1c. Incongruity

1d. "Incongruity" simply means that "we identify a simple predicational statement as metaphor when that statement is, in some sense, literally false."[4]

2d. For example, Hosea states that "Israel is a luxuriant vine" (Hos 10:1), the reader, assuming by default a literal meaning, senses that the statement fundamentally defies reality—he detects "a clash between the intent of the speaker and the character of the expression."[5]

3d. The reason for the clash (i.e., incongruity) is because the meanings of the two subjects (e.g., Israel & luxuriant vine) do not naturally belong together. Instead, the interaction of their meanings have created new meaning.

4d. Thus the reader then assumes that perhaps the statement's literal meaning was not that which the author intended and so seeks a metaphorical meaning.

5d. Even when a metaphor is cased in a statement that is not predicational, incongruity can still be detected.

6d. For example, when Amos states that "Yahweh roars from Zion" (Amos 1:2), the reader can easily sense logical incongruity when he tries to understand the statement literally. This is because the focus of the statement ("roars) contrasts with the rest of the statement.

7d. Incongruity may be sensed in a number of ways:

1e. Words

2e. Context

3e. Tone of voice

4e. Historical Background

[4] David H. Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphors, Semantics, and Divine Imagery*, Brill Reference Library of Ancient Judaism (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002), 36.

[5] Ibid., 115.

8d. Obviously, all this means that detecting incongruity can be somewhat subjective, and if the reader isn't careful, he can assume that metaphor is being used when it really isn't.

9d. Therefore, it's a good idea for the reader to test this incongruity to see if it really exists or if he's not seeing it correctly.

10d. A simple diagnostic might go something like this:

(a) MACHINES ARE PEOPLE (b) My computer died on me (c) Of course, computers are not people—but if they were, you might say mine has died on me

11d. In this test, (a) is the basic metaphor upon which (b) is based. Thus, when someone says, "My computer died on me," they are really using a metaphor that's built on the idea that a machine is a person. With (c), the reason for the incongruity is statement explicitly.

12d. In other words, we might say this: "Since machines *are not* people, when 'people ideas' are used regarding machines, one must be speaking about some behavior or event in a machine which is like one expected of people. Ergo: the statement is metaphorical."[6]

13d. Now let's take a second example:

(a) MACHINES ARE PEOPLE (b) My car [engine] is running well today (c) Of course, machines are not people—but if they were, you might say that my car is running well today

14d. Here's an example where incongruity is falsely detected. First, the reader falsely assumes that "running" is a uniquely *human* characteristic. Second, the reader assumes that every use of the word "running" carries the same basic meaning. However, a dictionary definition of the term "running" makes it quite clear that the word means different things in different contexts, and not every use is associated with a human characteristic.

15d. So we see that a person can incorrectly "detect" incongruity in a statement if (1) he doesn't share the same understanding of the subjects as the writer (2) he identifies an underlying metaphor that is not there, or (3) he approaches the statement expecting certain necessary conditions to be met in order to take the statement literally.

[6] Ibid., 116.

2c. Conditionality

1d. Conditionality refers to a set of conditions that exist in the reader's mind that must be met in order to consider a statement to be literal.

2d. Most readers tend to approach statements with a list of *necessary* conditions. In other words, "for any given concept—whether it is a thing, an event, or an abstract idea makes no difference—there is a checklist of yes-or-no questions that pertain to what is essential to the concept."[7]

3d. For example, a reader may have a checklist of yes-or-no questions about what makes something a "king." Thus, when they come across a statement referencing "king" (i.e., *x* is king), they go through the checklist of everything that makes something a king. If *x* passes the checklist, then the statement is literal. But if *x* doesn't pass the checklist, then they understand the statement to be metaphor.

4d. For example, take the statement, "Yahweh will reign over them in Mount Zion from now on and forever" (Mic 4:7). Is this statement literal or metaphorical?

5d. Brettler argues that it is metaphor, and he does so based on the ANE concept of kingship: "Biblical rhetoric uses language typically belonging to the human sphere and applies it to God. These uses may be considered metaphorical because the biblical God does not generally possess these human attributes in their usual form. For example, the Israelite king is crowned and is part of a dynasty; God as king lacks these qualities."[8]

6d. In other words, Brettler has a set of *necessary* conditions that must be present in order for something to be a literal king. Since God doesn't have all these necessary attributes, then he cannot be a literal king, and any statement that suggests he is should be understood metaphorically.

7d. But as Aaron argues, "There is nothing 'intrinsic to kingship' that forces us to see the phrase 'God is King' as metaphorical. Brettler's error lies in the fact that he believes 'King' must be applied identically to all realms of existence, such that unless there is a perfect match—in this case, between how human kings operate and how divine kings operate—metaphor must be at hand."[9]

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[7] Ibid., 71.

[8] Marc Z. Brettler, *God is King: Understanding an Israelite Metaphor*, JSOTSup 76 (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1989), 159.

[9] Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities*, 39.

8d. How do we avoid this kind of conclusion? Don't focus so much on the word itself and its "meaning." Instead, try to understand the author's understanding of the word and how he defined it. Undoubtedly, your idea of a "king" might be very different from the ANE concept of a "king." And even if "king" meant one thing in the ANE world, that doesn't mean that all those aspects came in to play every time the author used the word.

4b. Metaphor and Astronomical Signs

1c. Astronomical sign texts pose a formidable challenge in this discussion. Rarely do these passages present a simple predicational statement. Instead, they are cased in complex expressions.

2c. These texts also occur in a variety of contexts, and no two instances are identical.

3c. Nevertheless, incongruity is apparent in practically every passage.

1d. The reader is met by the language of passages like Isaiah 13:10; Joel 2:10; Ezekiel 32:7-8; and Amos 8:9, and is immediately struck by the surreal nature of the descriptions. Objects which by their very nature are meant to shine light no longer function as they should. This rhetoric defies reality and suggests to the reader that perhaps something different than a literal meaning is intended.

2d. The reader also senses something beyond the mere language. In all these passages, the authors make an abrupt shift from the earth to the heavens. In the surrounding contexts, divine judgment is depicted in wholly human terms using imagery which correspond to human experiences of warfare. But astronomical signs move out of reality to describe something which, if taken literally, defies all human experience.

4c. Thus, if these texts are intended to be taken metaphorically, then we must test to see whether we are truly detecting real incongruity or not.

1d. First, we identify the basic underlying metaphor from which all this imagery derives. Since all these texts deal with judgment, and all speak of darkness, perhaps we can say that they rely on the simple refrain JUDGMENT IS DARKNESS.

2d. As it turns out, this slogan is repeated nearly verbatim in 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?

3d. Almost all commentators interpret this entire passage metaphorically. They note the contrast between light and darkness, and they note that this passage seems to be the first of its kind—the first passage to talk about the Day of Yahweh in terms of darkness.

4d. So, is the statement JUDGMENT IS DARKNESS really metaphor? In other words, is the idea of darkness so foreign to that of judgment that it requires the reader to stretch his imagination to equate the two? Is there something inherent to darkness that will not allow it to be a literal expression of divine judgment?

5d. Two OT passages argue against that conclusion:

1e. **Exodus 10:21-23**

> Then Yahweh said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward the sky, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, even a darkness which may be felt." So Moses stretched out his hand toward the sky, and there was thick darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days. They did not see one another, nor did anyone rise from his place for three days, but all the sons of Israel had light in their dwellings.

1f. First off, the genre of the text (historical narrative) makes it extremely unlikely that this should be taken metaphorically.

2f. While several explanations have been given for how the darkness was accomplished (e.g., Saharan *khamsin*, supernatural darkness, etc.), the salient feature is that Yahweh caused it—whether naturally or supernaturally.

3f. All the plagues that fell on Egypt were called "signs" and "wonders" (Exod 7:3; cf. 7:9; 10:1-2; 11:9-10). These terms talk about an "event or object that points beyond itself to some remarkable divine intervention."[10]

4f. These same terms are used to describe astronomical signs in the Day of Yahweh (i.e., Joel 2:30). Thus the darkness of Egypt is linked conceptually and verbally with the cosmic activity of the Day of Yahweh.

[10] John Barton, *Joel, Obadiah: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 97.

2e. **Deuteronomy 28:29**

> You will grope at noon, as the blind man gropes in darkness.

1f. This is part of the curses for covenant treachery found in Deuteronomy 28. The curse itself is that Israel will "grope at noon," and their groping is likened to a blink man groping in darkness.

2f. This judgment reflects the language found in Exodus 10:22.

3f. Just like Yahweh produced (lit.) "darkness which causes groping" (Exod 10:22), so Israel would "grope around" at noon.

4f. Similar language is found in Amos 8:9, where the same language occurs. Just as he compared the turbulent movement of an earthquake to the rising of the Nile River in 8:8, so he said that the sun would be dark "at noon."

5f. The allusion to Deuteronomy 28:29 and Exodus 10:21 "could mean only one thing for apostate Israelites: they were under God's curse for breaking his covenant. What is more, they were accursed as the Egyptians."[11]

6d. Additionally, there is evidence outside the OT that connect darkness with judgment in the broader ANE culture:

1e. **Tablet II of Erra and Ishum (8th century B.C.)[12]**

This text is curiously similar to the astronomical imagery found in the OT.

> The time has elapsed, the hour has passed.
> I promise that I shall destroy the rays of the Sun;
> I shall cover the face of the Moon in the middle of the night.

[11] R. Reed Lessing, *Amos*, Concordia Commentary (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 355; cf. 527.

[12] *COS*, 1:410.

2e. **Deit 'Alla Inscriptions (ca. 800 B.C.)**[13]

This text describes the prophet Balaam, son of Beor, who receives a vision from the god El regarding a deistic counsel which had convened in order to command the goddess Shagar to produce darkness, and thus chaos, in the land. Some of the phrases are strikingly similar to the language used in Amos 5:18-20.

> The gods have banded together;
> The Shaddai-gods have established a council.
> And they have said to [the goddess] Shagar:
> "Sew up, close up the heavens with dense cloud,
> That darkness exist there, not brilliance;
> *Obscurity and not clarity*;
> So that you instill dread in dense darkness.
> And—never utter a sound again!"

5c. **Evaluation & Summary**

1d. All these texts require us to reconsider the relationship between darkness and divine judgment.

2d. To the modern reader, judgment and darkness appear related only by metaphor. But to the ANE mind, and particularly within the covenant context of Israel, darkness was a tangible expression of Yahweh's judgment.

4d. Thus, our diagnostic goes like this:

> (a) JUDGMENT IS DARKNESS
> (b) 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.
> (c) Of course, judgment *is not* darkness—but if it were, you could say that when judgment comes, the sun, moon, and stars will go dark.

5d. The assumption of (c) is immediately apparent, and expanding it clarifies it even more: "Since judgment *is not* darkness, when 'darkness ideas' are used regarding judgment, one must be speaking about some aspect or characteristic of judgment which is like a characteristic of darkness. Ergo: the statement is metaphor."

[13] Ibid., 2:142-43.

6d. From a modern perspective, the statement seems logical. But the ANE mind would not have sensed the incongruity nor placed nearly as much uncertainty on the statement being literal.