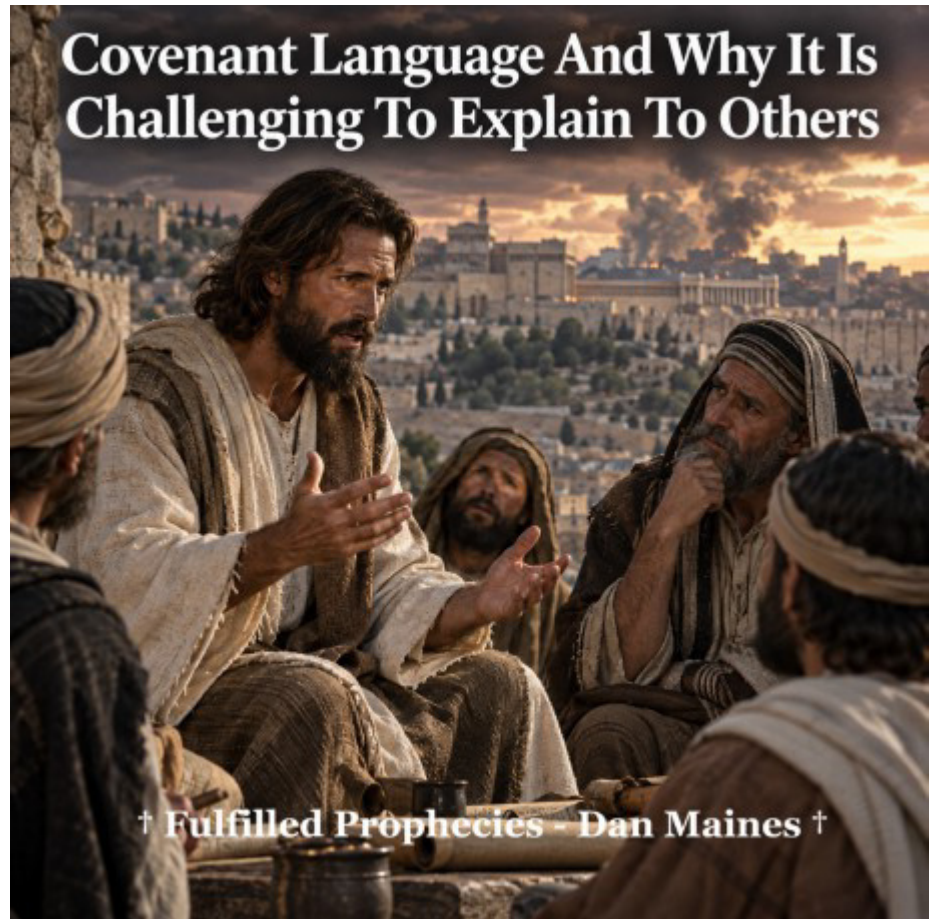


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Covenant Language And Why It Is Challenging To Explain To Others



By Dan Maines

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Introduction

† One of the greatest challenges in explaining fulfilled prophecy is helping people recognize covenant language in Scripture. Many readers have been taught to interpret prophetic descriptions as literal predictions about the physical universe, even when the Bible itself uses the same language for nations, kingdoms, covenants, and judgments.

† Scripture often describes covenant judgment with dramatic

language about heavens shaking, stars falling, the sun becoming dark, mountains moving, and the earth trembling. When we allow Scripture to interpret Scripture, we discover that this language was already being used by the prophets long before the New Testament was written.

† This is why explaining fulfilled prophecy can be difficult. We aren't asking people to ignore Scripture. We're asking them to read prophetic language the way Scripture itself teaches us to read it.

† Jesus and the apostles spoke to people who already knew the language of the prophets. Expressions that can sound strange or completely literal to modern readers carried familiar prophetic meaning to their first-century audience (Matthew 24:29-34; Acts 2:16-21).

Isaiah 13:9-10

Behold, the day of the Lord is coming, Cruel, with fury and burning anger, To make the land a desolation; And He will exterminate its sinners from it. For the stars of heaven and their constellations Will not flash their light; The sun will be dark when it rises And the moon will not shed its light.

† Isaiah used cosmic language while announcing God's judgment against Babylon. The prophecy itself identifies Babylon as the subject of the judgment (Isaiah 13:1, 17-19).

† The darkening of the sun, moon, and stars described the collapse of a nation under divine judgment. Isaiah wasn't teaching that the physical universe had to disappear whenever this prophetic language was used.

† This becomes extremely important when we reach the words of Jesus. His Jewish audience already had centuries of prophetic Scripture showing how cosmic language could describe covenantal and national judgment (Matthew 24:29-34).

Isaiah 34:4-5

And all the heavenly lights will wear away, And the sky will be rolled up like a scroll; All its lights will also wither away As a leaf withers from the vine, Or as one withers from the fig tree. For

My sword has drunk its fill in heaven; Behold it shall descend for judgment upon Edom, And upon the people whom I have designated for destruction.

† Isaiah described the heavens being rolled together like a scroll, yet the prophecy identifies Edom as the object of God's judgment.

† If we insist that prophetic heavens being dissolved must always mean the destruction of the physical universe, we create problems with passages such as this one. The text itself tells us that God was announcing judgment against Edom.

† This demonstrates why covenant language can be challenging to explain. Modern readers may naturally picture the physical heavens disappearing, while the prophetic context points to the overthrow of a people under judgment (Isaiah 34:6-10).

Ezekiel 32:7-8

And when I extinguish you, I will cover the heavens and darken their stars; I will cover the sun with a cloud And the moon will not give its light. All the shining lights in the heavens I will darken over you And will set darkness on your land, Declares the Lord God.

† Ezekiel used the same kind of cosmic language concerning Pharaoh and Egypt. The surrounding passage identifies Pharaoh as the one being addressed (Ezekiel 32:2).

† The sun, moon, stars, and heavens were used prophetically to describe catastrophic judgment and the fall of established powers.

† Once we recognize this pattern, New Testament prophecy doesn't appear in isolation. Jesus spoke from within the prophetic language already established throughout Israel's Scriptures (Matthew 24:29).

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

the Lord comes.

† Joel described the coming day of the Lord with signs in heaven and earth. Peter later quoted this prophecy at Pentecost and declared that what was happening belonged to what Joel had spoken (Acts 2:16-21).

† Peter didn't push Joel's prophecy thousands of years beyond his audience. He connected Joel's prophetic language directly with the last-days events unfolding in their generation.

† This is another reason covenant language can be difficult to explain. People often inherit an interpretation before examining how the New Testament writers themselves applied the Old Testament prophets.

Matthew 24:29-30

But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory.

† Jesus used the established language of Israel's prophets. Sun, moon, stars, clouds, and shaken heavens weren't new prophetic expressions invented in the Olivet Discourse (Isaiah 13:9-10; Isaiah 34:4-5; Ezekiel 32:7-8).

† Jesus had already identified Jerusalem and that generation as the recipients of covenant judgment. He said that all these things would come upon that generation (Matthew 23:35-36).

† Jesus then placed the fulfillment within the lifetime of His hearers when He said that their generation wouldn't pass away until all these things happened (Matthew 24:34).

† Reading Jesus through the prophets helps us understand why His words don't require the physical destruction of the universe. They describe the tremendous covenantal judgment associated with the end of the old covenant age.

Hebrews 12:26-28

And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven." This expression, "Yet once more," denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let's show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe;

† Hebrews explains the shaking of heaven and earth in connection with removing what could be shaken and receiving the kingdom that can't be shaken.

† The writer wasn't warning his audience that planet Earth was about to disappear. He was describing a covenantal transition in which the temporary order was being removed while the unshakable kingdom remained (Hebrews 8:13; Hebrews 12:22-24).

† This helps us understand prophetic language through covenant fulfillment rather than forcing every reference to heaven and earth into a prediction about the physical cosmos.

2 Peter 3:10-13

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be discovered. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.

† Peter's language sounds extraordinary to modern ears, but it belongs to the same prophetic world we've already seen in Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Joel.

† Peter said that they were looking for the new heavens and new earth according to God's promise. That promise takes us

back to Isaiah, where new heavens and a new earth appear in the context of God's restored people, worship, life, nations, and continuing generations (Isaiah 65:17-25; Isaiah 66:22-23).

† Peter wasn't introducing an unrelated vocabulary. He was using prophetic covenant language his readers could recognize from Israel's Scriptures.

† Understanding that background helps explain why fulfilled prophecy isn't based on weakening Peter's words. It's based on reading his words within the prophetic vocabulary from which they came.

Revelation 21:1-3

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is among the people, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them,

† Revelation brings the covenant imagery to its glorious conclusion. The passing of the former heaven and earth is followed by the New Jerusalem, the bride, and God's dwelling with His people.

† The New Jerusalem isn't presented as a physical city waiting to descend sometime in our future. Believers had already come to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God (Hebrews 12:22-24).

† This is covenant language describing restored fellowship with God through Christ. The emphasis isn't the destruction of God's physical creation, but the completion of redemption and the establishment of God's dwelling with His covenant people.

Historical References

† Josephus described the catastrophic destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70, including famine, internal violence, Roman armies, fire, and the devastation of the city. His account

gives important historical background for understanding the first-century judgment Jesus had announced.

† Tacitus also recorded the Roman war against Jerusalem and the destruction associated with that conflict. His Roman perspective provides independent historical testimony concerning the enormous upheaval surrounding Jerusalem's fall.

† Eusebius later connected Jerusalem's destruction with the judgments Christ had announced against that generation. He also preserved the tradition that believers in Jerusalem departed before the city's destruction.

† These historical writers don't determine the meaning of Scripture. Scripture interprets Scripture, but history confirms that the first-century judgment Jesus described truly occurred within the historical setting He identified.

How It Applies To Us Today

† Understanding covenant language helps us read prophecy without constantly expecting the physical universe to end.

† We shouldn't begin with modern assumptions and force them backward into ancient prophetic language. We should begin with Scripture and allow earlier passages to teach us how later passages use the same imagery.

† This also explains why fulfilled prophecy can be challenging to communicate. We may understand the conclusion before another person understands the prophetic language that leads to that conclusion.

† Patience matters. Instead of simply telling someone that a prophecy was fulfilled, we can show them Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Jesus, Peter, Hebrews, and Revelation and allow the biblical pattern to become clear.

† We aren't waiting for the old covenant world to disappear. Christ established the better covenant, opened access to God, established His kingdom, and brought His people into the heavenly Jerusalem (Hebrews 8:6; Hebrews 10:19-22; Hebrews 12:22-24).

† Covenant language becomes much easier to understand

when Scripture interprets Scripture. The prophets provide the vocabulary, Jesus announces the fulfillment, the apostles explain the transition, and Revelation shows the completed covenant reality.

Q & A Appendix

Q: Why is covenant language so difficult for many Christians to understand?

A: Because many people first encounter passages about falling stars, darkened heavens, fire, shaking, and a new heaven and earth without first studying how the Old Testament prophets used those expressions. Reading the prophets provides the biblical foundation for understanding the same language in the New Testament (Isaiah 13:9-10; Isaiah 34:4-5; Ezekiel 32:7-8).

Q: Does covenant language mean the prophetic judgments weren't real?

A: No. Symbolic prophetic language describes very real divine judgments. Babylon, Edom, Egypt, and Jerusalem experienced genuine historical judgment even though Scripture described those events with cosmic imagery (Isaiah 13:1, 17-19; Isaiah 34:5-6; Ezekiel 32:2; Matthew 23:35-38).

Q: Why did Jesus use language about the sun, moon, and stars?

A: Because He was speaking the established language of the prophets. His audience had Scriptures where similar imagery described God's judgment against nations and kingdoms (Isaiah 13:9-10; Ezekiel 32:7-8).

Q: How do we know Matthew 24 wasn't describing events thousands of years later?

A: Jesus gave His own time statement. He said that generation wouldn't pass away until all these things happened (Matthew 24:34). The time statement controls the interpretation rather than allowing us to move the prophecy beyond the generation

Jesus identified.

Q: What is the best way to explain covenant language to someone else?

A: Start with the Old Testament prophets before beginning with Revelation or other difficult prophetic passages. Show how Scripture uses cosmic language, then show how Jesus and the apostles used the same prophetic vocabulary (Isaiah 13:9-10; Isaiah 34:4-5; Ezekiel 32:7-8; Matthew 24:29-34).

Q: What does covenant language mean for believers today?

A: It helps us recognize what Christ accomplished. We're not waiting for God's kingdom, the New Covenant, or access to the heavenly Jerusalem. Through Christ, believers have received the kingdom that can't be shaken and have come to Mount Zion and the heavenly Jerusalem (Hebrews 12:22-28).

† This is the fulfilled perspective we proclaim at Fulfilled Prophecies †

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Source Index

† Isaiah 13:9-10; Isaiah 34:4-5; Ezekiel 32:7-8; Joel 2:30-31; Matthew 24:29-30; Hebrews 12:26-28; 2 Peter 3:10-13; Revelation 21:1-3

† Josephus, The Wars of the Jews; Tacitus, Histories; Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History

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