

The Collapsing Universe in the Bible: Literal Science or Poetic Metaphor?

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Creation and Decreation

When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. (Revelation 6:12–14)

The non-concordist view of science and Scripture argues that Biblical texts about creation were never intended to concord with modern scientific theories. Thus, Genesis 1 is not cryptically describing the Big Bang or instant fiat, a young earth or old earth, special creation or evolutionary creation. It is not “literal” language describing the physics of the universe; it is “literary” genre describing God’s sovereignty over creation and most likely his covenantal relationship with his people.

But the argument against literalism of language of the creation of the heavens and the earth is also applicable to the language of the destruction of the heavens and the earth, or what the Bible calls, “the last days,” “the end of the age,” “the end of days,” or “the Day of the Lord.” Christians often refer to this as “the end times,” but the technical theological term is *eschatology*, which means “the study of end things.” Regarding the end times, the modern Evangelical popular imagination has been deeply influenced and at times dominated by a theological construct that is best reflected in the 1970s bestselling *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey and the newer bestselling fictional phenomenon *Left Behind* by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.

This view believes that the Bible foretells an as-yet future scenario on the earth of a rapture of Christians, followed by the rise of an “Anti-Christ,” a world dictator who initiates a Great Tribulation on the earth, requires a “Mark of the Beast,” and assembles global forces for a battle of Armageddon against Israel, resulting in the Second Coming of Christ who replaces the universe with a new heavens and earth to rule forever. The technical theological term for this view is *futurism*, the belief that prophecies about the end times are yet to be fulfilled in the future.¹

In this article, I will address the hermeneutic or interpretive approach used by this futurist perspective and apply it to the particular aspect of creation language, or in this case, decreation language -- the collapsing universe and the destruction of the heavens and the earth.

In short, the language of cosmic catastrophe often interpreted literally as referring to the end of the space-time universe is actually used by Biblical authors to figuratively express the cosmic significance of the covenantal relationship between God and humanity.

The tendency of modern literalism is to interpret descriptions of signs in the heavens and earth as being quite literal events of the heavens and earth shaking, stars falling from the sky, the moon turning blood red, and the sky rolling up like a scroll. The problem with this hermeneutic is that it assumes the priority of modernity over the ancient world. Rather than seeking to understand the origins of symbols and images used by the writers within their ancient context, this literalism often suggests the writer was seeing events that would occur in our modern day but did not understand them, so he used his ancient “primitive” language to describe it.

So for instance when the apostle John saw modern day tools of war in his revelation, such as battle helicopters, he did not know what they were so he described them in ancient terms that he did understand such as locusts with the sting of scorpions, breastplates of iron, a crown of gold and human faces, whose chopper blades made the “noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle” (Rev 9:3-9).

I was taught this modernist interpretation and lived by it for many years. When I read about Jesus explaining the “end of the age” I would assume he meant the “end of the space-time universe” because that’s the kind of language I, a post-Enlightened modern scientific mind, would use to describe such an event. When he spoke of the moon turning blood red and the sun being darkened, I assumed such events were easy miracles for God, so if you considered them figurative, you were falling down the slippery slope of neo-orthodoxy. When Jesus said stars would fall from the sky, you had better bet stars would literally fall from the sky (a primitive description of meteors²) or else you’re a liberal who doesn’t believe in the literal accuracy of the Bible.

But all that changed when I sought to understand the prophetic discourse on its own terms within its ancient cultural context instead of from my own cultural bias. I now propose that the ancient writers did understand what they were seeing, but were using symbols and images they were culturally steeped in, symbols and images with a history of usage from the Old Testament, *their* cultural context – not mine.

In this essay, I will argue that the decreation language of a collapsing universe with falling stars and signs in the heavens was actually symbolic discourse about world-changing events and powers related to the end of the old covenant and the coming of the new covenant as God’s “new world order.” In this interpretation, predictions of the collapsing universe were figuratively fulfilled in the historic past of the first century. The technical theological term for this view is *preterism*, the belief that most or all prophecies about the end times have been fulfilled in the past.³

Sun, Moon and Stars

First, let’s take a look at the usage of sun, moon and stars in the Old Testament. In the ancient Near East, there is often a conceptual equivalency or link between stars, heavenly bodies, and deities.⁴ The Encyclopedia Judaica notes that, “in many cultures the sky, the sun, the moon, and the known planets were conceived as personal gods. These gods were responsible for all or some aspects of existence. Prayers were addressed to them, offerings were made to them, and their opinions on important matters were sought through divination.”⁵

But it was not merely the pagans who made this connection of heavenly physical bodies with heavenly spiritual powers. The Old Testament itself equates the sun, moon, and stars with the angelic “sons of God” who surround God’s throne, calling them both the “host of heaven” (Deut 4:19; 32:8-9).⁶ Jewish commentator Jeffrey Tigay writes, “[These passages] seem to reflect a biblical view that... as punishment for man’s repeated spurning of His authority in primordial times (Gen. 3-11), God deprived mankind at large of true knowledge of Himself and ordained that it should worship idols and subordinate celestial beings.”⁷

There is more than just a symbolic connection between the physical heavens and the spiritual heavens in the Bible. In some passages, the stars of heaven are linked *interchangeably* with angelic heavenly beings, also referred to as “holy ones” or “sons of God” (Psa 89:5-7; Job 1:6)⁸. Consider the following passages that equate the host of heaven with both astronomical bodies and angelic spirits *simultaneously*:

- “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?...when **the morning stars** sang together and all **the sons of God** shouted for joy?” (Job 38:4-7).
- “You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with **all their host**, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the **host of heaven worships you**” (Neh. 9:6).
- “It grew great, even to **the host of heaven**. And **some of the host and some of the stars** it threw down to the ground and trampled on them. It became great, even as great as the **Prince of the host [Michael]**” (Dan 8:10-11; Dan 10).

In the passages above, we see the equivocation of sun, moon, and stars with heavenly angelic powers. But there is another symbolic connection made in the Old Testament of the sun, moon, and stars with earthly human authorities such as kings and rulers. It is as if these earthly principalities are empowered by or represent images of those spiritual beings and principalities.

In the passages below, notice that the destruction of earthly powers is expressed through the figurative language of a collapsing universe: The sky rolling up and the sun, moon, and stars being darkened or falling. Another way to describe this discourse is the language of “decreation.”

- **Kings at war early 13th Century B.C.** “The **kings came, they fought**... From heaven **the stars fought**, from their courses they fought against Sisera” (Jud 5:19-20).
- **The destruction of Babylon in 539 B.C.** “the **stars of heaven** and their constellations will **not flash forth their light**; The **sun will be dark** when it rises, And **the moon will not shed its light**” (Isa 13:10).
- **The destruction of Edom in 586 B.C.** “all **the host of heaven will wear away**, And **the sky will be rolled up** like a scroll; **All their hosts will also wither away**” (Isa 34:4).
- **The destruction of Egypt in 587 B.C.** “When I **blot you out**, I will **cover the heavens and make their stars dark**; I will **cover the sun** with a cloud, and **the moon shall not give its light**. All the bright **lights of heaven will I make dark** over you, and put darkness on your land, declares the Lord GOD” (Ezek 32:7).
- **The destruction of Edom in 586 B.C.** “For the LORD is enraged against all the nations, and furious against **all their host**; he has devoted them to destruction, has given them over for slaughter...All **the host of heaven** shall rot away, and **the skies roll up like a scroll**. All **their host shall fall**, as leaves fall (Isa 34:2-5).

During none of these historical events did the sky “literally” roll up or the stars fall or the sun and moon turn dark. These passages correlate the collapsing universe figuratively with the fall of earthly regimes and the spiritual powers behind them.

And this figurative understanding is not a new invention. Eschatology expert Gary DeMar writes, “Before the advent of speculative exegesis, most Bible commentators who studied the whole Bible understood the relationship of collapsing universe language with the destruction of the religious and civil state.”¹⁰ Scholar Kenneth L. Gentry adds, “In Scripture, prophets often express *national catastrophes* in terms of *cosmic destruction*. The famed twelfth-century Jewish theologian Maimonides notes that such language ‘is a proverbial expression, importing the destruction and utter ruin of a nation.’”¹¹

Perhaps some clarity can now be brought to the New Testament usage of the same exact imagery when describing the last days and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

“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 heaven**, and the **powers of the heavens will be shaken**” (Matt 24:29).

“When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and **the sun became black** as sackcloth, the **full moon became like blood**, and the **stars of the sky fell to the earth** as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. **The sky vanished like a scroll** that is being rolled up, and **every mountain and island was removed from its place**” (Revelation 6:12-14).

Within the Church, there are several interpretations of when these prophecies are fulfilled, past, present, or future. But that does not concern us here. My main point is that these passages are so often used to look for a series of astronomical or geophysical catastrophes in creation, but now we see that they are actually a figurative expression rooted in Old Testament imagery of the fall of ruling powers.

What I will argue next is that in the New Testament, the usage of these images denotes more than just ruling powers being vanquished; it figuratively depicts the end of the old covenant order itself.

The Last Days

The term “last days” comes from several New Testament passages (Acts 2:17-21; 2Tim 3:1; Heb 1:2; James 5:3; 2Pet 3:3), but the one that encapsulates the issues addressed in this article is Acts 2:17-21:

“And in **the last days** it shall be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams;
even on my male servants and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.
And I will show **wonders in the heavens above**
and **signs on the earth below**,
blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke;
the sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the **day of the Lord** comes, the great and magnificent day.
And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

This passage seems to have it all: Day of the Lord, last days, wonders in heaven and earth. But let’s take a closer look. This is an Old Testament prophecy that the apostle Peter is quoting to a large crowd of Jews and devout believers from all over the known world gathered in Jerusalem for the Day of Pentecost. He is

preaching one of the first recorded salvation sermons on the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the need for all men everywhere to repent and be baptized in light of God's coming judgment.

The question arises: Is this "Day of the Lord," or these "last days," something yet to occur in the distant future, a part of the end of the space-time universe? Is it the beginning of a series of momentous geophysical catastrophes including astronomical phenomena like a blood red moon and an eclipsed or darkened sun? As indicated earlier, most New Testament imagery is rooted in Old Testament concepts, so let's take a look at the Old Testament background at this concept of "the last days" in order to understand what the New Testament writers intended with their words.

First of all, in the Old Testament, the "Day of the Lord" never meant the end of history or the destruction of the physical heavens and earth. It was used in varying contexts to proclaim God's judgment upon a specific city or nation. It was like saying "the day is coming when God will punish you."

Obadiah prophesied the destruction of Edom as *the day of the Lord* (Obad 15), judgment on Judah and Jerusalem in the time of Zephaniah was called *the day of the Lord* (Zeph 1:7, 14), Amos called the Assyrian destruction of the northern tribes *the day of the Lord* (Amos 5:18-20), Isaiah called the fall of Babylon to the Medes *the day of the Lord* (Isa 13:6, 9). So when we read of "the Day of the Lord" in the New Testament, we must be careful not to expand it into an end of the universe scenario, but to understand it in context as coming earthly judgment upon a nation or people.¹²

The Old Testament precedent for "last days" is translated in most English Bibles as "latter days." In some instances it simply meant events that would happen years later from when the subject was addressed (Num 24:14; Job 8:7). But with the prophets it became an eschatological reference about the children of Israel some day returning from exile and renewing the Kingdom of David, the archetype of Messiah, whose kingdom would be eternal after crushing the four previous kingdoms of Nebuchadnezzar's dream statue (Dan 2:28; 10:14; Hos 3:5).

The "stone cut from a mountain by no human hand" (Dan 2:35) that would crush the other successive kingdoms has been long known to be the "cornerstone" of God's Kingdom: Messiah, Jesus Christ (Isa 28:16; Act 4:11). That cornerstone that toppled the kingdoms of man came during the Roman Empire, the kingdom of iron mixed with clay (Dan 2:40-45). Daniel then says that, "the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth" (2:35).

So now the question is, when does this mountain begin filling the earth? The prophets Isaiah and Micah further explain that "in the last days, the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains and many nations shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob" (Isa 2:2-3; Micah 4:1-2).

When do the nations begin coming to the mountain of the Lord? Are these last days at the Second Coming of Christ at the end of time or is this a figurative reference to the spread of the Gospel after the first coming of Christ? In their book *The Early Church and the End of the World*, scholars Gary DeMar and Francis Gumerlock list early church scholars such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and others who understood Isaiah 2/Micah 4 and other Old Testament prophecies to be about the first coming of Christ rather than the second coming.¹³ But don't take early church scholars' word for it. The New Testament apostles clearly claimed that they were in fact living in "the last days."

If we return to Peter's sermon in Acts 2, and read it in context we see from the very start that Peter claims that the mysterious tongues speaking that the crowd was hearing was in fact the fulfillment of the Joel prophecy about God pouring out His Spirit *in the last days* (Act 2:16). This Pentecost event, with its

explicit proclamation of the Kingdom of God in the various tongues of the nations, marked the beginning of that drawing in of the nations to the Mountain of God, Messiah and the New Covenant (Heb 12:22-24).

But Peter did not stop with the prophesying, dreams, and visions. He also included -- in that current day fulfillment -- the astronomical catastrophic phenomena of the sun, moon and stars which we now know are references to falling principalities and powers both earthly and heavenly. Peter claims that those prophecies were being fulfilled *in their very day*, not in some distant end of the universe. And Peter reiterates his belief of being in “these last times” (1 Pet 1:10) when he claims in his letters that “the end of all things is at hand” (1 Pet 4:7), not in some distant future.

But Peter was not the only one who explicitly proclaimed their era as the “last days.” Both Peter and Paul referred to the scoffers and depraved people *of their own time* to be a sign that they were in the last days in the first century (2Pet 3:1-4; 2Tim 3:1-9). Paul wrote to the Corinthian church that they were the generation “on whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor 10:11), the same generation that Jesus said would see the destruction of the Temple that occurred in A.D. 70 (Matt 23:36; 24:34). The writer of Hebrews said conclusively that “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but **in these last days** he has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb 1:1-2).

So if the New Testament writers believed they were living in the last days, then what could that concept mean if not the last days of the space-time universe? As I will explain in the next section, I think the cosmic language of the Bible indicates that they believed they were living in the last days of the Old Covenant and the beginning days of the New Covenant. And in a further concluding section I will explain why this interpretation does not necessarily deny a Second Coming of Christ. You’ll have to bear with me

Shaking the Heavens and Earth

In a [previous article](#) on Biblical Creation and Storytelling , I argued that the establishment of covenants by God is spoken of in the Bible in figurative terms of the creation of the heavens and earth. After all, the Jews’ entire existence and reality was interpreted through their covenant with God, so it makes perfect ancient Near Eastern sense to speak of it in the big picture terms of heaven and earth.

God describes the creation of his covenant with Moses as the creation of the heavens and the earth (Isa 51:14-16). The creation of Israel through deliverance and Promised Land was likened to God hovering over the waters and filling the formless and void earth (Deut 32:10-12), separating the waters from the dry land (Ex 15:8, 16-17), establishing the sun and moon, and defeating the mythical sea dragon of chaos to create his ordered world (Psa 74:12-17; 89:6-12; Isa 51:9-14).

If the creation of a covenant is spoken of as the creation of heavens and earth, and the ruling powers are referred to as sun, moon and stars, then what would the destruction of those powers be but the destruction of the heavens and the earth, including the fall of those astronomical symbolic entities? And what was the embodiment of that covenant but the holy Temple in the holy city of King David?

The first time that Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed in 586 B.C. by the Babylonians, the prophets used the language of decreation to express the covenantal violation of Israel. The destruction of the Temple and exile of the Jews through God’s providence was likened to the destruction of the heavens and earth and a return to a pre-creation chaotic state, a reversal of Genesis 1 language:

I looked on the earth, and behold, it was without form and void;
and to the heavens, and they had no light.

I looked on the mountains, and behold, they were quaking,
I looked, and behold, there was no man,
and all the birds of the air had fled.
I looked, and behold, the fruitful land was a desert...
For this the earth shall mourn,
and the heavens above be dark.
Jer. 4:23-26

Behold, the LORD will empty the earth and make it desolate...
The earth shall be utterly empty and utterly plundered...
The earth staggers like a drunken man;
On that day the LORD will punish
the host of heaven, in heaven,
and the kings of the earth, on the earth...
Then the moon will be confounded
and the sun ashamed
Isa 24:1-23

In the same way that the first temple destruction was earth-shattering in its covenantal impact, so the second destruction of Jerusalem and the holy Temple in A.D. 70 was of equal spiritual significance in God's covenantal relations with Israel. It was the shaking of the heavens and earth with a punishment of the host of heaven, both astronomical and political/spiritual.

In the year A.D. 66, revolutionary Zealots and other factions had fueled a revolt against their Roman occupiers. The leaders of Israel had rejected Jesus of Nazareth as being the Messiah, but they knew the calculations of Daniel's prophecy (Daniel 9:24-27). The 490 years were up. Messiah would arrive, crush the Roman pagan oppressors and establish the long awaited eternal Kingdom of God (Daniel 2:44-45) on earth.

The Roman emperor Nero sent his general Vespasian to crush the Jewish rebellion and bring peace back to Roman rule. The city of Jerusalem was besieged by Vespasian's son Titus, and by the summer of A.D. 70, was completely destroyed, along with the Jewish Temple. A million or more Jews were killed, a hundred thousand were made slaves and exiled,¹⁴ and the Temple has never since been rebuilt from its ruins.

This important piece of history was extensively recorded by a Jewish historian in the Roman court, Flavius Josephus, in his book *The Wars of the Jews*. In this single historical event lies the key to understanding many mysterious metaphors and perplexing poetry of end times prophecy. What appears to modern Americans as esoteric Nostradamus-like riddles in biblical language about the "end of the age," when interpreted through the images and metaphors of the Old Testament, becomes a powerful testimony of the New Covenant.

This all sheds light on Jesus' prophecy about the impending destruction of the Jerusalem Temple when he was asked by his disciples on the Mount of Olives, "Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" (Matt 24:3).

The Greek word for "age" is not *cosmos* as in the physical world, but *aion*, as in a time era. Jesus was not describing the end of the space-time universe, he was talking about the end of the Old Covenant

era, the last days of the Old Covenant that culminated in the destruction of the sacramental incarnation of that Old Covenant: The Temple in Jerusalem (Matt 24:1-2).

As scholar N.T. Wright put it,

“the ‘close of the age’ for which they longed was not the end of the space-time order, but the end of the present evil age, and the introduction of the (still very much this-worldly) age to come... Matthew 24:3, therefore is most naturally read, in its first-century Jewish context... as a question of Jesus ‘coming’ or ‘arriving’ in the sense of his actual enthronement as king, consequent upon the dethronement of the present powers that were occupying the holy city...When will the evil age, symbolized by the present Jerusalem regime, be over?”¹⁵

The destruction of the Old Covenant order would be likened to the destruction of the heavens and the earth.

In Hebrews 12:18-22, the writer tells us that God shook the heavens and the earth when he established his covenant with Moses on Sinai. But then in verses 23-24 he says that the New Covenant is a heavenly city of God on the Mount Zion of the heavenly Jerusalem, far superior to the Mosaic covenant. Then he concludes that the end of that Old Covenant is near because a new shaking of the heavens and earth is coming, and that shaking is the establishment of the New Covenant.

At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. (Heb 12:26-28)

J. Stuart Russell answers the relevant question, “What then, is the great catastrophe symbolically represented as the shaking of the earth and heavens?”

“No doubt it is the overthrow and abolition of the Mosaic dispensation, or old covenant; the destruction of the Jewish church and state, together with all the institutions and ordinances connect therewith... the laws, and statutes, and ordinances.”¹⁶

The book of Hebrews was written before A.D. 70, when the Temple was destroyed. So the physical embodiment of the Old Covenant was still on earth even though the New Covenant had been inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Christ. It was not until the Temple was destroyed that the New Covenant was considered fully inaugurated. They were living in a transition period between covenants during the years of 30-70.

This is why the writer of Hebrews says, “In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is **becoming** obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away” (Heb. 8:13). Notice how the author says that the Old Covenant was becoming old and obsolete but was not yet replaced. That is because the incarnation of the old heavens and earth, the Jerusalem Temple, was not yet destroyed at the

time of his writing. The Old Covenant was the heavens and earth that was shaken and replaced by the New Covenant, which is the eternal kingdom that will never be replaced or shaken.

2 Peter 3:10–13

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the elements will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed...

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the elements will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. (2 Peter 3:10–13)

The interpretation I have presented in this essay is no doubt earth-shattering for some eschatological paradigms about the end times. Such radical departures from the futurist’s received wisdom always beg plenty of questions about other passages and concepts taken for granted by the futurist interpretation.

One of them is the apparently clear description in 2 Peter about the day of the Lord and the passing away of the heavens and the earth replaced by a new heavens and earth. Isn’t that unambiguous language to be taken literally? Well, actually, no. As a matter of fact, orthodox believers have wide-ranging interpretations of this passage, so it is a controversial one to begin with.¹⁷

We must remember our dictum to seek to understand the text within its ancient Jewish setting steeped in Old Testament imagery and symbols. I believe when we do this, we will have to conclude that the decreation of the heavens and earth is covenantal metaphor *not* literal physical scientific observation. Peter writes figuratively about the final ending of the Old Covenant, with God’s judgment on Israel for rejecting Messiah, and the final establishment of his New Covenant as a New World Order, or in their case, a “new heavens and new earth.”

In the beginning of chapter 3, Peter compares the scoffers of his day and their impending judgment with the scoffers of Noah’s day before their judgment. So the judgment is near, and what’s more, these scoffers are in the “last days” which we have already seen were considered the last days of the Old Covenant that the New Testament writers were living within. Those last days would be climaxed by judgment. But what kind of judgment?

Peter references creation of the heavens and earth (red flag about covenants!) and then the destruction of that previous world by water. Scholars have indicated how the flood of Noah is described using terms similar to Genesis 1, as if God is “decreating” the earth because of sin, in order to start over with a new Noahic covenant.¹⁸ The ark floated over the chaotic “face of the waters” (Gen 7:17) like God’s spirit hovered over the chaotic face of the waters before creation (Gen 1:2). The dry land recedes from the waters (8:3) just as it was separated in creation (1:9). God makes the same command to Noah to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (9:1) that he gave to Adam and Eve (1:28). So the covenantal connections are loud and clear.

As already noted, the Day of the Lord is always used in the Bible for a localized judgment upon a people, which by way of reminder, Jesus had already prophesied was coming upon Jerusalem to the very generation he spoke to (Matt 23:36-24:2). But what makes some interpreters think this is the final judgment of the universe is the very bad translation of the Greek word *stoicheion* as “elements” in some English texts. This makes modern readers think of the periodic table of elements as being the most foundational building blocks of the universe. They conclude that the Bible must be talking about the very elements of helium, hydrogen, deuterium and others being burned up and melted!

But this is not what the Greek word means. Though some Greek thinkers believed in the existence of atoms, the common understanding was that there were four basic elements, earth, water, wind, and fire.¹⁹ Though someone may conjecture that these could still be considered physical elements that could be destroyed, a simple look at the usage of *stoicheion* throughout the New Testament shows that the Hebrew usage had nothing to do with Greek primitive scientific notions.

In every place that *stoicheion* shows up in the New Testament it means elementary principle rudiments of a worldview, sometimes a godless worldview (Col 2:8), but more often the elementary principles of the Old Covenant law described as a “cosmos” (Gal 4:3; 9; Col 2:20; Heb 5:12).²⁰

Remember how the cosmic language of creating heavens and earth was used to describe the cosmic significance of God establishing a covenant? And remember how in the Old Testament, the destruction of covenants, nations, and peoples was described in *decreation* terms as the collapsing of the universe?

That is the case in these passages as well, with the term “cosmos” being used metaphorically for the “universe” of God’s covenantal order as embodied in the Old Covenant laws of Jewish separation: Circumcision, dietary restrictions and sabbaths. Paul is telling his readers that the *stoicheion* of the Old Covenant *cosmos* are no longer over them because the people of God are under new *stoicheion*, the elementary principles of faith (Gal 4:1-11).

Peter means the same thing. When he says that the heavens will pass away and the *stoicheion* will be burned up, he is claiming that when the Temple in Jerusalem is destroyed, it will be the final passing away of the old covenant cosmos, along with all the elementary principles tied to that physical sacramental structure, the laws that once separated Jew and Gentile. The new cosmos is one in which both Jew and Gentile “by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1Pet 1:5).

As Gary DeMar concludes, “The New Covenant replaces the Old Covenant with new leaders, a new priesthood, new sacraments, a new sacrifice, a new tabernacle (John 1:14), and a new temple (John 2:19; 1 Cor 3:16; Eph 2:210). In essence, a new heaven and earth.”²¹ Eminent Greek scholar John Lightfoot agrees, “The destruction of Jerusalem and the whole Jewish state is described as if the whole frame of this world were to be dissolved.”²²

The new heavens and new earth, the dwelling places of righteousness that Peter was waiting for, were the New Covenant cosmos of righteousness by faith inaugurated by Christ’s death and resurrection. The New Covenant inauguration and implementation were not merely abstract claims of contractual change; it was physically verified that the destruction of the Old Covenant emblem, the Temple, finalized the dissolution of the Old Covenant itself.

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! See, your house [Temple] is left to you desolate.

Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

Matt 23:36-38

Coming on the Clouds

Jesus' Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24 is the classic reference used by futurists to point to the future second coming of Christ. I have been exegeting the decreation language about the sun, moon, and stars as referring to the end of the Old Covenant. Yet, right after those verses that speak of the collapsing universe, Jesus speaks of his "coming on the clouds":

"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 heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the land will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. Matt. 24:29-30

I want to focus on the phrase, "coming on the clouds of heaven" to prove that it is not the physical return of Christ that this passage is talking about, but rather a metaphor for God's judgment upon Jerusalem for rejecting Messiah. I believe Jesus Christ will physically return to this earth, but I do not think that this passage teaches that doctrine. It teaches something else. And I am in good company with orthodox scholars through history who have posited this very interpretation of Matthew 24: Eusebius, John Calvin, John Lightfoot, John Gill, Phillip Schaff, Gary DeMar, Kenneth L. Gentry, R.C. Sproul and many others.²³

When considering the ancient Near Eastern context of this "cloud" image, I have previously written that the notion of deity coming on clouds or riding clouds like a chariot was already a powerful metaphor used for the god Baal in Canaan when Israel arrived there.²⁴ Baal, the storm god, was called the great "Cloud-Rider"²⁵ who would dispense his judgments through thunder and lightning in his hand.²⁶ To ride the clouds was a sign of deity and judgment to the Canaanites. So it makes sense that the Biblical writers who were dispossessing Baal and his worshippers from the land would use the same epithets of Yahweh in a subversive way of saying Yahweh is God, not Baal.

In light of this connection of cloud-riding with deity and judgment, Jesus' statement becomes an implicit reference to his own deity and messiahship rejected by the first century Jews which resulted in God's judgment upon Jerusalem (Matt 21:33-45). Jesus is coming in judgment to vindicate his claims (Matt 26:64), and he is going to do so by using the Roman armies of Titus to do his bidding.

Look at these Old Testament passages that use the concept of coming on the clouds as a metaphor for God coming in judgment upon cities or nations:²⁷

God's judgment on Egypt

Isa. 19:1 Behold, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud, and is about to come to Egypt.

Ezek 30:3 For the day is near, the day of the LORD is near; it will be a day of clouds, a time of doom for the nations.

God's judgment on Ninevah

Nahum 1:3 In whirlwind and storm is His way, And clouds are the dust beneath His feet.

God's judgment on Israel

Joel 2:2 Surely it is near, A day of darkness and gloom, A day of clouds and thick darkness.

Messiah as deity and kingly judge

Dan. 7:13-14 "I kept looking in the night visions, And behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, And He came up to the Ancient of Days And was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, Glory and a kingdom."

Did God literally or physically come riding on a cumulus nimbus in these passages? The answer is obvious: No. The notion of coming on the clouds with storm and lightning was an ancient Near Eastern motif of deity coming in judgment upon a city or nation. Egypt was plundered by the Assyrians (Isa 9:23-25). Ninevah was destroyed by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (Ezek 30:10). But God is described as the one who was using these pagan forces as his own means of judging those cities. This is how God "came on the clouds."

So, Matthew 24 is God's description of judging Israel for rejecting Messiah, by using the Roman armies to destroy the Temple and Jerusalem. Jesus didn't physically come riding on a cumulus nimbus, he "came on the clouds" in judgment by using the Roman armies to vindicate his claims of Messiahship. This was not a physical Second Coming, but rather a spiritual coming.

Once it is realized that creation and decreation language regarding the heavens and the earth is covenantal in its reference and not scientific, the natural question arises: does this deny the second coming of Christ altogether? Is this a heterodox view that leads us on the slippery slope into heresy? My answer is again, "no."

Context is everything. Just because *some* passages are shown to be fulfilled in the past, does not mean that *all* passages are fulfilled in the past. For example, many preterists maintain that 1 Corinthians 15 affirms that there will be a future physical return of Christ followed by a physical resurrection of humanity.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 1Cor. 15:20-26

Other preterists make the argument that the "new creation" and "new heavens and earth" of the New Covenant may have been inaugurated in the first century, but it will not be consummated until this physical return of Christ. At that time, what was a spiritual truth of new creation will become a physical reality. Christ reigns now over every authority and power (Eph 1:20-22). But his overcoming of every authority and power is a process that is not yet completed (Heb 2:8). This notion of a seed form of beginning with a

future completion is referred to as the “Now/Not Yet” of the Kingdom of God. As scholar Ken Gentry writes,

“Despite initial appearances, Revelation 21-22 does not speak of the consummate new creation order. Rather, it provides an ideal conception of new covenant Christianity, presenting it as the spiritual new creation and the new Jerusalem. Though the ultimate, consummate, eternal new creation is implied in these verses, (via the now/not yet schema of New Testament revelation), John’s actual focus is on the current, unfolding, redemptive new creation principle in Christ.”²⁸

This now/not yet, inauguration/consummation paints a picture of a New Covenant that is already here with a new creation of a new heavens and earth that will one day be fully consummated at the physical return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead. At that time, Death will be swallowed up in victory, even though we can now speak of it having already lost its sting. This is present reality based on future promise.

When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”

“O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Cor 15:54-57

Notes

1. The *Left Behind* series is a particular version of futurism called Dispensational Premillennialism. For a more in depth presentation of these varieties of eschatology see Bock, Darrell L. ed., *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999.
2. Interestingly, as soon as the interpreter thinks falling stars are meteors, he has just engaged in figurative speculation, which is not literal.
3. Some examples of orthodox scholars who hold to this view are Sproul, R.C. *The Last Days According to Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998; and Gentry, Kenneth L. Jr. *Navigating the Book of Revelation*. Fountain Inn: SC, Goodbirth Ministries, 2009.
4. Some examples of orthodox scholars who hold to this view are Sproul, R.C. *The Last Days According to Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998; and Gentry, Kenneth L. Jr. *Navigating the Book of Revelation*. Fountain Inn: SC, Goodbirth Ministries, 2009.
5. I. Zatelli, “Constellations.” Toorn, K. van der, Bob Becking, and Pieter Willem van der Horst. *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*. 2nd extensively rev. ed. Leiden; Boston; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brill; Eerdmans, 1999., 202-204; “Astrology and the Worship of the Stars in the Bible,” *ZAW* 103 (1991): 86-99.
6. “Astrology”, Berenbaum, Michael and Fred Skolnik, eds. 2nd ed. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007, p. 8424.
7. See also Deut 4:19; Deut 17:3; 2King 23:4-5; 1King 22:19; Neh 9:6.

8. Tigay, Jeffrey. JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996): 435; as quoted in Heiser, Michael S. "Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (January-March 2001): 72; Copyright © 2001 Dallas Theological Seminary; online: <http://thedivinecouncil.com/>
9. See also Psa 148:2-3, 1King 22:29 & 2King 21:5. In Isa 14:12-14 the king of Babylon is likened to the planet Venus (Morningstar) seeking to reign above the other stars of heaven, which are equivalent to the sons of God who surround God's throne on the "mount of assembly" or "divine council" (see Psa 89:5-7 and Psa 82).
10. DeMar, Gary. *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church*. Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999, p. 144.
11. Ice, Thomas and Kenneth L. Gentry Jr. *The Great Tribulation Debate: Past or Future?* Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999, p. 55.
12. In 2 Thess 2:2, Paul exhorts the Thessalonians not to believe anyone who says that the Day of the Lord has come. But he doesn't make the obvious rebuttal of saying "because it would be the end of the universe, duh." Instead he gives them other events that will happen first, thus proving that the Day of the Lord was a localized event not a universal or global one. If it was universal or global, they could not possibly be deceived into missing it. See Isa 34:8, 35:4 in conjunction with Luke 21:22ff and Matt 21:33-43. In these passages, the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 was the "days of vengeance" of God upon Israel for rejecting Messiah. "Days of vengeance" is a synonym for "Day of the Lord."
13. DeMar, Gary and Francis Gumerlock. *The Early Church and the End of the World*. Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2006, pp. xi-xiii. Among other important scholars who held this preterist interpretation of the last days or "end of the world" (especially of Matthew 24) were St. John Chrysostom, Bede, Eusebius, Augustine, Origen, Hugo Grotius, John Lightfoot, Milton Terry, Moses Stuart, John Calvin, Philip Dodderidge, Thomas Newton, John Gill, Adam Clarke, and F.W. Farrar.
14. Flavius Josephus. *Wars of the Jews*, 6.9.3 (6:420).
15. Wright, N.T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996, p. 345-346.
16. Russell, J. Stuart. *The Parousia: The New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord's Second Coming*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999, p. 289.
17. Bauckham, Richard J. Vol. 50, *Word Biblical Commentary: 2 Peter, Jude*. Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002, p. 315-319.
18. Wenham, Gordon J. Vol. 1, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15*. Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002, p. 207.
19. Schreiner, Thomas R. Vol. 37, 1, *2 Peter, Jude*. electronic ed. Logos Library System; The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2007, p. 384.
20. Leithart, Peter J. *The Promise of His Appearing: An Exposition of Second Peter*. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2004, p.101. Bauckham argues that "The heavenly bodies (sun, moon and stars) is the interpretation favored by most commentators," for *stoicheion*. But then we are right back to the sun, moon, and stars as figurative language of covenantal elements. Bauckham, *2 Peter, Jude*, 316. But I doubt this interpretation because the clear words for "heavenly bodies" are not *stoicheion*, but *pouranios soma* (1 Cor 15:40-41).

21. Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, p. 192.
22. Lightfoot, John. *Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica: Matthew – 1 Corinthians*, 4 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1859, 1989, 3:454.
23. DeMar, Gary. *End Times Fiction: A Biblical Consideration of the Left Behind Theology*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001, 111-115. For more, see “Preterist Scholarship” on the Preterist Archive: <http://www.preteristarchive.com/Preterism/index.html>.
24. Godawa, Brian. “Old Testament Storytelling Apologetics,” *Christian Research Journal*, Vol. 34, #3, 2011, p. 24-31. Online: <http://www.godawa.com/Writing/Articles/OTStoryApologetics-CRJournal.pdf>
25. KTU 1.2:4.8–9; 1.3:3.38–41. All these Ugaritic texts can be found in N. Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit*, 2nd ed., The Biblical Seminar, vol. 53 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).
26. Baal sits.../in the midst of his divine mountain, Saphon,/in the midst of the mountain of victory./ Seven lightning-flashes,/eight bundles of thunder,/a tree-of-lightning in his right hand./His head is magnificent,/His brow is dew-drenched./his feet are eloquent in wrath. (KTU 1.101:1–6) The season of his rains may Baal indeed appoint,/the season of his storm-chariot./And the sound of his voice from the clouds,/his hurling to the earth of lightning-flashes(KTU 1.4:5.5–9)
27. See also Psa 18:9-10; 68:32-33; 104:3; 2Sam 22:10; Zeph 1:15; Isa 30:30-31 cf 31:15; Deut 33:26.
28. Gentry, Kenneth L. Jr. *Navigating the Book of Revelation: Special Studies on Important Issues*. Fountain Inn: SC, Goodbirth Ministries, 2009, p. 167.