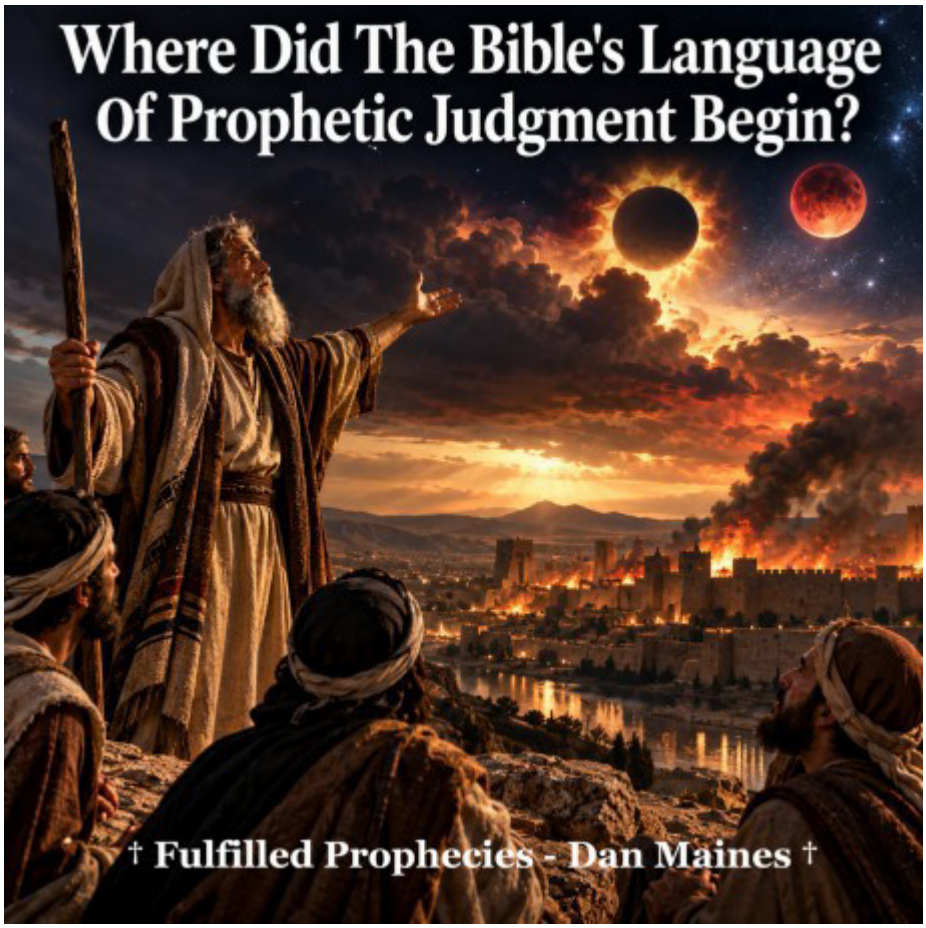
Fulfilled Prophecies

Where Did The Bible's Language Of Prophetic Judgment Begin?



By Dan Maines

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Introduction

† The Bible's language of prophetic judgment didn't suddenly appear when the prophets announced judgment against Egypt, Babylon, Edom, or Jerusalem. Its foundations reach much deeper into Scripture.

† Before Isaiah described stars disappearing, the sun becoming dark, and the heavens being shaken, Genesis had already established the sun, moon, and stars as God's appointed rulers,

signs, and markers in the created order (Genesis 1:14-18).
† Joseph's dream then shows the sun, moon, and stars representing human rulers and a covenant family. Jacob himself interpreted the imagery as referring to Jacob, Rachel, and Joseph's brothers (Genesis 37:9-10).
† Later prophets didn't invent a new symbolic vocabulary. They drew upon patterns already established in Scripture and applied creation language to kingdoms, rulers, covenant communities, and divine judgment.
† This means the prophetic language of the Old Testament has roots reaching back through Joseph's dreams and ultimately into the creation account itself.

Genesis 1:14-18
Then God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and they shall serve as signs and for seasons, and for days and years; and they shall serve as lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth"; and it was so. God made the two great lights, the greater light to govern the day, and the lesser light to govern the night; He made the stars also. God placed them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, and to govern the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness; and God saw that it was good.
† This is one of the earliest foundations for understanding later prophetic imagery. The heavenly lights were created not only to give light, but also for signs and appointed times.
† Notice the language of rule. The greater light rules the day, and the lesser light rules the night. Scripture therefore introduces heavenly bodies together with the concept of governing authority.
† Later prophetic passages can use the disruption of these heavenly rulers as symbolic language for the overthrow of earthly rulers and established orders because Scripture itself had already connected the heavenly lights with rule (Psalm 136:7-9).
† This doesn't mean every reference to the sun, moon, or stars

is symbolic. Context determines meaning. It does mean that the symbolic vocabulary used later by the prophets has roots extending back to creation itself.

Genesis 37:9-10
Then he had yet another dream, and informed his brothers of it, and said, "Behold, I have had yet another dream; and behold, the sun and the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." He also told it to his father as well as to his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have had? Am I and your mother and your brothers actually going to come to bow down to the ground before you?"
† Here Scripture interprets its own symbolism. Joseph saw a sun, a moon, and eleven stars, but Jacob understood that the vision concerned people.
† Jacob identified the imagery with himself, Joseph's mother, and Joseph's brothers. The heavenly bodies represented the covenant family rather than a prediction that astronomical objects would literally bow down.
† This passage is extremely important because the interpretation isn't being imposed centuries later. The symbolic meaning is given within the narrative itself.
† By the time the prophets later used sun, moon, stars, and heavens in prophetic visions, Scripture already had an established example of heavenly imagery representing earthly and covenant realities.

Deuteronomy 32:22-23
For a fire has flared in My anger, And it burns to the lowest part of Sheol, And devours the earth with its yield, And sets on fire the foundations of the mountains. I will add misfortunes to them; I will use up My arrows on them.
† Moses used creation-sized language while describing covenant judgment upon Israel. God's anger burns, consumes the land, and sets the foundations of the mountains on fire.
† This provides an important bridge between Genesis and the later prophets. Cosmic and creation imagery became part of the

covenant vocabulary of judgment.
† The language doesn't require the physical planet to be destroyed. The song itself concerns God's covenant dealings with His people and the judgments that would come upon them because of their unfaithfulness (Deuteronomy 32:5-6, 19-21).
† The later prophets inherited this vocabulary. They weren't introducing an entirely different prophetic method.

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 applies the established cosmic vocabulary directly to historical judgment. The context identifies the prophecy as an oracle concerning Babylon (Isaiah 13:1).
† The darkened sun, moon, and stars communicate the collapse of Babylon's power, glory, rulers, and established order under God's judgment.
† Isaiah didn't require his readers to believe that the literal universe had to cease existing when Babylon fell. The imagery communicates the magnitude of God's intervention in history.
† This becomes a major interpretive standard. When similar language appears later in Scripture, we must first ask how Scripture has already used that language before assuming the physical universe must be destroyed.

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 uses nearly the same cosmic vocabulary against Egypt and Pharaoh. The context explicitly identifies Pharaoh king of Egypt as the object of the lamentation (Ezekiel 32:2).

† God says He'll cover the heavens, darken the stars, cover the sun, and prevent the moon from giving its light. Yet the prophecy concerns the downfall of Egypt's ruler and power.
† This gives us another inspired example showing that cosmic darkness can describe political and national judgment.
† Genesis established heavenly lights as rulers and signs, Joseph's dream demonstrated their symbolic application to human authorities, and the prophets developed that established vocabulary when announcing the fall of nations.

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.
† Here the heavens are rolled up like a scroll and their host falls, yet Isaiah immediately identifies Edom as the object of God's judgment.
† The imagery sounds universal when isolated from its context, but the context identifies a historical nation being brought under divine judgment.
† This passage establishes another important principle. The magnitude of prophetic imagery doesn't determine the geographical extent of the historical event being described.
† God could describe the collapse of a nation as the shaking or dissolution of its heavens because prophetic language portrayed the destruction of an established world of authority and order.

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 continues the established prophetic vocabulary of cosmic

disturbance surrounding the day of the LORD.
† Peter later quoted this passage at Pentecost and said, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel (Acts 2:16-21).
† Peter therefore placed Joel's prophecy within the last-days setting already unfolding in his own generation rather than moving its beginning thousands of years into the future.
† The same imagery that had described divine judgment throughout Israel's Scriptures remained part of the prophetic vocabulary used in the New Testament.

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 didn't speak in a prophetic vacuum. His language came from the prophetic vocabulary His Jewish audience already knew from Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Daniel, and the rest of Israel's Scriptures.
† Sun, moon, stars, shaken heavens, clouds, and judgment already had established biblical meanings before Jesus used them in the Olivet Discourse.
† Jesus also placed these events within the generation standing before Him, saying that all these things would occur before that generation passed away (Matthew 24:34).
† Reading Matthew 24 through its Old Testament background allows Scripture to interpret Scripture instead of forcing modern assumptions onto ancient prophetic language.

Revelation 6:12-14
And I looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became as black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood; and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree drops its unripe figs

when shaken by a great wind. The sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.
† Revelation gathers together imagery already established throughout Scripture. The darkened sun, blood-colored moon, falling stars, rolled-up heaven, earthquake, mountains, and islands all belong to an existing prophetic vocabulary.
† John's imagery shouldn't be interpreted as though nobody had ever written this way before. Isaiah had already described the heavens being rolled up like a scroll in a prophecy concerning Edom (Isaiah 34:4-5).
† Revelation therefore stands at the end of a long biblical symbolic tradition rather than at the beginning of one.
† The safest way to understand Revelation is to trace its symbols backward through the prophets, through the covenant writings, through Joseph, and ultimately back to the foundational patterns introduced in Genesis.

Historical References
† Josephus described signs, portents, famine, fire, warfare, and extraordinary events surrounding Jerusalem's destruction in AD 70. His account demonstrates how catastrophic the judgment appeared to those who lived through it, although Josephus isn't our authority for interpreting Scripture. Scripture remains the standard.
† Josephus recorded a remarkable statement concerning armies and chariots appearing among the clouds before Jerusalem's fall. Whatever conclusion is reached about that report, it shows that first-century writers described the period surrounding Jerusalem's destruction in extraordinary language.
† Tacitus likewise recorded unusual signs and portents associated with the period surrounding Jerusalem's fall. His testimony provides independent historical evidence for the atmosphere of catastrophe surrounding the Jewish-Roman War.
† Eusebius later connected Jesus' warnings with the calamities that came upon Jerusalem and recorded the tradition that believers left the city before its destruction.

† These historical writers don't create our interpretation. They help illuminate the historical setting, while the biblical foundation for prophetic symbolism comes from Scripture itself.

How It Applies To Us Today

† We shouldn't begin interpreting prophetic imagery by asking what sun, moon, stars, heavens, mountains, earthquakes, and clouds mean to a modern reader. We should begin by asking how Scripture already used those images.

† Genesis gives us the foundation, Joseph provides an early inspired demonstration, Moses develops creation language in covenant judgment, and the prophets repeatedly apply cosmic imagery to historical nations and rulers.

† Jesus and the writers of the New Testament inherited that same prophetic vocabulary. They didn't abandon thousands of years of biblical symbolism without explanation.

† This protects us from turning every cosmic expression into a prediction about the physical destruction of the universe.

† It also reveals something deeper. Biblical apocalyptic language isn't random exaggeration. It's a carefully developed vocabulary rooted in creation, covenant, rule, judgment, and restoration.

† When God removes a ruling order, Scripture can portray its lights going dark. When He judges an established covenant world, its heavens can shake. When rulers fall, its stars can fall. When an order reaches its appointed end, its heavens can be rolled away.

† The prophetic vocabulary that reaches its fullest expression in Revelation didn't begin in Revelation. Its roots reach all the way back to Genesis.

Q & A Appendix

Q: Did prophetic sun, moon, and star symbolism begin with Isaiah?

A: No. Genesis already connected the heavenly lights with signs, appointed times, and ruling functions, and Joseph's dream explicitly used the sun, moon, and stars to represent

people (Genesis 1:14-18; Genesis 37:9-10).

Q: Does Genesis 1:14 prove that every later reference to the sun, moon, and stars is symbolic?
A: No. Context determines whether a passage is literal or symbolic. Genesis establishes foundational concepts, while passages such as Genesis 37:9-10 explicitly demonstrate symbolic usage.

Q: Why is Joseph's dream especially important?
A: Because Scripture itself interprets the symbols. Jacob understood the sun, moon, and eleven stars as representing members of his family (Genesis 37:9-10). We don't have to invent the symbolism.

Q: Why did the prophets describe national judgment with cosmic language?
A: Because the imagery communicated the collapse of rulers, powers, nations, and established orders under God's judgment. Isaiah used it concerning Babylon and Edom, while Ezekiel used it concerning Egypt (Isaiah 13:1, 9-10; Isaiah 34:4-5; Ezekiel 32:2, 7-8).

Q: Does that help explain Jesus' language in Matthew 24?
A: Yes. Jesus used the established language of Israel's prophets when He described the sun being darkened, the moon withholding its light, the stars falling, and the powers of the heavens being shaken (Matthew 24:29-30). He then placed all these things within that generation (Matthew 24:34).

Q: Does Revelation invent a new system of prophetic symbolism?
A: No. Revelation draws heavily from imagery already established throughout the Old Testament. The rolled-up heaven of Revelation 6:14, for example, echoes Isaiah's judgment language concerning Edom (Isaiah 34:4-5; Revelation

6:12-14).

Q: Where, then, does the Bible's standard for prophetic judgment imagery ultimately begin?
A: Its deepest foundations reach back to creation itself. Genesis introduces heavenly lights as signs and rulers, Joseph's dream demonstrates their symbolic relationship to earthly people and authority, and later Scripture develops those foundations into the prophetic vocabulary of covenant and national judgment (Genesis 1:14-18; Genesis 37:9-10).

† This is the fulfilled perspective we proclaim at Fulfilled Prophecies †
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Source Index
† Genesis 1:14-18; Genesis 37:9-10; Deuteronomy 32:22-23; Isaiah 13:9-10; Ezekiel 32:7-8; Isaiah 34:4-5; Joel 2:30-31; Matthew 24:29-30; Revelation 6:12-14
† Historical writers: Josephus, The Wars of the Jews; Tacitus, Histories; Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History

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