

Bro John Thomas on Symbology:

The Heavens and the Signs Thereof

"Be not dismayed at the Signs of the Heavens" - JEREMIAH.

THAT language must be symbolical which, being taken from material objects, expresses things incompatible with the acknowledged properties of those bodies; as, for example, where it is said that stars fall to the earth; for since the stars are larger than the earth, they cannot literally fall to it. In the Apocalypse, chapter 1:1, it is said that God signified the revelation of Jesus Christ; the word *esemanen*, meaning to express by signs or symbols.

"Symbolic language," says Bp. Hurd, "is constructed upon such principles as make it the subject of just criticism and rational interpretation. The prophetic style was constructed on the symbolic principles of the hieroglyphics, which were not vague uncertain things, but fixed and constant analogies, determinate in their own nature, or from the steady use that was made of them; and a language formed on such principles may be reasonably interpreted upon them.

In Luke 21:25, there is a key by which any symbols in Scripture may be safely and clearly explained; and that is by interpreting the figure by the plain declaration, and not by straining the plain declaration to make it agree with the figure.

We have for an example of this rule, signs spoken of in this verse as to take place in the sun, moon, and stars: this may mean either literally those material luminaries themselves, or some other things of which they are only symbols; but when we read further, we find that there is also distress of nations upon the earth, with perplexity, we can have no doubt that the latter is literal, and the former figurative.

We know from the words of Balaam, Daniel, and of the Lord Jesus himself, that the stars are symbols representative of great and distinguished personages, ecclesiastical and civil, and the sun and moon, therefore, being homogeneous symbols with the stars, must represent constitutional elements of their system, ecclesiastical and secular.

It is amongst these, then, that we must look for the signs which are here foretold, and not in the physical heavens, which is expressly forbidden in the Word. In the same manner we learn that the sea, and the waves roaring, represent tumultuous assemblages of the people.

From Gen. 38:9-10, we learn that the sun, moon, and eleven stars, which made obeisance to Joseph, were immediately interpreted by Jacob to be symbolical of himself, Rachel, and his other eleven sons.

Hence, Mede is fully justified in saying that "Heavens mean Regnum Politicum, a political kingdom; Sun, secular government; moon, ecclesiastical government; and Stars, ministers of religion;" but not these exclusively, as Jacob's interpretation of them in Joseph's dream clearly shows. "The Heaven of this political world," says he, "is the sovereign part thereof, whose host and stars are the powers ruling that world. In the highest place, gods or idols; next, kings, princes, magistrates, &c., and other such lights shining in that firmament.

The Earth is the peasantry or *vulgus hominum*, together with the terrestrial creatures serving the use of man." The following writers also all agree that "Heavens" is the symbol for the higher places of the political universe discoursed of: Dr. H. More, Daubuz, Lancaster, Sykes, Dr. Wall, Vitringa, Lowth, Owen, and Warburton.

And Sir Isaac Newton says, "in sacred prophecy, which regards not single persons, the sun is put for the whole species and race of kings." Hence, to "ascend into heaven" must be "to obtain new power and glory:" and Daubuz says, "to ascend into heaven" is to obtain rule and dominion.

That "the sea and the waves roaring," mean tumultuous assemblies of the people, and the sea by itself, the mass of the people, is manifest from many passages. In Isaiah 17:12-13, it is written, "Woe to the multitude of many people, which make a noise like the noise of the seas; and to the rushing of nations, that make a rushing like the rushing of mighty waters; the nations shall rush like the rushing of many waters."

Again, in ch. 8:7, "Behold the Lord bringeth upon them waters of the river, even the King of Assyria, and all his glory," meaning his army. "As the sun and the moon, the stars and the sea, are symbolical expressions, to annex a dissimilar interpretation to the word earth, would be to incur the charge of inconsistency."

The earth is generally put for that over which the heavens do rule; but if there be any distinction between it and the sea, as there undoubtedly is, it is that the earth represents the people in a quiet, and the sea the same in a disturbed state.

Thus, earthquake must mean, as Sir Isaac Newton observes, "The shaking of kingdoms so as to overthrow them;" and Jurieu says, "It is known by all who are versed in the prophets, that in the prophetic style an earthquake signifies a great commotion of nations."

All commentators have been obliged to consider "the heavens" and their sun, moon, and stars, as symbolical from the necessity of the case. Mede quotes the Hebrew commentators to show that they understood the expressions in that way; and Daubuz in his Dictionary gives several instances of heathen writers using the same figures.

Thus, the king of Babylon under the name of Lucifer, as the type of its last ruler in the latter days, is represented in Isaiah 14:13-14, as threatening to place himself above all earthly rule, with Zion for the throne of his dominion, saying in his heart, "I will ascend into the heavens, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God, I will sit also upon the Mount of the Congregation on the sides of the north. I will ascend above the height of the clouds."

This ascending of the Assyrian "into the heavens" implies some particular heavens in which he is not previously to his ascent; and that it is the Assyrian of the Latter Days is clear from the testimony that Jehovah says, "I will break the Assyrian in my land, and upon my mountains tread him under foot: then shall his yoke depart from off Israel, and his burden depart from off their shoulders."

This has never happened yet to the Assyro-Babylonian power, and must therefore be in the future. This saying of Lucifer in his heart is no other than "the evil thought" which is to come into the mind of Gog, impelling him to the invasion of the Holy Land, and the siege of Jerusalem, which will be taken.

He is now beyond the limits of the Roman earth, and consequently not in its heavens, which are the heavens of Daniel's Fourth Beast. But he says, "I will ascend into them, and above the height of the clouds," or powers of those heavens; that is, he will become the Imperial Chief of the Four-Beast dominion, and exalt himself above Israel, with Zion for his throne.

In Isaiah 24:23, it is written, "Then the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed, when the Lord of hosts shall reign on Mount Zion, and in Jerusalem."

If these words be construed literally, the expression is unintelligible; but if interpreted as the political heavens, the civil and ecclesiastical rulers of their former polity,--"the army of the high ones on high, and kings of the earth upon the earth,"--the saying is full of propriety and force.

In Isaiah 34:4, it is declared, that "All the army of the heavens shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled up like a scroll; and all their armies shall fall down, and the leaf falleth off from the vine, and as a falling fig from a fig-tree."

Here also, if taken literally, it is not easy to affix a definite idea to the word heavens as contradistinguished from the hosts of the heavens: but waiving this, it is not possible that the celestial luminaries should fall down to this earth, which is not half their size; and yet to fall down can mean nothing else: whereas, if taken for rulers and the systems in which they rule, the figure is clear and beautiful.

But Isaiah 60, is quite conclusive on the point: here Zion, the metropolis of the Jewish kingdom at its restoration, is said to be the light to which the Gentiles shall come: and in his address to her the prophet saith,

"The sun shall no more be thy light by day, neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee; but the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy gods for thy glory: thy sun shall no more go down, neither shall thy moon withdraw itself, for the Lord shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended."

These are expressions which it is impossible to construe of any thing but of that state of the Jewish kingdom when the Lord Jesus shall be both King and Priest upon its throne; particularly the pronoun thy, limiting the sun spoken of to be that which exclusively pertained to the land of Judea.

Zion's sun and moon shall no more suffer eclipse when Jesus reigns upon his father David's throne in her midst: but now, "if one look into her land, behold darkness and sorrow, and the light is darkened in the heavens thereof."

These are her days of mourning, in which her glory is eclipsed by the intervention of the orb of the nations between her and her glorious DAY-STAR, or Sun of Righteousness, who shall soon arise upon her with healing in his wings.

The filling of a kingdom, then, with darkness, is the consequence of its political luminaries being eclipsed; and so long as this darkness continues, they are days of mourning for that kingdom: but let the darkness pass away, from whatever cause, and its sun, moon, and stars shine forth in all their glory, and its people pass into that national condition indicated in the words applied to Zion, "the days of thy mourning shall be ended."

Another striking illustration of the Scripture use of the heavens and their luminaries as prophetic symbols, occurs in Ezekiel 32:7, in a prophecy of the overthrow of Egypt's kingdom under the last of the Pharaohs.

"In extinguishing thee, saith the Lord Jehovah, I will cover the heavens, and I will eclipse their stars: with a cloud I will cover the sun, and the moon shall not give her light. All the luminaries of the brightness in the heavens shall be eclipsed over thee, and I will set darkness over thy land."

This passage is the only one in the entire prophecy that has not been literally fulfilled; and there exists no apparent reason for separating this verse from the whole context, and for not interpreting it as of Egypt's political heavens, and therefore as having been fulfilled equally with the remainder when Pharaoh's kingdom was absorbed into the Assyro-Babylonish empire.

Joel's prophecy is another illustration of the propheto-symbolic style. He takes his stand-point upon Jehovah's land eight hundred years before the birth of Jesus, and notes down certain striking political phenomena which he observes in the field of vision, whose horizon is bounded by "the Great and Terrible Day of Jehovah."

The things he observes pertain to Israel's fortunes from the invasion of Judea by "a strong nation," which he, Daniel, and Jeremiah, liken to "a great lion,"--Nebuchadnezzar--to that last and approaching overflow of the Lord's land by the "the northern army" of the Assyro-Babylonian Gog of the Latter Days. The points of his prophecy are,

1. The overthrow of the kingdom of David by Nebuchadnezzar;
2. A remoter eclipse of the luminaries of Judah's heavens;
3. A gathering of the nations against Jerusalem to battle, on the approach of the Day of the Lord;
4. The extinction of the Gentile heavens forever, and the breaking up of their world in the Day of the Lord;
5. The pouring out of the Spirit upon Israel; and,
6. The consecration of Jerusalem, and the redemption of the Holy Land and people from Gentile oppression for ever.

1. The overthrow of the kingdom and throne of David by Nebuchadnezzar is the burden of the first and second chapters to the eleventh verse inclusive.

His hosts which are also styled the Lord's army, bring a day of Jehovah upon Judah, which is styled "a destruction from the Almighty," whose operations are thus described:

"They shall run to and fro in the city; they shall run upon the wall, they shall climb up upon the houses; they shall enter in at the windows like a thief. The earth shall quake before them; the heavens shall tremble: the sun and the moon shall be dark, and the stars shall withdraw their shining; and the Lord shall utter his voice

before his army; for his camp is very great: for he is strong that executeth the word: for the Day of the Lord is great and very terrible, and who can abide it?"

This was literally accomplished when the Jewish polity was suppressed, and the kings, princes, priests, and nobles, were carried captive to Babylon for seventy years.

2. After this overthrow of David's kingdom, from which it never recovered, Joel predicted another break up of Judah's Commonwealth "before the great and terrible day of the Lord should come."

We learn this from the way Peter, on the day of Pentecost, handled Joel's prophecy of the outpouring of the Spirit upon Israel. He shows that Jehovah contemplated an early and a latter rain of the Spirit in the words of Joel 2:28, 29--a rain in the last days; and a rain in the latter days, already eighteen hundred years apart.

Peter did not say that the Pentecostian outpouring was a complete fulfillment of Joel's prediction, but that it was spoken of by him in the words he quoted. This was the Spirit's own interpretation of what he meant by Joel; and the partial application of it to the last days of the Mosaic Economy gave to that generation "the earnest of an approaching day of the Lord upon it.

After seventy years' captivity, Judah's Commonwealth, but not David's throne, was re-established, under Gentile supremacy. This was its condition in Peter's day. Its sun, moon, and stars illumined its heavens, in which unrighteousness dwelt incorporate in its powers.

Peter took up the prophecy of Joel as the burden of his proclamation of "judgment to come" upon the State; and upon the "cursed children, who had forsaken the right way," and become again entangled in the pollutions of the world from which they had escaped in obeying the truth which he ministered to the circumcision.

He urged upon them a then approaching epoch of "wonders and signs," which should bring destruction upon them and their country "before that great and terrible day of the Lord," in which Joel foretold the redemption of Israel, and the punishment of their oppressors. Nevertheless, he promised deliverance to all Jews who should call upon the name of the Lord; for at that time he knew nothing of the salvation of Gentiles in the great and terrible day.

The "wonders" and "signs" of this Mosaic Epoch are some of them indicated by the Great Prophet in this message he delivered to the people. "There shall be great earthquakes in places, and famines, and pestilences, (as) portents; and great signs also of heaven shall there be."

These portents were to occur before the encompassing of Jerusalem with armies, (which was the immediate sign of its approaching desolation, and the manifestation of the "great signs of heaven." Immediately after the desolation of the city these signs would be visible; for then Jesus said, "The sun should be darkened, and the moon should not give her light, and the stars should fall from the heavens."

These were the signs that indicated to the believers of that generation that Messiah the Prince, as Son of Man, though invisible, had come (see Matthew 10:23) with his armies, and taken vengeance upon his murderers, and burned up their city--Matthew 22:7. Thus, in "the tribulation of those days," which were "days of vengeance," when there was "great distress in the land, and wrath upon this people," as their prophets had foretold, the words of Joel were germinantly fulfilled, and Zion's days of widowhood and mourning established.

Haggai speaks of those days as well as of the days to come. "Thus saith the Lord: Yet once, it is a little while and I will shake the heavens and the earth, and the sea and the dry land;" which signifies, as is explained in the next sentence, "And I will shake all the nations."

The earnest of this is found in the overthrow of Judah by the Romans, five hundred and eighty years after Haggai prophesied; the full measure when "the desires of all the nations shall come," and the Lord shall "overthrow the throne of kingdoms (an imperial throne), and shall destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations;" and the anti-typical Zerubbabel shall be "as a signet," or ensign, in Jerusalem--Haggai 2:22. Paul quotes from this prediction, and points out its germinant fulfillment, by applying it to one particular system of things to which the Hebrew Christians, to whom he was writing, were politically related.

Having reminded them that the Mosaic Economy under which they lived, had "waxed old and was ready to vanish away," he speaks of its removal after this wise: "He whose voice shook Sinai hath promised now,

saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also the heaven." And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that may be shaken, as of things that have been fulfilled, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain.

Wherefore we taking a kingdom (not having received) which cannot be shaken, let us, &c." The heaven and the earth then shaken was one of "the heavens" spoken of by Haggai. Jehovah began with Judah's heaven and earth, and will end with those of all other nations. This is his order of judgment, as it is written by Paul, "Tribulation and anguish upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile." The tribulation and anguish of the Jew is rapidly closing, while that of the Gentile has notably begun.

In the Day of the Lord upon David's throne, Nebuchadnezzar was His sword; in the Day of the Lord upon the murderers of His Son, the Romans were His sword; but in the Day of the Lord upon the Gentiles, Judah and Israel in the hand of the Son of David, will be His battle-axe and weapons of war to "destroy the strength of their kingdoms."

The Day of the Lord upon His Son's murderers was "the Day of God" earnestly desired by the apostles and their brethren, who were suffering persecution at the hands of the Jewish power--a day, (di ain,) through which their inflamed heavens would be dissolved, and "pass away with a great noise." Peter says Paul spake of these things in all his epistles; that is, of the dissolution with judgment of "the heavens and earth which are now;" namely, those existing when Peter wrote, which, while I am writing, are no where to be found extant.

3. "I will shake the heavens and the earth--I will shake all the nations; and the desires of all the nations shall come, saith Jehovah;" and "the powers of the heavens shall be shaken," repeated the Lord Jesus. This was to accompany the introduction of the desires of all the nations.

The shaking was to precede, and be contemporary with the coming Abrahamic blessing, but did not attend Christ's birth, for he was born in a period of profound peace. The shaking at the destruction of Jerusalem, nor any national convulsions since did at all result in his manifestation, or the coming of any object of Gentile desire.

Hence, then, the prophecies of Haggai, Joel, and Jesus, look to the future for their full terminal accomplishment, and as Israel has no longer any heavens and earth to be shaken, the shaking predicted must relate to other heavens, which can therefore only be the heaven of the Gentiles.

The conclusion, then, to which we are led is this: that in the Gentile world in its heavens and earth, will be displayed wonders and signs, attended with "blood and fire, and pillars of smoke," or bloody and destructive war; and that their sun shall be turned into darkness, and their moon into blood, as Judah's has been; that is, that its existing supreme secular sovereignty shall be set aside by the overshadowing of a new power, whose vengeance will be disastrous to the ecclesiastical orders; and that all this shall come to pass "before the great and the terrible day of the Lord come."

Synchronous with these "wonders" and "signs" is the period alluded to by the Lord Jesus in these words, saying, "And there shall be signs in sun, and moon, and stars; and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity; the

sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them for fear and anticipation of the things coming upon the habitable; for the powers of the heavens shall be shaken.

And afterwards shall they (who pierced him--the Jews, then hereafter in Palestine) see the Son of Man coming in cloud, with power and great glory."

This period is a time of great trouble, but not the greatest that will be.

The coming of the Son of Man is the end of one period, and the beginning of another. His appearing is the standing up of "Michael, the great Commander," who stands for Judah. Before this standing up there is a period of great trouble; but after the appearing is "the great and terrible day of the Lord," when "there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation to that same time;" it will also be "the time of Jacob's trouble, but he shall be saved out of it;" for "at that time Daniel's people shall be delivered ... and many of them who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake."

The nations have already entered the pre-adventual time of trouble, in which the "wonders" and "signs" in the sun, moon, and stars of the Gentile heavens, and "the blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke," upon the habitable, are being displayed to the eye of enlightened faith, for whose benefit they are alone revealed. The work is begun which Joel did foresee, as well as the apostle John.

"The nations are angry;" but not yet so enraged as they will be before "the wrath of the Lord God Almighty comes." "Secret diplomacy," against which there is so much indignation in Europe, is effectually at work upon "the kings of the earth and of the whole habitable;" and will not intermit its labors until it have involved them all in war, the crowning event of which will be the rushing of the roaring sea and waves-- "the upwakened nations"- -into the Valley of Jehoshaphat, where they will be encountered and rolled back with terrible disaster by the mighty ones of God.

4. The sun and the moon having been darkened, and the stars withdrawn their shining, Joel tells us that "Jehovah also (the Lion of Judah) shall roar out of Zion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem; and the heavens and the earth shall shake;" that is, the Gentile heavens and earth; for the declaration is offset with the comforting assurance that, in the midst of this shaking, "the Lord will be the shelter of his people, and the strength of the children of Israel."

He will not shake them, but "the powers of the heavens" that oppress them. "So," says Joel, that is, by the Lord uttering his voice from Jerusalem in the midst of this shaking of the nations, "shall ye know that I am the Lord your God dwelling in Zion, my holy mountain: THEN shall Jerusalem be holy, and there shall no foreigners (or Gentile powers) pass through her any more."

5. The "throne of kingdoms" being overthrown, and the "strength of the kingdoms of the nations" destroyed, by this shaking of the Gentile heavens and earth, Israel shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord their God that hath dealt thus wondrously in their deliverance.

"And it shall come to pass afterward," saith the Lord by Joel, "that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh." Ezekiel also testifies to the same thing as to occur after their deliverance. He declares that "the Lord will take them from among the nations, and gather them out of all countries, and will bring them unto their own land."

And "then" give them a new heart, and put a new spirit in them, and will take away the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh: and continues, "I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them."

And in his prophecy of Gog's overthrow, he informs us that when this is accomplished, the promise of bringing again the captivity of Jacob, and having mercy upon the whole house of Israel, will be carried into effect; and he concludes the passage by saying, "Neither will I hide my face from them any more: for I have poured out my spirit upon the house of Israel, saith the Lord God."

The difference between this outpouring of the Spirit and that of Pentecost is, that the latter was only upon a few of Judah's Commonwealth who believed: whereas the former will be an outpouring upon the whole twelve tribes of Israel engrafted into their own olive tree again.

6. The thrones of the Gentiles being cast down by the shaking of their heavens and earth, their high ones on high punished, Israel delivered, the whole nation engrafted and anointed, and the crucified King of the Jews in Zion upon his throne--the Gospel preached to Abraham will have become an accomplished fact.

The City of the Great King, "the Jerusalem that is exalted, and the mother of us all," will be holiness; and, saith Joel, "Judah shall dwell for ever, and Jerusalem from generation to generation. For I will cleanse their blood that I have not cleansed; even I, the I SHALL BE dwelling in Zion."

In conclusion, this article will have illustrated the scriptural import of the symbolic style of speech to some extent, ignorance of which has led to most of the absurdities of Millerism, Turnerism, Fifty-Fourism, &c., and of not a few of the "orthodox" interpretations of the sure prophetic word besides.

The well-intentioned people who hold on to these fatal errors ought to know that the Bible is not a revelation of geological and meteorological phenomena; and that God's signs are not in the atmosphere, or in astronomical appearances. To take cognizance of these as indications of the fate of nations and other kingdoms, and of the appearing of the Lord of Glory, is a relic of that paganism which has been transmitted to our generation by the Romano-Babylonish Mother of all the abominations of Anti-Christendom.

The idolatrous Greeks and Romans used to prognosticate human calamities by the flights of birds, eclipses, comets, atmospherical darkenings, and so forth, to the dismay of all that believed in them. But these are not God's signs.

He says concerning them, "Learn not the way of the nations, and be not dismayed AT THE SIGNS OF THE HEAVENS for the nations are dismayed at them; for the customs of the peoples are vain."

The darkened state of the New England atmosphere in 1780, the falling of meteoric stones which is limited to neither time nor place, the star-like pyrotechnics of Nov. 1833; Aurora Borealis, the redness of the sun in a fog, and other phenomena of a like character, are all referable to specific electrical conditions of the earth and air.

And besides, God's signs are not in the heavens of the New World, physical or political. His signs are in the Heavens of the Habitable--the political heavens of Daniel's Fourth Beast, whose dominion does not shine over the American Continent.

Signs in these republican heavens would not indicate the fall of kingdoms beyond the Atlantic, and the Lord's appearing in Jerusalem; they would only indicate something to happen in relation to the political constitution of these States.

The signs of God are in the heavens to be affected by the events they signify or represent; and there is no sign ever in these which he has not previously declared to be such, and the signification of which he hath not also revealed.

As we have seen, the subjects discoursed of show that the luminaries to be darkened are the sun, moon, and stars of a particular system of nations, connected with Jehovah's people Israel, and that, too, for a long series of ages; not for a few fleeting hours in Yankeedom, to the temporary inconvenience of its industrious artizans!

Alas! how the people are deceived by the ignorance that is in them concerning the purpose of God. Not knowing his revealed purpose, they understand not the signs he has communicated "to his servants," indicative of its approaching fulfillment.

This comes of not knowing the gospel of the kingdom "which he has promised afore by his prophets in their Holy Writings;" and so long as they put this from them and refuse to be instructed as babes, they will continue to perpetuate the most eccentric foolishness, which will ever and anon expose them to the pity due to those who are bewitched, and grope for the wall in darkness visible, crying out, "I see, I see!"

The truth is, that the signs of the New Testament can only be understood by reference to the prophets, and an historical acquaintance with the past. The meaning of the term "the Times of the Gentiles" must be sought for in

Daniel, to which it refers. Ignorance of these disqualifies a person for discerning the signs of their approaching conclusion.

In like manner, the meaning of the signs in the sun, and moon, and stars, mentioned by the Lord Jesus, his apostles, and in the Apocalypse, must be sought for in the writings of Moses and the prophets.

Brother John Thomas, December 28, 1854