

Interpreting Texts on End-Time Geophysical Catastrophes: Part 2

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Part 2

“These two methods [the young-earth-futurist literalism and the full preterist hermeneutics] play strongly in modern debates over Genesis and biblical prophecy. A dogmatic literalism. . . fosters interpretations that would have been completely foreign to the original readers of biblical passages. . . Literalism yields a global flood in Genesis as well as a global interpretation of New Testament prophecy. . . The modern hermeneutic myopia screams for a cure. Erroneous exposition on both ends of Scripture embarrasses modern Christians of all persuasions.”¹

Introduction

In the previous paper I provided suggestions for a biblically-based hermeneutic for understanding the prophetic language of end-time geophysical catastrophes. I warned against modern Christians being deceived or intimidated by ideological influences from three major background sources. Uncritical acceptance of these biblically-alien concepts seriously alters how one understands texts like these:

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken.” — Matthew 24:29²

How are such texts to be understood—as literally referring to geophysical conditions described or as mere metaphors for social upheavals?

Hermeneutical Contamination

The three sources of hermeneutical contamination were shown to be: modern cosmology; Enlightenment-derived anthropocentric epistemology; and recent language theory. Modern cosmology uses the term “science” in a deceptive manner to appropriate for itself the credibility of laboratory science and engineering that has been gained from all their demonstrated achievements. Nearly always overlooked, however, is that laboratory science and engineering rely heavily upon repeated, public, and in most cases, direct measurements for their conclusions. Cosmology cannot; it must rely upon surrogate measurements and remote sensing, both of which require layers of speculative models to reconstruct the distant past and distant astronomical phenomena. Nevertheless, popular consensus seduced by the “science” word favors such speculation over any consideration that biblical texts might possibly report real observations about cosmic history.³

¹ This statement by consistent (full) preterists summarizes the hermeneutical collision between two very different understandings of grammatical-historical interpretation. Each accuses the other of imposing modern cosmological conceptions onto the interpretative process at both ends of the Bible. Timothy P. Martin and Jeffrey L. Vaughn, *New Covenant Creation From Genesis to Revelation* (Whitehall, MT: Apocalyptic Vision Press, 2007), 452,455.

² All references are from the New King James Translation unless otherwise noted.

³ Contrary to oft-repeated statement that the Bible isn’t a “textbook of science”, my argument here isn’t proposing any such approach. I am simply arguing that contained in biblical narratives and poetic reflections of the past may be bona fide observations by ordinary “laymen” that are useful data.

Anthropocentric epistemology, operating within this larger context of modern cosmology, (Kant being the prime example and one of the founding fathers) insists that information contained in linguistic expressions arises *solely* out of man's mind. This perspective starts out by completely repudiating the two kinds of Being in Scripture—the self-contained and self-revealing God and the dependent and receptive creation. Biblical hermeneutics, in this perspective, only operates on Hebrew imaginative autobiography.

The third influence my previous paper discussed was the effect of recent language theories, all of which operate within the context of anti-biblical epistemology. Meaning, according to this approach, is constructed by whatever socio-linguistic community harbored the speaker or writer. The problem here is that whatever the construction dynamics are, the resulting meaning is arbitrary and merely conventional. It excludes all biblical concepts of language creation and purpose. With such a low view of language, the interpreter cannot accept that the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek text carries the "bandwidth" of information from the mind of God to the mind of man that the Bible claims.

Cleaning Up Our Hermeneutic

I concluded my previous paper with suggestions based upon a more biblical view of language that avoids the contamination just mentioned. I will use each of these to defend the reality and apparent size of prophesied geophysical catastrophes.

- (1) Interpretation must contextualize such passages within the community of writing prophets that thought in the cosmological terms of Genesis 1-11 and subsequent revelation. These writers did not incorporate pagan literary expressions uncritically in their canonical writings. Nor did they entertain the placid, non-catastrophic, purely natural cosmology of modern readers.⁴ I will discuss implications of this suggestion under the heading "Relation of man and nature."
- (2) Interpretation must recognize the cultural impact of early historical prototypes of future geophysical judgments. Events such as the fall, the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, and especially the exodus and conquest events prepared the language of end-time prophecy. I discuss this matter under the heading "Nature judgments against Gentile nations."
- (3) Interpretation must observe the spectrum of localized geophysical phenomena affecting Israel that is implicit in the Sinaitic Covenant's cursings and blessings. Periodically referenced in Old Testament narrative and prophetic literature these environmental phenomena differ in scope from the judgments upon the Gentiles. I will take up this matter under the heading "Nature judgments and redemption of Israel."
- (4) Interpretation must not overlook the absolute uniqueness of the promised re-creation of the universe. History is not a geophysical dead-end as it inevitably is in pagan thought. Through the promises given to Abraham all nature will be blessed. This, too, will be covered under the heading "Nature judgments and redemption of Israel."
- (5) Numerical patterns of cosmic judgments—the sevenfold seals, trumpets, and bowls for example in Revelation—do not have to be artificial symmetry of literary structure. Numerical patterns are everywhere in creation and, indeed, even in the Triune God! Ancient Hebrews and pagans alike were aware of numerical patterns in their in their environment. This will be mentioned occasionally throughout the following discussion.

⁴ Note that I speak here of the *writers'* culture, not that of their countrymen who as both the Bible and archeology show were often out-of-synch with the writers.

Relation of Man and Nature

Nearly everyone today agrees that to understand a text the interpreter must determine its cultural context. It is not agreed, however, on just how this is to be done. In this paper I will attempt to understand the cultural context of the authors who wrote of geophysical catastrophes—both judgmental and re-creative—by applying the hermeneutical suggestions described above. Since this kind of text concerns the physical environment of man (whether written about as reality or as metaphors) I first will discuss how man and nature were related under God in the writers' culture.

The Cultural Context of Mosaic Cosmology

Through Moses writers of Scripture received a divinely preserved cosmology which significantly differed from the pagan cosmologies of their neighbors. The writers' cultural context, as a consequence, was dominated by two major ideas that were utterly opposed to their pagan neighbors as well as to the de-facto majority view of their unbelieving countrymen. A third major idea superficially resembled paganism, but as I will show it was fundamentally different. In order for us moderns to enter into the writers' cultural perspective of their relationship to nature, therefore, we need work hard at processing the ramifications of these three cosmological conceptions for our texts.

Three Basic Ideas

Idea #1: Theocentricity. Paganism—both ancient and modern—is fundamentally “nature-centric.” Ancient Near Eastern origin myths conceived of a continuum of Being shared by the various deities, sky, earth, man, and animals. In *Enuma Elish*, for example, there is a transmutation between the material cosmos and the goddess Tiamat. Man later emerges out of that prior matrix. Similar elements occur in modern cosmology: man is a casual result of cosmic alchemy whereby non-living matter spontaneously transmutes into a sequence of living entities.

From Genesis onward biblical writers incessantly affirmed God as Creator of all. They shared a history of grand theophanies like Moses' encounter with the burning bush that so graphically revealed God's aseity (Exod 3). They shared details of God's providential rule rooted in His position as Creator (e.g., Job, Isaiah 40-44). From within this conceptual framework they engaged in powerful polemics against the nature-centered idolatry of Baalism that infiltrated their national culture. Their perspective was thus theocentric.

Idea #2: Dominion Man. Paganism fosters the idea that man is slave to the gods and goddesses which in turn are temporally varying and capricious features of nature. In such servitude mankind knows only anxiety and fear of tomorrow. In utter contrast, Genesis 1 and 2 pictures man as lord of his earthly environment. He lives in subordination not to nature but to nature's God. In Genesis 2 God provides a model of what dominion looks like: He plants a garden. That means that nature is not complete until it is managed in such a fashion so as to bring forth its full fruitfulness. The romantic notion of “pristine nature untouched by man” is a pagan delusion. The measure of man is thus the zone of his dominion or “kingdom.” This dominion ideal is not the selfish

anthropocentricity that modern ecologists accuse the Bible of fostering; it was to be disciplined by the effect of the accompanying theocentricity.⁵

Idea #3: Integrated Nature—terrestrial, extraterrestrial, visible, and invisible. Biblical writers were well aware of the sun, moon, and stars as integrated with growth in the fields of wheat, barley, and orchards. After all, an agrarian society can't avoid the connection between the sun's elevation and the seasons. Nor could a society that was required to maintain exact calendar dates for their feasts ignore the celestial bodies' positions and motions.⁶ Wisdom writings such as Job and Proverbs express the expanse of nature as including these extra-terrestrial entities integrated within God's wise plan. Moreover, the biblical writers were quite aware of the interplay between visible nature (whether terrestrial or celestial) and the invisible background of "heavenly" powers and principalities.⁷ However this idea might superficially resemble paganism's Continuity of Being, we must remember that it was at bottom totally different due to the Creator/creature distinction inherent in the biblical perspective.

Hermeneutical Consequences for Interpreting Geophysical Catastrophe Texts

In seeking to interpret the texts of interest as the writers would have wanted us, we need to reconstruct their viewpoint using insights from these three distinctive ideas. We now move on to understanding how these writers viewed the matter of God's judgments and saving acts in history.

Idea #2 defines man's zone of responsibility. Dominion establishes the dimensions of existence for which individuals, cities, and nations are held accountable to God. A city like Sodom, for example, had a domain that included men, women, and children—the sociological dimension—but it also included its fields and products of trade—the geophysical dimension. Its economic health was supported by so-called natural processes (celestial configurations, rainfall, cloudiness, heat, etc.). A further aspect of the geophysical dimension of a pagan domain like that of much of pre-exilic Israel was their astral pantheon. A full description of their domain would include—besides the sociological behavior—*the geophysical support to their economic production and religious worship.*

Idea #1 added to Idea #2 establishes the zone of judgment and re-creation. Under theocentricity man individually and/or corporately is held accountable. If the responsible domain or "kingdom" of an individual like

⁵ Here the Bible and so-called "deep ecology" of modern environmentalism are at profound odds. For an excellent study of this conflict see E. Calvin Beisner, *Where Garden Meets Wilderness: Evangelical Entry in the Environmental Debate* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1997). Although I differ with the author on the scope and means of cosmic redemption (he is postmillennial; I am premillennial), I have benefited especially from his exegetical insight into the difference between the garden of Genesis 2 and the rest of the environment outside of the garden—a wilderness waiting for man to extend his dominion. As a scientist working with the environment for many years I have personally experienced the vitriol from regulators hostile to biblical dominion. In a forthcoming study, *Nazi Oaks: The Sacrificial Offering of the Judeo-Christian Worldview in the Holocaust*, R. Mark Musser documents the hatred of biblical dominion by influential intellectuals such as Arthur Schopenhauer and David Henry Thoreau that culminated in the 20th century environmental policies of the Third Reich. The connection, as Musser shows, was directly related to the Genesis narrative seen as a Jewish threat responsible for industrial damage to the European environment.

⁶ See, for example, the late Jewish apocalyptic book, 1 Enoch, chapters 72-82, known also as the "Astronomical Book" for a detailed exposition of celestial motion and calendar fixing. Obviously, calendar fixing occurred millennia earlier and Genesis 1:14-18 was well known, but the significance of 1 Enoch is that it provides a window into Jewish thinking apparently influenced by exilic exposure to the Babylonian/Persian *observational* data. A fairly complete discussion of Mesopotamian astronomical knowledge occurs in Deborah Furian Taylor, "The Geographical and Adversarial Orientation of the Book of Revelation" (Ph.D. dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 2004), pp 266-350. Daniel and Ezekiel must have been aware of these data when they prophesied catastrophes that included the celestial regions. They weren't naïve regarding what constituted "normal" behavior of celestial phenomena.

⁷ E.g., Gen. 19; 2 Sam. 24:15-17; 2 Kings 19; Job.

Job, a city like Sodom, or a nation like Israel can be described in its sociological and geophysical dimensions, that description also establishes the target of God's judgment. Alternatively, if there is to be redemption and re-creation, that description also defines the dimensions of God's ultimate blessing.⁸ We thus expect that prophetic language of cursing or blessing could include references to terrestrial and extra-terrestrial nature that were intended to be literally interpreted. To understand such language readers must take seriously the symbiotic biblical relationship between man and nature.⁹

Idea #3 added to the above. Let's add to our mix the basic biblical idea of integrated nature that includes also that which cannot be empirically sensed, i.e., the principalities and powers. What consequence follows as a hermeneutical aid? Biblical writers who thought in these terms would feel quite at home intermixing terminology referencing the natural environment as well as the angelic and demonic agents acting upon it as intermediaries between God and man. Biblical writers did not share our materialist limitations on cause-effect.

Section Summary

The relationship of man to his natural environment in the world of the Bible is structurally distinct from paganism in: (1) its theocentricity—that God is creator of all and definer of man's dominion; (2) its subjection of nature to judgments against man as well as to blessings for man; and (3) its comprehensive picture of man, nature, and background angelic powers operating under God as an integrated system. Hermeneutically, this means that prophetic language of end-time catastrophes must be understood in a context where man's literal physical and spiritual environment were all seen to be part of his zone of responsibility, his "kingdom" at it were. Whether or not this perspective is an embarrassment to "modern Christians of all persuasions", the careful interpreter's job is to faithfully mirror the original writers' meaning.¹⁰

Experienced Geophysical Judgments Against Gentile Dominions

Given the general relationship between man and nature, let's focus specifically on the features of actual geophysical judgments experienced and remembered by biblical writers. The most spectacular of these experiences involved judgments against Gentile people, cities, and nations—dominions for which they were held accountable by God. How would such events help shape the biblical language of prophecy?

The Prototype of All Judgments: The Edenic Curse

Genesis 3 reports the first divine judgment experienced by man. There are three catastrophic occurrences: (1) an anatomical transformation of the serpent's body (3:14) coupled with an altered future history of Satan's interaction with man (3:15); (2) a physiological and an altered feminine dynamic in the marriage and family

⁸ This view of a "full-sized", integrated dominion is often ignored by various schools of eschatology. Marvin Rosenthal of the pre-wrath school vainly tries to sharply distinguish between sociological and nature judgments in his *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1990). Preterist treatments of the AD 70 judgment of Israel insist that prophecies of celestial catastrophes were mostly metaphorical "codes" for sociological judgments (e.g., see Martin and Vaughn, footnote 1).

⁹ The former editor of the *Journal of Biblical Literature* observed that there exists a "symbiosis between the human and non-human orders commonly observed in the OT from Genesis 3 on (e.g., Hos. 4:1-3; Jer. 9:10-16, 20-22). Terence E. Fretheim, *Interpretation Bible Commentary: Exodus* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), p. 112.

¹⁰ In a day when the interaction between the planet and its extra-terrestrial environment is more and more obvious modern readers should not think they have a strong prima-facie argument against inclusion of literal celestial elements in any prophesied catastrophe.

structures (3:16); and (3) a comprehensive judgment on the male—a cursed ground that yields botanically mutated plants, physiological deterioration, and physical death.

Note that the Edenic curse was dimensionally commensurate with Adam’s dominion. It went as far as to alter crucial components in the natural environment. The material bodies of Adam and his wife experienced irreversible changes that could be empirically observed. Zoological changes occurred in not only the serpent but in the first killing of an animal. Botanical changes occurred in plant life. Presumably the biochemical elements of the soil were transformed. The scope of judgment affected every area of man’s first “kingdom” and therefore potentially affected everywhere man would live.¹¹

There is another very important dimension to the Edenic prototypical judgment. It also extended into the invisible realm of the spirit world. Somehow the evil problem that includes the spirit world will be resolved by an intrigue centered upon human history. The different interactions between man, nature, and the principalities and powers cannot be isolated from each other. Paul’s language in Romans 8:18-25 clearly has been “constructed” out of memory of the Edenic judgment with its accompanying awareness of the interaction of “angels and rulers” with man’s sociological and geophysical environment (8:38).

The Flood

The judgment in Noah’s day was extensive enough to bring all the dominion of man upon the earth under God’s wrath. Observe the creation language of Genesis 6:7: *“I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry I made them.”* The flood judgment must extend outward to every area where man and the animals that man was to have subdued then existed. Its universality can be confirmed from the depth and duration of the flood waters, the Ark size, and the commentary in 2 Peter 3:5-7.¹² It profoundly altered the geophysical environment.

Embedded in this pre-scientific writing are observations fitting together in ways unknown by the biblical writers yet which testify to their authenticity. The declining ages of the post-diluvian patriarchs unmistakably show the tell-tale sign of an exponential decay-curve—a feature not at all appreciated until recent scientific observations of changes-of-state in chemical, electrical, and thermodynamic systems. There is also physical consistency between the pre-flood observation of the hydrological cycle (Gen. 2:5-6), the flood mechanisms (7:11-12), and the rainbow occurrence (9:13). Pointing out how such scattered observations are physically consistent does *not* require making the Bible into a science textbook as opponents of literal interpretation allege.

The writer of Hebrews notes that the cataclysm and subsequent environment was something Noah had no knowledge of when he obeyed by faith (Heb. 11:7). Peter writes of the “heavens and earth” before and after the event as structurally distinct thus interpreting the scope of this event as extending into the extra-terrestrial.¹³ The same background invisible element in the Edenic judgment appears in the flood account. Mysterious

¹¹ Contra full preterists Martin and Vaughn who write in agreement with old-earthers that, “the fall had no bearing on biological life and death in God’s original creation. . . .the physical world we witness today is the same world God originally created.” They then explain the ubiquitous suffering and death in nature as simply a revelation of God’s “dangerous” and “wild” character (pp 191, 218, 227).

¹² For more detailed discussion see Charles A. Clough, “A Calm Appraisal of The Genesis Flood” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1968) and the last several decades of research by creationist organizations such as the Creation Research Society and the Institute for Creation Research.

¹³ Even the calendar year appears to have shifted from 360 days to 364+. See the argument of Bill Cooper, “The Calendar and the Antiquity of Genesis”, *Acts and Facts*, June 2009, p 19.

interaction with demonic agencies precede the event (Gen. 6:1-2), and the evil powers are defeated by the event (2 Pet 2:4; Jude 1:6).¹⁴

Forever afterward there seems to be an underlying anxiety by biblical writers of the sea and storms as though these posed challenges to trusting God. They relished, therefore, the Noahic covenant as an assurance of cosmic subordination to God's control. Isaiah compared God's limitation on the "waters of Noah" with His ability to save His people amidst catastrophic tectonic events (Isa. 54:9-10 cf. similar passage in Jer 31:35-37). Ezekiel mentions Noah in a context of threatened judgments on the natural environment.

The Trial of Job

The trial of Job follows the same judgment pattern. Job's judgment is dimensionally large enough to include his "kingdom,"—his children, his health, and his agricultural business. The proximate causative agents were both natural phenomena and humans (1:16,19 cf. 1:15,17) yet both were part of an invisible Satanic causation. Furthermore, his final deliverance involved again both geophysical and human spheres (42:9-15). Throughout the book Job thinks about his natural environment in non-symbolic, real terms (e.g., 9:5-7). In the theophany of chapters 38-41 God repeatedly refers to the geophysical environment not as symbolic but as a real, empirically observed revelation of His character. Interestingly, the later remembrances of Job utilize him as a model for living amidst eschatological judgments (note the context of Ezk 14:14 and James 5:11).

Sodom and Gomorrah Judgment

God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was recent and nearby enough to be recalled again and again by the writing prophets of Israel, Jesus and the NT apostles (Isa 1:9-10; 13:19; Jer. 23:14; 49:18; 50:40; Amos 4:11; Zeph 2:9; Matt 10:15; Rom. 9:29; 2 Pet 2:6; Jud 1:7). Although these cities could be taken out by human means (Gen. 14), God chose to do it through a geophysical catastrophe (Gen. 19). With these cities sitting on the great rift between Asia and Africa that runs northward from the Red Sea through the Jordan valley, one can speculate that God used both tectonic and atmospheric or extra-terrestrial agencies.¹⁵ Again we observe that the size of the judgment fit the size of these cities' areas of control. We also observe that angelic agents were involved.

The Exodus Complex of Judgments

By far the experienced and remembered judgment that most dominated the biblical authors' language was the cluster of geophysical phenomena accompanying the exodus (e.g., Jos 2:8-13; Pss 66:5-12; 74:12-15; 77:16-20; 78:12-16, 20, 23-28, 40-51; 89:10; 105:27-36; 106:7-11,17-18; 114:3-8; Isa 10:26; 11:15-16; 29:6; 41:18; 42:15; 43:16-17; 50:2-3; 51:9-10; 63:11-13; 64:1-4; Amos 4:10; Micah 7:15). I pointed out in my previous paper that this exodus memory is treated by increasing numbers of evangelicals in much the same way as non-evangelicals treat it, viz., that it represents the "religious meaning" of Yahweh Warrior deliverance that emerged from an exodus experience with rather mundane and ordinary physical phenomena.¹⁶ Granted that Hebrew culture cherished the exodus story for religious reasons, it does not thereby follow that the originating events were ordinary things that modern readers would hardly notice as exceptional. Consider how Exodus 7-15 is often treated:

¹⁴ The conceptual world of New Testament writers included detailed accounts of antediluvian interaction between God, man, and the principalities and powers. See 1 Enoch 1-36 known as the Book of Watchers so named for the angels who were supposed to have been involved in pre-flood history.

¹⁵ In recent years there have been manifestations of very powerful instabilities along this rift, the dimensions of which are more than enough to cause many of the prophesied physical judgments in this area of the world quite literally.

¹⁶ Epistemologically self-conscious readers will recognize the Kantian influence in such treatments.

“It has been suggested that the plagues are arranged in three cycles of three plagues each, culminating with the single plague, the death of the first-born. . . . In each cycle, Moses issued a warning prior to the first two plagues. In the first plague of each cycle, Moses was commanded by Yahweh to come before Pharaoh in the morning to give warning. Yahweh also told Moses to warn Pharaoh before the second plague of each cycle, but the time for doing so was not specified. The third plague occurred each time without warning. Typically, the third-cycle plagues were harsher than those of the first two cycles.”¹⁷

FIRST CYCLE	SECOND CYCLE	THIRD CYCLE
1. Water turned red	4. Flies	7. Hail
2. Frogs	5. Cattle	8. Locusts
3. Gnats	6. Boils	9. Darkness

Figure 1. From Eakin (see footnote 17).

Because a numerically ordered pattern appears, commentators hastily attribute it to after-the-fact literary editing. (God’s saving actions couldn’t possibly show numerical order because we supposedly “know” that historical events just don’t happen that neatly.)

Let’s look at the events themselves. The blood-colored waters last for *exactly* 7 days.¹⁸ The frog infestation is reduced to *only* the Nile. The lice spread over *all* Egypt. The flies completely avoided *all the Hebrew area of Goshen* because God said, “I will make a difference between My people and your people” (8:22). The pestilence upon the cattle is timed *exactly* and excluded from *Israel’s livestock*. The boils begin with *Moses’ hand motions*. Hail of a unique type occurred at a *specific* time with fire mingled in that was “so very heavy that there was none like it in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation (9:24) yet it failed to occur *in Goshen*. An east wind brought locusts “which neither your fathers or fathers’ fathers have seen since the day they were on the earth to this day” (10:6); at Moses’ intercession a strong “sea wind” blew *every last one of them* back into the Red Sea. Finally, a strange three-day darkness occurred—except *in Hebrew dwellings*. Then the ultimate judgment came upon *only* the first born not in homes with blood on the door. Add to these plagues the Red Sea crossing with a dried sea bed and walls of water on both sides of the opening but which suddenly destroyed the Egyptian chariot force.

Does the text consider such phenomena mundane and ordinary? Their unique magnitude, exact timing, and discrimination in spatial occurrence are all explicitly noted. Admittedly secondary natural causes are involved (frogs, flies, locusts, east wind, sea wind, etc.), but the surgical precision is *the very thing that enables Pharaoh to recognize the hand of Moses’ God in the phenomena!* And with textual notices of such time and spatial precision, why should interpreters doubt that the sequential pattern in Figure 1 must be due to a humanly-contrived literary organization? By attributing this order to human literary ingenuity (liberal higher critics)—even a Holy Spirit inspired ingenuity (evangelical commentators)—such a hermeneutic diminishes the revelation inherent in

¹⁷ Frank E. Eakin, Jr., “The Plagues and the Crossing of the Red Sea,” *Review and Expositor* 74:4 (Fall, 1977), 475.

¹⁸ One wonders if it’s only pure coincidence that the Red Sea happens to be called by the color of this first plague.

the plagues themselves that were after all designed to glorify Yahweh to Pharaoh. This hermeneutic implies that Pharaoh would have to wait upon a Hebrew re-arrangement of the story to get the full message.¹⁹

Certainly important to the matter of hermeneutic is the narrative-poetic renditions of the Red Sea crossing in Exod 14-15. Here is a test case for determining whether Hebrew writers, when engaged in psalm composition with its poetic imagery and metaphor, exaggerate actual historic events. Not a trace of such can be found in Exodus 15! What often can be found elsewhere are the images of Rahab (Isa. 30:7; 51:9-10), Leviathan (Ps. 74:14), and the dragon (Ezk. 29:3) used for Egypt. These images, as I noted in my previous paper, reveal the prophets' understanding of the demonic forces behind history. It's a fundamental part of their concept of man and nature. Even the plague narrative mentions the demonically inspired magicians' attempts to mimic the early plagues.

I conclude this judgment event by stating again that the dimension of a judgment matches the dimension of the domain judged. In this case Egypt's entire kingdom was affected—people, the economy, the military, and last, but not least, the magician-priests of the Egyptian pagan religious establishment. Their religion relied upon an idolatrous interpretation of the Nile, of animal forms, and of the sun. Each part of this pagan perspective, therefore, had to be destroyed. Geophysical catastrophes have a higher purpose than providing symbols for cryptic political messages; *they are to devastate astral idolatry with physical manifestations of the supreme glory of the Creator God.*²⁰

Conquest Events from Jericho to Hezekiah

Biblical writers continued to experience judgment or “conquests” against Gentile dominion from the initial invasion led by Joshua all the way up to the time of the classic writing prophets. These events reinforced the pre-Sinai sense of how man, nature, and God were related. This centuries-long, divinely “situational” history shaped the cultural thinking and vocabulary of prophesies against the enemies of God. A proper hermeneutic of prophesied judgments must seek to understand it

The pre-invasion intelligence-gathering mission discovered how the exodus event has already shown Canaanite pagans that Yahweh was “God in heaven above and on earth beneath” (Jos. 2:11). They didn't have to have the story re-arranged by Hebrew literati to get the message. The crossing of the parted waters of the Jordan was remembered like the crossing of the Red Sea (Ps. 114:3-5). A perfectly timed earthquake devastated Jericho (Jos. 6).

By far, the long day of Joshua stands out as a prime example of God's miraculous interaction with nature. Both sun and moon stopped their transit across the sky during Joshua's pro-Gibeon protection campaign in the

¹⁹ Regarding the lack of clear evidence of the exodus phenomena, I noted in my previous paper that there are problems of chronology and archeology involved here. To locate such evidence one needs to synchronize biblical and Egyptian history.. Most conservative evangelicals would date the exodus around 1445 BC, yet an earlier date of approximately 1580 BC is also possible depending upon how one arranges the biblical notices. An uncertainty of over a century thus exists on Israel's side. Egyptian chronology has its own uncertainties (see for example, David M Rohl, *A Test of Time: Volume One* (London: Random House, 1995). Immanuel Velikovsky published a series of radical revisions to ancient Middle Eastern history decades ago that has largely been refuted. However, he did bring to public notice several documents that could be evidence of the exodus plagues (Papyrus Ipuwer) and the long day of Joshua (Annals of Cuauhtitlan). David Corson who champions a 1581 BC exodus shows that it would have occurred at the end of the Hyksos Pharaohs who were virtually illiterate as far as records go. See his book *Israel's Historical Chronology: Its Merit, Precision, Extent, and Implications* (private printing, 2000), p 107—available from the author, 3125 N. Farragut St., Portland, OR 97217.

²⁰ Geophysical judgments also support a theocentric view of nature by treating it according to its created subordination to man's dominion. Contrary to modern environmentalist moralism, man devastates nature chiefly by his idolatrous religion which God then triggers judgment upon the nature under his responsibility. Environmental devastation since Genesis 3 has thus been indirectly due to man incurring the wrath of God rather than by directly trashing it (although that, too, can occur).

Aijalon valley (Jos. 10:1-14). Commentators have made numerous attempts to dismiss the clearly unique characteristics of this event in view of “known” natural history.²¹ Biblical writers, however, would not have known. They therefore simply reported this astronomical observation and were aware enough to comment “there has been no day like that, before it or after it, that the LORD heeded the voice of a man; for the LORD fought for Israel” (Jos. 10:14). The celestial dimension of this judgment would have been appropriate given the Canaanite worship of astral deities.

Another conquest related judgment occurred during the time of the Judges. Judges 4-5 offer the interpreter prose and poetic accounts of the same event like Exodus 14-15 did with the Red Sea crossing. The prose narrative reports that Yahweh, not Barak, routed Sisera’s chariot force (4:7, 14-15). It also adds an interesting detail: during his retreat Sisera abandoned his high speed chariot and fled on foot. What the narrative omits, the poetic Song of Deborah supplies. After first citing the geophysical disturbances that accompanied Israel’s earlier march from Sinai to the border of Edom (5:4-5), the song recounts that the stars fought against Sisera in concert with a flooding storm. Evidently, much in the same way that the Egyptian chariots were mired in the Red Sea, so Sisera’s chariot force was mired in the Kishon river valley, hardly a location that normally floods enough to stop a chariot force. That the stars were implicated is part of the man-nature cultural context: the flash flood was triggered by extra-terrestrial causes. Whether material or invisible agencies were involved or both is left out of the text.

The Kishon location reminds us of the famous Elijah confrontation with the state-religion of Baalism in the northern kingdom. The Mt. Carmel occurrence of Yahweh’s fire from heaven is only part of an entire campaign against Baalism by both Elijah and Elisha. In her fascinating study of this campaign Leah Bronner concludes:

“Prior to the unearthing of the Ras Shamra tablets. . . it was never recognized that these wonderous narratives were intentional and planned attacks to demolish the very foundations of pagan mythology. . . They are. . . the work by a well informed author who was intimately acquainted with Canaanite mythology and protested against it by showing that all powers in heaven and earth are under the control of Israel’s God. The miracles discharged by Elijah as increasing the oil and meal, with-holding or releasing the forces of rain, restoring the dead to life, ascending heaven, were designed to undermine the belief prevalent in Canaanite circles that Baal was the dispenser of all these blessings. . .²²

We thus observe in the Elijah-Elisha cycle that nature miracles have the purpose, not of merely providing metaphors for sociological persons and events, but of combating ubiquitous pagan theology by empirical evidence that undermines its faith.

One further notable event is the incident of Hezekiah’s sundial presented in narrative history (2 Kings 20; 2 Chron. 32) and in prophetic literature (Isa. 38). The writers simply report as non-scientist laymen that the sun’s shadow retrograded on the royal sundial: no naturalistic explanation; only an observation free of any poetic exaggeration. Much like the virgin sign to Hezekiah’s father, King Ahaz—who built the royal sundial—this sign to Hezekiah had to be a unique event, or it wouldn’t have been an empirically observed sign. Moreover, it revealed that Yahweh was in ultimate control over the vaunted Assyrian pantheon that likely included solar worship as other pagan religions.

²¹ Note that I speak of natural *history*, not natural *processes*. See my first paper for the distinction between science as the field of direct and repeatable measurements versus science as a vehicle of speculation about past history.

²² Leah Bronner, *The Stories of Elijah and Elisha as Polemics against Baal Worship* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), 139f.

Section Summary

Modern language theory that is increasingly shaping evangelical hermeneutics makes much of socio-linguistic community dynamics that is said to construct meanings in the community's language. This section has shown that the socio-linguistic community in which the biblical writers lived had significant memories of how and why their God had actually interacted with man through the visible and invisible parts of nature. These remembered experiences particularly revealed the supremacy of Yahweh over Gentile kingdoms and paganized Israelite institutions. We can infer that prophets of cosmological signs and wonders would expect their readers to view geophysical catastrophes as *directly-observable polemical revelation*. They may well have used catastrophic imagery secondarily to preach the glory of God such as occurs in 2 Sam. 22 / Ps. 18, but such imagery had real full-scale prototypes. It wasn't the result of religious exaggeration of ordinary events.²³

Nature Judgments and Redemption of Israel

At the birth of the nation Israel the Sinaitic covenant placed it under the direct rule of Yahweh. This was a different relationship than Gentile nations sustained with God. Alva McClain put it well:

"The well-being of men, not only physically but every other way, is morally and spiritually conditioned by a principle confirmed by divinely imposed sanctions. Now this principle holds good generally in all nations in every age. But its operation has often been obscured to human eyes by the time 'lag' between the moral breach and the infliction of the sanction. . . .In the general history of nations, the divine penalties are inflicted through secondary causes behind the veil of providential control. . . .But in the case of the nation of Israel, the moral judgment of Jehovah was not only declared at Sinai but also was confirmed spectacularly in the recorded history of that kingdom by divine sanctions immediately imposed. And these sanctions were generally supernatural. . . ."²⁴

Israel had become a national Exhibit A testifying to the existence of a moral order in the cosmos before the rest of nations.²⁵

Israel's Domain of Responsibility

I turn now from those events when God judged Gentile domains to His work with Israel's domain of responsibility. Israel's domain, unlike the widespread Gentile cities and kingdoms, was localized. Within that domain Israel had access to an unambiguous, specially-revealed moral and legal code. To hold the nation accountable Yahweh sent a continuous line of prophets throughout the centuries.²⁶ These prophets acted to

²³ What of Joseph's dream with its astral imagery (Gen. 37:9)? Obviously, the celestial objects were prophetic images here, but so too were the sheaves of the field (37:7) and later the cows in Pharaoh's dream were prophetic images (41:1-8). The dream context of the Joseph cycle orients the interpreter. Within this context there was no reason for refuting astral religion and so no reason for a literal astral catastrophe.

²⁴ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 86.

²⁵ This explains the otherwise unexplained fact of why a virtual explosion of so-called ethical religions arose throughout the world after the complete fall of the Israel in 586 BC. "Seven [ethical] world religions appeared within fifty years of each other and all continue to this day." Robert Brow, *Religion: Origin and Ideas* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 27. Also, shortly after Israel's fall and the resulting Diaspora classical Greek philosophy arose. Scholars still puzzle over how the idea of a rationally-ordered cosmos suddenly triumphed over chaotic paganism in the 6th century BC. The Bible solves the puzzle..

²⁶ Not only was Israel unique in here contract with God, but it enjoyed this line of prophets. "Such a line of apostle-prophets is unknown to paganism. . . .[The pagan prophet] incorporated a unique, self-contained divine power; therefore his 'mission' ended with him." Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, trans. and abridged by Moshe Greenberg (ppbk ed., New York: Schocken Books, 1972 [1960]) 212.

enforce the terms of the Sinaitic covenant (cf. Deut. 32:1; Isa. 1:2; Mic. 6:1-2). This covenant included “carrot-and-stick” enforcement provisions—blessing and cursings which acted upon Israel’s physical environment (Lev. 26; Deut. 28). Geophysical elements of the blessings and cursings, therefore, were dimensionally commensurate with the land Israel occupied.

Environmental Violence of Theophany

From the beginning Israel experienced Yahweh in theophanies that caused physical violence. The encounter with God at Mt. Sinai and during the subsequent wilderness wanderings left a distinct impression in the culture. Yahweh demanded what Eugene Merrill calls a “sacred space” in Eden, at Sinai, around the Ark, and in the Temple.²⁷ When Yahweh, therefore, establishes such a space in a theophany, there can be a violent disturbance in man’s fallen physical environment. Thick cloud, smoke, fire, loud noise as of a trumpet or as of thunder, and powerful earth tremors happened at Mt. Sinai (Exod. 19:9,13,16,18-19; 20:18). Only authorized people were allowed into this zone under threat of lethal force; not even animals could enter (cf. Gen. 3:24). The same violence attended the pillar theophany at the exodus and during the wilderness which later is blended in the literature with the Sinai violence (Jud. 5:4-5; 2 Sam. 22:8-16; Nahum 1:4-6). Later the prophets longed for such a theophany to make Yahweh’s name known (Isa. 64:1).

Such environmental violence, however, is not to be interpreted in modern terms as “natural” cloud, smoke, fire, noise, or earthquake. The Bible insists that these apparently “natural” phenomena were mediated by angelic beings from the invisible world (Deut 33:2; Acts 7:38; Gal 3:19; Heb 2:2). Psalm 104:4 links angelic beings to wind and fire. David actually saw the angel that threatened a plague on Jerusalem (2 Sam. 24:15-17). In his visions John the Apostle reports seeing angelic controllers over the physical environment including the sun (Rev. 7:2-3; 8:12; 16:8; 19:17). Nature, it must be remembered, in the culture of Israel had visible and invisible parts. Physical stars in the ancient world were thought to be living creatures.²⁸ It should not surprise us, therefore, that the violent phenomena accompanying a theophany is viewed by biblical writers as either caused by principalities and powers or as transmutations of these otherwise invisible agents.²⁹

The linkage of environmental violence in Israel’s early encounters with Yahweh theophanies may explain the “thunderstorm/earthquake” language used throughout the OT. Consider the expression “rider of the clouds/wind/heavens” (Deut. 33:26; Pss. 18:10; 68:33; 104:3; Isa. 19:1). Some interpreters consider such an expression to refer to an ordinary thunderstorm in the same sense as the Ugaritic mythology speaks of Baal. However, in the context of these passages a theophanic type deliverance is never far in the background (see Deut. 33:27; Pss. 18:7-15; 68:17,30; 104:32; Isa. 19:5-10). The frequent mention in these so-called “thunderstorm” passages of accompanying earthquakes challenges this interpretation.³⁰ The storm imagery was derived not from ordinary thunderstorms but from Israel’s historic encounters with God’s judgments both against Gentile enemies (previous section) and the theophanies that accompanied Israel’s birth as a nation.

²⁷ Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 275-488. The “sacred space” continues into the Eternal State where the redeemed enjoy the space but the damned are excluded (Rev. 21:27).

²⁸ “Sharing the common, if not universal, view that the celestial bodies are living beings, the [Astronomical Book in 1 Enoch] explicitly represents the movement of various celestial bodies as the behavior of various classes of beings in God’s hierarchical government of the cosmos”, Taylor, 328.

²⁹ Lest we moderns give a condescending “tut-tut”, let’s recall that we know actually very little about what we call the fundamental forces of our empirically observed reality.

³⁰ “The earthquake held a place in the religious conceptions of the Israelites quite out of proportion to its slight and relative rare occurrence in Palestine,” A. Lods, *Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Middle of the Eight Century* (trans. S. H. Hooke, 1932), 31 cited in Immanuel Velikovsky, *Worlds In Collision* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1950), 280.

Violence Bound by Contract

Viewed in light of the ferocity of Yahweh, the Sinaitic covenant with the nation is truly amazing. Unlike Allah whom Muslim theologians insist would never compromise his transcendence with any binding commitments to his creatures, the God of the Bible condescends to enter covenants or contracts with His people.³¹ In the treaty with His nation, Yahweh agrees to specific environmental blessings and cursings (judgments) on Israel's domain of responsibility. Yahweh will alter the following elements of Israel's physical environment: the fertility of the soil, the climate, crop production, population growth rate, and farm animal production (Lev. 26; Deut. 28).

Centuries of subsequent history verified this contract in how these elements varied with the nation's obedience or disobedience. Solomon recognized this dynamic in his dedicatory prayer (1 Kings 8:35-40). In Elijah's day Yahweh brought drought upon the apostasized northern kingdom (1 Kings 17:1). Isaiah announces God's impending withholding of rain due to Jerusalem's rebellion (Isa. 5:6). Jeremiah made similar announcements (Jer. 14:4-6). Amos reports how Yahweh invoked the climate and crop production judgments (Amos 4:7-9). Haggai writes that Yahweh invoked all of the environmental judgments (Hag. 1:10-11).

The cosmos was thus seen to have a moral order but only because all-powerful Yahweh made and kept covenant. Pagans had no such conception; the cosmos was unknowable and capricious. To control the geophysical environment of Israel's domain, Yahweh's covenant implied total control over even the invisible part of all nature, the entire complex of angelic intermediaries. Viewed as binding the God of the terrifying Sinai appearance, it elevated written revelation to utmost importance.

Israel's Redemption

For God to redeem Israel, He would have to redeem the whole responsible domain of Israel. Not only would the people have to be redeemed, but so too would the nation's cities, soil, crops, herds, and climate since these all bore the brunt of judgments under the Sinaitic covenant. For such redemption to take place, of course, Israel must nationally fulfill the ethical requirements of Yahweh. That is the story of the New Covenant prophecies of Jeremiah and others.

Jeremiah would expect his readers to understand New Covenant terminology of changes in nature as referring to the literal environment. Agricultural prosperity is vital to any economy. References to crop and herd production mean just that (Jer. 31:5, 12; 33:13). Isaiah would expect his readers to realize the necessity of redeeming the cursed aspects of nature besides regenerating people. Defanged animals are needed for herd and human safety (Isa. 11:6-9). Light level is a major driver of botanical growth and fruitfulness as well as a source of "clean energy" so its increase—without catastrophic accompanying heating—would support economic prosperity (Isa. 30:26).

Amillennial interpretation restricts redemption to the spiritual sphere. It ignores the symbiotic relationship of man and nature under God. Postmillennial interpretation does a better job in at least acknowledging that nature, too, must be included in any concept of redemption. However, it also is too restrictive in that it ignores or minimizes the invisible part of nature, the background conflict going on with the principalities and powers that are God's intermediaries with visible nature. Neither interpretative school reads the redemptive prophecies within the cultural context of the writing prophets who shared the view of man and nature that I have outlined above. Only the much-maligned premillennial interpretative school reads prophetic texts with the same general perspective as the writers.

³¹ Israel in fact is the only nation known to do so. William Foxwell Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: An Historic Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1968), 108.

Jesus' Contribution

The Incarnation confirmed this perspective. As the Son of Man whose coming was prophesied in Daniel 7:13-14 Jesus takes upon himself the original dominion role given to Adam as Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 and the author of Hebrews (Heb. 1:5-14; 2:5-18). But this dominion role explicitly enlarges to include all of nature—both terrestrial, extra-terrestrial, visible, and invisible. His enduring priesthood is modeled after that of Melchizedek that applies to all mankind (Heb. 7).

That a violent theophany doesn't accompany the Incarnation is because God has become man for a test period under a kenotic condition. Nonetheless, there are "flashes" of His divine nature (e.g., John 18:6). Of particular interest is the Mount of Transfiguration appearance (Matt. 16:28-17:13). Note the "catastrophic" physical, instantaneous changes that are clearly visible: a radiance from the face comparable to the sun, transformation of his clothes, appearance of a bright cloud over the mountain top from which God the Father speaks in a human language, and manifestations of two dead leaders out of the invisible world of the dead.

When Jesus instructed the disciples with the language of OT prophecy in the Mt. Olivet Discourse, he expected them to understand it as people living with the OT view of nature as symbiotic with man (not symbolic of man). Parallels with the "little apocalypses" of Isaiah 24-27 and Zechariah 12-14 would be recognized as being like past judgments against Gentile nations, not the judgment-curses against Israel under the Sinaitic covenant. The disciples lived within a culture that knew prophecies about physical phenomena in the heavens and on earth (e.g., Isa. 24:23; 27:1; Zech. 14:4-8). There was no question of their literalness as this passage in Zechariah shows:

"Then the LORD will go forth and fight against those nations. . . . And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives. . . [it] shall be split in two from east to west, making a very large valley; half the mountain shall move toward the north and half of it toward the south: then you shall flee through My mountain valley; for the mountain valley shall reach to Azal. Yes, you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah" (14:3-5)

There had been a devastating earthquake-judgment prophesied two years before it occurred through Amos (Amos 1:1). The land undulated up and down like the flooding and receding Nile (8:8; 9:5). It destroyed altars and property of rich and poor alike (3:13-15; 6:11). Amos saw the true divine agency behind the earthquake, including the angelic intermediaries: *"The Lord God of hosts, He who touches the earth and it melts"* (9:5). Some archeological evidence exists of its effects as far away as Hazor. With these sorts of events in their collective memory how else but literally would the disciples take Jesus' words of pending geophysical catastrophes?

Jesus' resurrection is one of the greatest events of human history. It is a very significant addition to the repertoire of experiences possessed by biblical writers. In an instant of time a material body is created that has genuine flesh and bones (Lu. 24:39), consumes food (Lu 24:43), speaks with a vocal intonation of a previous existence (John 20:15-16), has features of the previous body (John 20:27), appears and disappears (John 20:26), and ascends into heaven (Acts 1:9-11). It invalidates every modern conception of reality.³² It provides an empirical observation on the eternal state of the universe to come. As George Ladd has written:

³² That features of human bodies are carried only by DNA-encoded information is refuted by the fact that the information necessary to create the resurrected body with features common to the natural body was somehow transmitted *independently* of dead flesh. As John Pilkey stated so well, the resurrection "whenever it is clearly conceived as a metaphysical reality, . . . annihilates every premise and every conclusion of the Marxist, Freudian, and Darwinian schools of thought. It erases the premise of Marxism by positing a version of humanity independent of the natural food chain; it cancels the premise of Freudianism by furnishing a degree of vitality so absolute that temporary sexual euphoria loses all meaning; and it destroys the whole point of evolution by bringing mankind to perfection in an instant of transformation." *Origin of the Nations* (San Diego: Masters Book Publishers, 1984), 260.

“Jesus’ resurrection is not an isolated event that gives to men the warm confidence and hope of a future resurrection; it is the beginning of the eschatological resurrection itself. If we may use crude terms to try to describe sublime realities, we might say that a piece of the eschatological resurrection has been split off and planted in the midst of history.”³³

Jesus has given to humanity what no eschatological vision has ever done, whether that of Marx, Islam, or modern secular globalists. He has given us an *actually existing* first installment!

Finally, Jesus’ ascension gave yet another concrete picture of coming events. The two angels clearly stated that Jesus will come back in the same way he ascended, in a visible cloud with a visible body (Acts 1:11) (note again the ubiquitous presence of spirit-beings around theophanies and physical signs).

Section Summary

The NT writers thus had additional experiences with special geophysical events beyond that of their OT predecessors. The language of biblical revelation that finally developed within the line of prophets and apostles, therefore, was a product of sovereignly managed events of two kinds. First, there was a set of judgments against the enemies of Israel that reached into the heavens to challenge their idolatrous views of nature as well as to devastate their economic reliance upon crop and herd. Second, there was a set of judgments specifically aimed at the land of Israel and which were explicitly linked to the terms of the Sinaitic covenant. Israel as God’s elect nation benefited from authentic theophanies that had their own catastrophic manifestations but which were understood to conform to divine covenant agreements. Jesus added to the second and prophesied of the first.

Conclusion: Using the Prophets’ and Apostles’ Cultural Context to Interpret End-Time Geophysical Catastrophes

How can we use our understanding of the biblical writers’ cultural awareness of man and nature? Let me first try to state the critical differences between their awareness and our modern perspective. Then I will apply these insights to a fragment of the Mt. Olivet discourse.

Some Critical Conceptual Differences Between Us and the Biblical Writers

No one can understand the interplay between man and the visible and invisible components of nature in the Bible without a self-conscious attempt to set aside certain modern notions. Unless we question the so-called scientific certitude of modern cosmology, we will find ourselves hastily dismissing various assertions of historic and prophetic literature as “real.” That leads us to prematurely seek symbolic interpretations.

Unless we self-critically evaluate how information content originates in writers’ minds, we will fall into the trap of ignoring prophetic visions (direct revelation) as the true sources of information. It is far too easy to imagine that the Apostle John, for example, had some sort of mystical encounter and then wrote the book of Revelation from a collage of OT texts that he knew. Any similarities between Revelation and, say, Ezekiel are then explained as sourced in Ezekiel rather than in John’s vision. Instead the similarities could simply be due to the fact that both Ezekiel and John saw the same throne of God Almighty; John didn’t have to borrow from, or be “influenced” by, Ezekiel in order to write similar things.

Finally, unless we respect the historical line of revelatory events uniquely experienced by Israel, we will fail to recognize the nuances in vocabulary and phrases. Treating all ancient near eastern cultures as living in the same

³³ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans :Publishing Co., 1974), 326.

environment—merely interpreted differently—leads us, for example, to conclude that the “storm-god imagery” means the same in Baalism and as in Yahwehism. Storms just have a different deity behind them.

Understanding an Olivet Discourse Assertion

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken.” Matthew 24:29

In sharing with his disciples a common cosmology and body of historical experiences how would Jesus have expected them to understand his words? He had just spoken of famines, pestilences, and earthquakes—all familiar elements in their historical horizon (24:7). These words would recall memories of Egypt in Joseph’s day, the plagues of the exodus in Moses’ day, the tectonic disturbances of the Sinai theophany and of the great earthquake of Uzziah’s day. All were actual geophysical history and all were under the absolute control of God.

Jesus had also spoken of social and political turmoil, including the prophesied desecration of the Temple (24:9-22). Further, he had spoken of demonically-inspired “signs and wonders” (24:23-26). Surely those words would have brought to mind the role of the invisible world in energizing such deceptive happenings.

Then Jesus spoke of His coming. From Daniel 7 the disciples would have associated the coming of the Son of Man with the very Presence of God. This coming of the Son of Man from the Throne of God could not help but make them sense the likelihood of environmental violence that accompanied God’s appearance at Sinai and in the wilderness.

Sure enough the next thing Jesus speaks of is degradation of the extra-terrestrial environment. The sun, moon, and stars in the view of Jesus and the disciples were the universal time standard for calendar-making and agricultural planning whose regularity was contingent upon God. They were indispensable for maritime trade among the nations. They were tools of dominion for man everywhere whether for good or for evil. To claim that they would functionally fail meant that all the kingdoms that all the nations had constructed would be severely affected.

To functionally disrupt these astral lights would not only devastate national economies; it would also undercut religious idolatry. The disciples could recall how the plagues discredited the Egyptian pantheon and frustrated Pharaoh’s magicians. They could remember how Joshua’s long day undercut the Canaanite nations’ solar worship and how Elijah’s and Elisha’s nature miracles led to the destruction of state-sponsored Baalism. The sun, moon, and stars were assigned to all Gentile nations (Deut. 4:19). The verb “assign” (Heb: hlk) implies a near universality of celestial nature-religion.³⁴

What of the phrase “the stars will fall from heaven”? Here we face the writers’ perspective in which the invisible principalities and powers somehow are connected with the observed heavenly lights. Jesus could well be including a struggle involving angels that are connected with the actual stars. That may be true, but it doesn’t get into the mind of Jesus or the earlier prophets about what exactly they saw in their visions of falling stars.

There are three kinds of heavenly lights here—sun, moon, and stars. All of them are darkened together in most Day of the Lord prophecies (e.g., Isa. 13:10; Joel 2:10; 3:15). . We could infer that the picture observed by the prophets was one in which the catastrophes on earth generate smoke or other debris that block an earthbound observer from seeing any of them. That would mean that the coming of the Son of Man involves only the earth

³⁴ As futurists we should be able to see how such a disturbance would not only affect our economic lives, but it would serve the same purpose of refuting our own celestial nature-religion of cosmic evolution. In every generation such a calamity would immediately be recognized by man made in God’s image as a divine judgment upon them (Rev. 6:15-17).

and doesn't "really" affect the extra-terrestrial regions. But that inference is only one of several that we moderns could add to the text.

To understand why the stars in Jesus' discourse are seen not as being darkened but as falling, we might obtain help from a revelation given to Isaiah in which he had seen that "all of the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled up like a scroll; all their host shall fall down as the leaf falls from the vine. . ." (34:4). The Hebrew verb *nbl* usually translated "fall down" can mean "wither" as the NET Bible translates it. The metaphor of leaves falling depicts the result of the leaves first withering *before* disappearing from the vine; it does not necessarily include the resultant falling. The LXX translates *nbl* by the Greek verb *pipto* the usual meaning of which is "fall." And Jesus uses that verb in his statement. However, if the LXX sense is that the stars disappear from the sky as leaves disappear when they fall (lumping the withering and falling together) then withering is a possible explanation for Isaiah's vision. The NET translation reads:

*"All the stars in the sky will fade away,
the sky will roll up like a scroll;
all its stars will wither,
like a leaf withers and falls from a vine
or a fig withers and falls from a tree." — (Isa. 34:4)*

This translation reunites the change in the stars with the changes in the sun and moon, viz., that all the prophets saw basically the same thing in their visions—a darkening of the sky reminiscent of the plague of darkness in Egypt during one of the great judgments on the Gentile nations. This understanding of Jesus' Olivet assertion again allows us as moderns to infer that the Second Coming involves only the earth and not its extra-terrestrial surroundings. In doing so, however, we must admit that we're adding something from contemporary cosmology that the disciples would not have understood. I frankly don't think we know enough about cosmology to safely make such inferences.

To sum up, the disciples would have understood Jesus' words as descriptive of the real heavens just as they would have understood his earlier remarks as referencing real geophysical catastrophes on earth.