

## Prophetic Figures of Speech

How do we know when words are literal or figurative?

The Bible should be understood literally whenever possible. But when a statement appears to be contrary to our experience, knowledge, or clear teaching of truth, we can anticipate that a figure of speech is present. Often, in prophetic writings and Jesus' teachings, words were replaced with other, richer words to emphasize or illustrate a point or teaching. Jesus used this technique to warn the disciples against false teaching. *"Watch out and **beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees**"* (Matthew 16:6). The word leaven did not fit with Pharisees and Sadducees in their minds, so they misunderstood His meaning. Therefore He said, *"How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees'. Then they understood that He did not say to beware of **the leaven** of bread, but of **the teaching** of the Pharisees and Sadducees"* (Matthew 16:11-12).

One straightforward use of this kind of figure of speech, using the sun, moon, and stars, is found in Genesis 37. God made and controls the cosmos and the nations with their head, governors, and representatives in a similar fashion. It is natural then that the Spirit uses the heavens' lights to represent the nations' leaders. They represent Joseph's father, mother, and eleven brothers in Joseph's dreams. Joseph has two dreams recorded in Genesis 37. In the first, sheaves of grain cut by each of his brothers bow down to Joseph's sheave. His brothers understand that it describes their bowing down to Joseph. His second dream is even more troubling to the brothers. *"Lo, I have had still another dream; and behold, **the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me**"* (Genesis 37:9). When Joseph told his father and brothers, Jacob became angry and said, *"What is this dream that you have had? Shall I and your mother and your brothers actually come to bow ourselves down before you to the ground?"* (Genesis 37:10). In this passage, the sun represents the father, the moon the mother, and the stars the brothers. In other prophetic passages, the sun represents the ruler or king, the moon the princes and councilors, and the stars the appointed leaders throughout the city, country, or kingdom.

We read the same figurative use of the sun, moon, and stars in Ezekiel's description of Egypt's conquest by Babylon. ***"And when I extinguish you, I will cover the heavens and darken their stars; I will cover the sun with a cloud And the moon will not give its light. All the shining lights in the heavens I will darken over you And will set darkness on your land,"*** Declares the Lord GOD. *"I will also trouble the hearts of many peoples when I bring your destruction among the nations, into lands which you have not known. I will make many peoples appalled at you, and their kings will be horribly afraid of you when I brandish My sword before them; and they will tremble every moment, every man for his own life, on the day of your fall"* (Ezekiel 32:7-10).

Most of us have witnessed the panic that consumes people when the lights go out in a crowded building. The ancients did not understand the mechanics of an eclipse of the sun or moon. When one occurred, it caused great anxiety and panic. Similarly, as light provides confidence, a ruling government's guidance, whether good or bad, gives a degree of security to the population. When that government is removed, its citizens' lives are disrupted, causing anxiety and panic within the population. Other nations that interact with them are also affected both economically and politically. When the future cannot be seen, the darkness of uncertainty is just like having the lights turned off.

As nations rise and fall, one after another, we see the prophetic use of the darkening or covering of the sun, moon, and stars used to illustrate the turmoil that will occur.

When Babylon had served its purpose, Isaiah said that it too would be destroyed. *"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 forth their light; The sun will be dark when it rises And the moon will not shed its light.** Thus I will punish the world for its evil And the wicked for their iniquity; I will also put an end to the arrogance of the proud And abase the haughtiness of the ruthless"* (Isaiah 13:9-11).

For every disaster that comes, rulers of nations and their peoples are panicked until a recovery plan is prepared and implemented. We have seen this play out in 2020 with a pandemic. How much greater will be the darkening and panic when the Lord returns, and the nations find out that there is nothing they can do. Are you ready for the physical sun, moon, and stars to be replaced forever by the brightness of His glory?