

2 Peter 3 – Understanding Old Testament Apocalyptic Language

William Bell

For many, the art and skill of employing the apocalyptic language (symbols and signs) used in the Old Testament is a lost art. For this reason, many New Testament passages seem obscure and almost impossible to understand.

This is true of passages like 2 Peter 3, which discuss the end of heaven and earth. Peter speaks of his fellow apostle, Paul, saying that some things he wrote about the end time were hard to be understood. The unstable wrest them to their own destruction.

The Old Testament provides many references to the use of language regarding the end of heaven and earth. The prophets were masters at creating suspense, especially in their dooms day teachings. Examples are found in Isaiah, Hosea, Joel, Haggai, and Zephaniah to name a few.

It is from this rich genre that the apostles and teachers of the New Testament crafted their messages. Therefore, we have an actual system for understanding and unlocking the meaning of these texts.

A sign or symbol points to something other than to itself. Thus when employed to speak about the destruction of heaven and earth, the prophets have something else in view other than torching the planet.

For example, Isaiah 13 is a chapter which describes the fall of ancient Babylon by the Medo-Persian army in 6th century BC. These "dooms day" prophecies of the downfall of nations are often referred to by the prophets as "burdens." See verse 1, where Isaiah establishes the context as the "burden of Babylon."

In this prophecy God brings "his army" from a "far country" as the "weapons of his indignation" to destroy the whole land, v. 5. Observe this is called the **day of the Lord**. In these words Isaiah describes one of many national judgments used throughout the Bible. Its meaning is the same in the New Testament. Never were they describing a cataclysmic universal wipe-out of the globe, -- a colossal error in modern biblical interpretation.

The poetic language used to describe the fall of the nation is that of falling stars, the darkening of the heavenly luminaries, and the shaking of the heavens and earth. This is a common prophetic description of the fall of rulers and their nations.

"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...Therefore I will shake the heavens and the earth will move out of her place....(13:9-13)

Other examples of this language are found in Isaiah chapters 24, (Israel's destruction), and chapter 34 (Edom's destruction). In the New Testament, the language refers exclusively to the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. See Matthew 24:29, Hebrews 12:26-27, 2 Peter 3.

Taking a literal approach to these passages has created an insatiable frenzy of destructive world views with hopeless attempts of finding current events to satisfy these ancient historic national judgments.

The last half of the 20th century miserably embarrassed the prophetic date-setting doomsday would be prophets who changed their predictions like the weather. Getting a grasp on the apocalyptic language used by the prophets is the divine cure for such millennial madness.

To learn more about the use of this language check out the video at YouTube.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67j25-Vm1o4> . It reveals basic details with clear examples.

Once you see how this language is used, your eyes will open to the simplicity of new testament eschatology. Yes, some passages will yet be a challenge, but most will be easily understood.