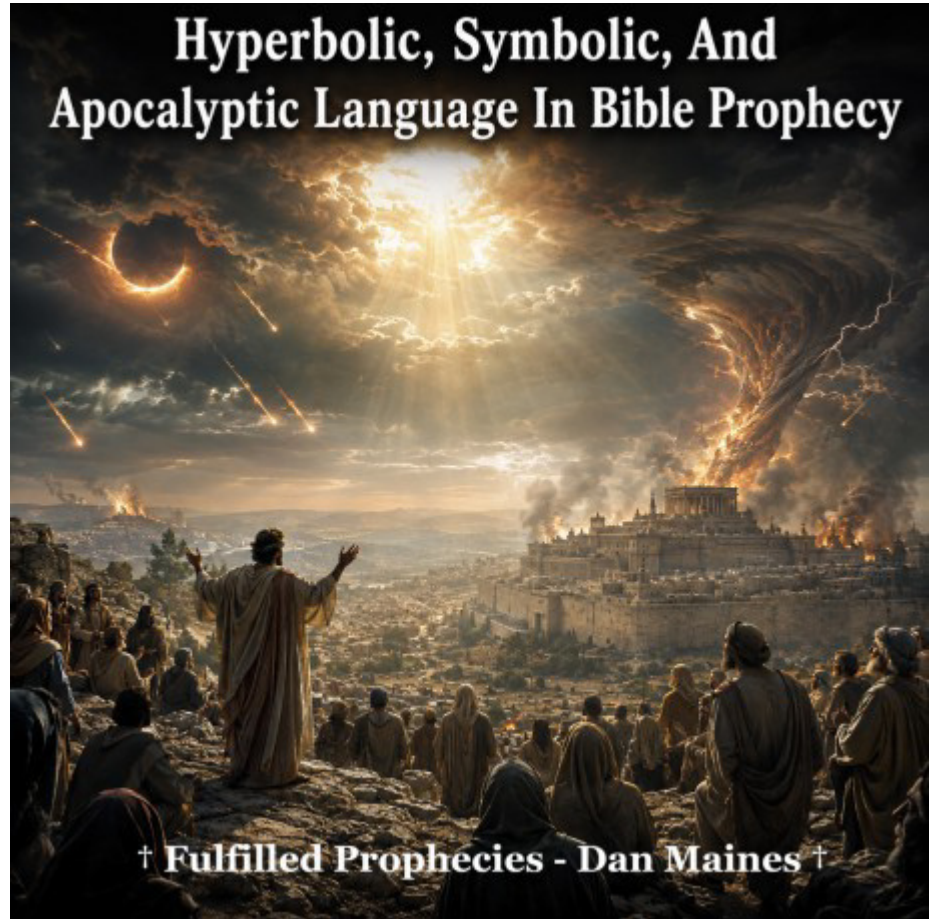


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Hyperbolic, Symbolic, And Apocalyptic Language In Bible Prophecy



By Dan Maines

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Introduction

† The Bible frequently uses hyperbolic, symbolic, poetic, and apocalyptic language to describe God's judgment, deliverance, the fall of nations, and major covenant events. Hyperbole intentionally uses exaggerated imagery to emphasize the greatness or seriousness of an event, while apocalyptic language often describes historical events through cosmic symbols.

† One of the clearest examples is Psalm 18. David tells us exactly what he's describing, God's deliverance of him from Saul and his enemies. Yet David describes that historical deliverance as God coming down from heaven, riding upon a cherub, shaking the earth, moving the foundations of the mountains, sending fire, hailstones, thunder, and exposing the foundations of the world.

† David wasn't claiming that the physical planet was destroyed or that God literally traveled through the atmosphere riding on a visible cherub. He was using powerful prophetic imagery to describe God's intervention in history. Once we recognize this language in the Old Testament, we have to allow Jesus and the New Testament writers to use the same prophetic vocabulary. (2 Samuel 22:1; Matthew 24:29-34)

Psalm 18:1-3

For the music director. A Psalm of David, the servant of the Lord, who spoke to the Lord the words of this song on the day that the Lord rescued him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul. And he said, "I love You, Lord, my strength." The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my savior, My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge; My shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, And I am saved from my enemies.

† The setting couldn't be clearer. David is celebrating God's deliverance from his enemies. What follows is David's inspired description of that historical deliverance.

† This context controls the language that follows. David isn't predicting the destruction of planet earth. He's describing God's judgment against his enemies and God's deliverance of His servant.

† This becomes an important interpretive key because later prophets, Jesus, and the writers of the New Testament use the same kind of judgment language. (Isaiah 13:9-13; Matthew 24:29-34)

Psalm 18:7-10

Then the earth shook and quaked; And the foundations of the mountains were trembling And were shaken, because He was angry. Smoke went up out of His nostrils, And fire from His mouth was devouring; Coals burned from it. He also bowed the heavens down low, and came down With thick darkness under His feet. He rode on a cherub and flew; And He sped on the wings of the wind.

† Did the entire physical earth literally shake? Did the foundations of every mountain physically move? Did God visibly descend from the sky riding upon a cherub? The text itself gives us no reason to turn David's poetic description into a literal worldwide catastrophe.

† David uses cosmic language because God's intervention was enormous from David's perspective. God's judgment and deliverance are pictured as heaven and earth being shaken.

† This same prophetic vocabulary appears throughout Scripture. If we recognize it as figurative in David, we can't automatically demand wooden literalism when similar language appears in prophecy. (Isaiah 13:10; Isaiah 34:4; Matthew 24:29)

Psalm 18:12-15

From the brightness before Him passed His thick clouds, Hailstones and coals of fire. The Lord also thundered in the heavens, And the Most High uttered His voice, Hailstones and coals of fire. He sent out His arrows, and scattered them, And lightning flashes in abundance, and routed them. Then the channels of water appeared, And the foundations of the world were exposed By Your rebuke, Lord, At the blast of the breath of Your nostrils.

† David describes his deliverance with hailstones, fire, thunder, lightning, exposed waters, and the foundations of the world being uncovered.

† The historical event was real, but the imagery used to describe God's intervention is highly poetic and symbolic. The symbolism doesn't make the event less real. It makes the description more powerful.

† This is one of the mistakes people make when discussing fulfilled prophecy. Symbolic fulfillment doesn't mean imaginary fulfillment. Biblical symbolism communicates genuine historical and covenantal realities. (Psalm 97:1-5; Habakkuk 3:3-15)

Isaiah 13:9-13

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. So I will punish the world for its evil And the wicked for their wrongdoing; I will also put an end to the audacity of the proud And humiliate the arrogance of the tyrants. I will make mortal man scarcer than pure gold And mankind than the gold of Ophir. Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, And the earth will be shaken from its place At the fury of the Lord of armies In the day of His burning anger.

† Isaiah uses extraordinary cosmic language, the stars stop shining, the sun becomes dark, the moon gives no light, the heavens tremble, and the earth is shaken from its place.

† Yet the context identifies the judgment as the burden concerning Babylon. This language described the catastrophic fall of a kingdom, not the literal destruction of the universe. (Isaiah 13:1, 17-19)

† This establishes an important biblical precedent. Sun, moon, stars, heavens, and earth could be used prophetically to describe rulers, kingdoms, governments, and established orders being brought down under God's judgment.

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.

† This is one of the strongest examples of apocalyptic language in the Old Testament. Isaiah says the heavens would be rolled together like a scroll and the heavenly host would fall, yet the next verse identifies the object of God's judgment as Edom.

† The physical universe didn't disappear when Edom was judged. The language describes the catastrophic overthrow of a nation under divine judgment.

† This becomes especially important when Revelation uses nearly identical language about heaven being removed like a scroll. John was using prophetic vocabulary already established centuries earlier. (Revelation 6:13-14)

Isaiah 19:1

The pronouncement concerning Egypt: Behold, the Lord is riding on a swift cloud and is about to come to Egypt; The idols of Egypt will tremble at His presence, And the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them.

† Here God is pictured riding upon a swift cloud and coming into Egypt. This was judgment language directed against Egypt.

† Scripture doesn't require us to imagine God physically sitting on a cloud and traveling through the atmosphere. The cloud-coming represented divine presence, authority, and judgment.

† This matters enormously when we read New Testament cloud-coming passages. Jesus and His Jewish audience already possessed an Old Testament vocabulary in which coming on clouds represented divine judgment. (Daniel 7:13-14; Matthew 24:30)

Psalms 104:3

He lays the beams of His upper chambers in the waters; He makes the clouds His chariot; He walks on the wings of the wind;

† Scripture itself describes the clouds as God's chariot. Cloud language communicates God's majesty, presence, authority, and activity.

† This strengthens Isaiah 19:1, where God rides upon a swift cloud in judgment against Egypt. The Bible had established

cloud imagery long before Jesus spoke about coming on the clouds. (Isaiah 19:1; Daniel 7:13-14; Matthew 24:30)

Micah 1:3-4

For behold, the Lord is coming forth from His place. He will come down and tread on the high places of the earth. The mountains will melt under Him And the valleys will be split, Like wax before the fire, Like water poured down a steep place.

† Micah says God comes down, walks upon the high places of the earth, melts mountains, and splits valleys.

† The prophet immediately identifies the historical objects of this judgment as Samaria and Jerusalem. The imagery is cosmic, but the judgment has identifiable historical targets. (Micah 1:5-6)

† Mountains melting like wax communicates the irresistible power of God's judgment. No kingdom, city, ruler, or covenant order can stand when God rises in judgment.

Nahum 1:3-6

The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, And the Lord will by no means leave the guilty unpunished. In the gale and the storm is His way, And clouds are the dust beneath His feet. He rebukes the sea and dries it up; He dries up all the rivers.

Bashan and Carmel wither, The blossoms of Lebanon wither.

Mountains quake because of Him, And the hills come apart;

Indeed the earth is upheaved by His presence, The world and all the inhabitants in it. Who can stand before His indignation?

Who can endure the burning of His anger? His wrath gushes forth like fire, And the rocks are broken up by Him.

† Nahum describes God's judgment with whirlwinds, storms, clouds, drying seas and rivers, shaking mountains, melting hills, an upheaved earth, fire, and shattered rocks.

† Yet Nahum identifies the historical subject of the prophecy as Nineveh. The cosmic imagery communicates the overwhelming power of God's judgment against a real city and kingdom.

(Nahum 1:1)

† This gives us another clear biblical example where dramatic

earth-shaking language doesn't require the literal destruction of the physical planet.

Luke 21:20-22

But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is near. Then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those who are inside the city must leave, and those who are in the country must not enter the city; because these are days of punishment, so that all things which have been written will be fulfilled.

† Luke gives us the unmistakable historical setting for Jesus' judgment prophecy. Jerusalem would be surrounded by armies, Judea was told to flee, and Jesus called these the days of vengeance.

† Most importantly, Jesus said these were the days in which all things written would be fulfilled. That directly connects the language of Israel's prophets with the approaching judgment upon Jerusalem. (Daniel 9:26-27; Luke 21:32)

† This prevents us from taking Matthew's apocalyptic imagery out of its first-century setting and moving it thousands of years beyond Jesus' audience. Matthew gives us the prophetic imagery, while Luke gives us the unmistakable historical sign. (Matthew 24:15-21, 29-34)

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 invent a completely new prophetic vocabulary in Matthew 24. He used language already established throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.

† Darkened sun, failing moon, falling stars, shaken heavens, and cloud-coming were familiar prophetic descriptions of divine

judgment and the collapse of established powers. (Isaiah 13:9-13; Isaiah 19:1; Isaiah 34:4; Daniel 7:13-14)

† Jesus also placed these events within the generation standing before Him. We shouldn't separate His prophetic imagery from His explicit time statement. (Matthew 24:34)

Matthew 24:34

Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.

† Jesus didn't say some of these things. He said all these things.

† The cosmic imagery of the preceding verses doesn't give us permission to move the fulfillment thousands of years beyond the generation Jesus identified.

† The Old Testament teaches us how to understand the imagery, and Jesus tells us when His prophecy would be fulfilled. The language and the time statement work together. (Matthew 16:27-28; Matthew 23:36; Luke 21:20-22, 32)

Acts 2:16-21

but this is what has been spoken through the prophet Joel: 'And it shall be in the last days,' God says, 'That I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind; And your sons and your daughters will prophesy, And your young men will see visions, And your old men will have dreams; And even on My male and female servants I will pour out My Spirit in those days, And they will prophesy. And I will display wonders in the sky above And signs on the earth below, Blood, fire, and vapor of smoke. The sun will be turned into darkness And the moon into blood, Before the great and glorious day of the Lord comes. And it shall be that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

† Peter said, this is that. He placed Joel's prophecy within the events unfolding in his own generation.

† Joel's imagery included blood, fire, smoke, a darkened sun, and the moon becoming blood. Peter didn't push this language into the distant future. He announced that the prophetic period had arrived.

† The same generation that witnessed the outpouring of the Spirit would experience the approaching Day of the Lord against the Old Covenant world that was passing away. (Hebrews 8:13; Hebrews 10:25, 37; 1 Peter 4:7)

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 uses the same prophetic vocabulary found throughout the Old Testament, earthquake, darkened sun, blood-colored moon, falling stars, disappearing heaven, and moving mountains.

† We shouldn't suddenly abandon the Bible's established prophetic language when we reach Revelation. John expected his readers to recognize imagery drawn directly from Israel's prophets. (Isaiah 13:10; Isaiah 34:4; Joel 2:10)

† Revelation itself repeatedly tells its original audience that these events were near, would happen soon, and that the appointed time was near. (Revelation 1:1-3; Revelation 22:6, 10)

Revelation 1:1-3

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, everything that he saw. Blessed is the one who reads, and those who hear the words of the prophecy and keep the things which are written in it; for the time is near.

† Revelation tells us at its beginning how its symbolic visions must be approached. The things revealed to John were to shortly come to pass, and the time was at hand.

† The symbolic nature of Revelation doesn't erase its time statements. Falling stars, a darkened sun, a blood-colored moon, moving mountains, and a disappearing heaven must be interpreted within the timeframe the book itself establishes.

† Revelation closes with the same message with which it begins, these things were near and coming quickly. (Revelation 22:6, 10, 12, 20)

Historical References

† Josephus described extraordinary signs surrounding the Jewish War and the destruction of Jerusalem, including a star resembling a sword, a comet, unusual light around the temple, a heavenly appearance of armed forces, and voices associated with the temple. Whatever conclusions we draw about individual reports, Josephus clearly understood the destruction of Jerusalem as an extraordinary historical catastrophe.

(Josephus, Wars of the Jews, Book 6, Chapter 5, Section 3)

† Eusebius connected Jesus' warnings concerning Jerusalem with the calamities that overtook the city and recorded the escape of believers before the war. He treated Christ's warnings as directly relevant to first-century Jerusalem. (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Book 3, Chapters 5-7)

† Biblical prophetic imagery doesn't require us to turn every sun, moon, star, cloud, earthquake, mountain, fire, and shaking into a literal physical event. The Old Testament itself provides the interpretive foundation for understanding this language.

How It Applies To Us Today

† We need to let Scripture interpret Scripture. Before declaring that prophetic imagery must describe events in our future, we should ask how the Bible previously used the same language.

† When David described God's deliverance, he didn't rejoice because innocent people suffered. He rejoiced because God delivered him from those who sought his destruction. There's an important difference between rejoicing in God's justice and taking personal pleasure in human suffering.

† Christians shouldn't revel in the demise, suffering, or

destruction of other people. Jesus taught us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. (Matthew 5:44)

† Fulfilled prophecy shouldn't produce arrogance or cruelty.

Understanding judgment should make us appreciate God's justice, Christ's victory, and the blessings we now possess in the New Covenant. (Hebrews 12:22-24)

† We live on the fulfilled side of those prophetic judgments. Our message isn't that we're waiting for the heavens to collapse around us. Our message is that Jesus Christ reigns, His kingdom has been established, and those who belong to Him have come to the heavenly Jerusalem. (Colossians 1:13; Hebrews 12:22-24)

Q & A Appendix

Q: What is hyperbolic language in the Bible?

A: Hyperbolic language intentionally uses extreme or enlarged descriptions to communicate the magnitude of something. Biblical writers also use poetic, symbolic, and apocalyptic imagery. Psalm 18 is a powerful example because David describes a real historical deliverance with the earth shaking, mountains moving, heavens bowing, God riding upon a cherub, fire, lightning, and the foundations of the world being exposed. (Psalm 18:7-15)

Q: Does symbolic language mean nothing actually happened?

A: Absolutely not. The event can be completely real while the language describing it is symbolic. Babylon really fell, even though the physical stars didn't stop shining and planet earth wasn't literally moved from its orbit. (Isaiah 13:1, 9-13, 17-19)

Q: Why is this important when interpreting Matthew 24?

A: Because Jesus used the established language of Israel's prophets. Isaiah had already used a darkened sun, failing moon, shaking heavens, and a shaken earth to describe national judgment. Jesus then used the same prophetic vocabulary and said all these things would occur within this

generation. (Isaiah 13:9-13; Matthew 24:29-34)

Q: Did cloud-coming language always require a visible bodily descent from heaven?

A: No. Isaiah described God riding upon a swift cloud and coming into Egypt in judgment. This gives us an Old Testament precedent for understanding cloud-coming as divine judgment language. (Isaiah 19:1; Matthew 24:30)

Q: Approximately how many hyperbolic, symbolic, or apocalyptic verses are there in the Old Testament and New Testament?

A: There isn't an inspired or universally accepted verse count because interpreters don't classify every metaphor, hyperbole, symbol, poetic expression, and apocalyptic image the same way. The safest answer is that there are hundreds of verses in the Old Testament and many dozens, arguably well over a hundred depending on classification, in the New Testament that contain this kind of figurative or symbolic language. The important point isn't an exact number, it's that this language occurs throughout Scripture and forms an established biblical vocabulary for judgment, deliverance, kingdoms, and covenantal change. (Psalm 18:7-15; Isaiah 13:9-13; Isaiah 19:1; Micah 1:3-4; Matthew 24:29-34; Acts 2:16-21; Revelation 6:12-14)

Q: If Christ's return is still future, why do some Christians look forward to prophetic events that they believe will bring terrible suffering upon others?

A: Christians should never take pleasure in the suffering or destruction of other people. Yet some futurist interpretations portray future prophecy as involving worldwide war, famine, persecution, catastrophic judgments, and the deaths of countless people, while believers are encouraged to anticipate those events as signs that Christ's return is near. Scripture teaches us to love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, and never rejoice when an enemy falls. God's righteous

judgment can be acknowledged without celebrating human suffering. (Matthew 5:44; Proverbs 24:17; Romans 12:19-21)

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

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Source Index

† Psalm 18:1-3, 7-10, 12-15; Isaiah 13:9-13; Isaiah 19:1; Micah 1:3-4; Matthew 24:29-30, 34; Acts 2:16-21; Revelation 6:12-14

† Josephus, Wars of the Jews, Book 6, Chapter 5, Section 3; Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Book 3, Chapters 5-7

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