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**Adams, Edward**

***The Stars Will Fall from Heaven: Cosmic Catastrophe  
in the New Testament and Its World***

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This fine monograph by Edward Adams examines the motif of cosmic catastrophe in ancient apocalyptic literature and related writings. It takes as its point of departure N. T. Wright's view that the language of cosmic disaster in the early Jewish apocalyptic texts serves as a metaphor for expected sociopolitical change. The New Testament writers merely followed convention in this matter and indeed reflected Jesus' own views. Whenever Jesus is reported to have used such language, as for example in Mark 13:24–27 (+ par.), he was referring to the coming destruction of Jerusalem and other radical historical changes, not the end of the world in a grand, cosmological sense.

For Adams, the literary evidence fails to support this position. Instead, the major New Testament passages that contain the language of catastrophe refer to the anticipation for some form of cosmic destruction, a notion also in step with the Jewish apocalyptic literature of the era. Specifically, Adams argues that Mark 13:24–27 (+ par.) plausibly may be read as anticipating cosmic destruction, that this destruction is definitely envisioned in Heb 12:25–28 and 2 Pet 3:5–13, and that the data of Rev 6:12–17 “either prefigure or initiate the passing away of the present heaven and earth” of 21:1.

The book's first three chapters address literature from sources other than the New

Testament. Chapter 1 deals with the “Old Testament.” It discusses the story of the flood, as well as the passages that foresee an end to the created world in the prophetic literature and elsewhere (Gen 8:22; Pss 46:1–3; 102:25–27; Isa 51:6). The evidence seems to be inconclusive. In any case, Adams notes, “Old Testament usage is not necessarily determinative for New Testament usage” (51). More important is the subject of the next chapter, Jewish apocalyptic and related literature. Here Adams finds conclusive evidence for a belief in the end of the created world in 1 Enoch, Pseudo-Sophocles frag. 2, Jubilees, 1QH xi [*olim* iii] 19–36, the Testament of Moses, the Testament of Job, Pseudo-Philo’s L.A.B., 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, the Apocalypse of Zephaniah, 2 Enoch, and the Sibylline Oracles (3.75–92; 4; 5.179–285, 435–531). While the logic of these texts does not demand that the world be sundered into absolute nothingness, there is a general sense that cosmic destruction will be followed by cosmic re-creation. Chapter 3 examines parallel ideas in the classical literature. From his survey of the relevant literature, Adams concludes that notions of universal destruction were part of the larger Greco-Roman tradition, despite important differences with the Jewish texts. Moreover, while Platonic and Aristotelian circles favored the indestructibility of the universe, Stoic and Epicurean doctrines incorporated ideas of cosmic demise.

The book’s next four chapters discuss the aforementioned New Testament passages that contain the language of cosmic catastrophe. The fourth chapter addresses Mark 13:24–27 (+ par.). Adams approaches the passage with the requisite attention to its larger context, that is, the eschatological discourse of Mark 13. He contends that the imagery, motifs, and sequence of events in Mark 13:24–27 are better understood as part of a process leading to cosmic destruction, all the more so in light of the evidence of the Jewish apocalyptic literature. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss Heb 12:25–28 and 2 Pet 3:5–13. For the author of Hebrews, 12:25–28 represents the enunciation of his earlier assertion that creation will perish (1:10–12). As for the author of 2 Peter, he clearly envisions an end by fire. In chapter 7 Adams argues that the catastrophic events of Rev 6:12–17 either adumbrate the new heaven and earth of 21:1 or represent the beginning of the process that culminates in it, depending on one’s view of the sequence that is assumed by 20:1–10.

As well as dealing decisively with the issue of cosmic catastrophe, which informs several areas of New Testament scholarship, Adams’s book sheds light on several matters relevant to the study of ancient apocalypticism. For example, the concept of the eschatological restoration of the singularity of creation, which requires the abrogation of the interregal historical age, is a fundamental axiom of apocalypticism. As such, Adams’s observations on cosmic-catastrophic language in the Jewish apocalyptic texts are consistent with the underlying philosophical basis of the ideology as it is derived from other aspects of the literature. Some readers might find that his discussion of these texts is limited in its dialogue with scholarship, but Adams’s aim is to demonstrate a consistent

pattern, not to provide the last word on every example of cosmic destruction. This might explain why Dan 2:44–45 is overlooked in his survey; alternately, Adams might understand the passage to refer to a this-worldly event. Still, the language of Dan 2 is reflected at points in Mark 13:24–27, and of course the role of Dan 7:13 in the Markan verses is not insignificant.

Adams also briefly examines his topic in the context of environmental ethics. Over the past generation, the intersection of apocalypticism and environmentalism has come to inform a surprising number of issues, including the stance Jews, Christians, and Muslims ought to take regarding the present environmental crisis. “Biblical” (i.e., nonsecular) apocalypticism and environmental responsibility simply may be incompatible on any level, but Adams suggests otherwise. The subject is highly nuanced—and one to which Adams cannot do justice within the context of the book under review. His interesting and fertile ideas, which are grounded on a solid understanding of the ancient sources rather than wishful thinking, deserve their own forum. One hopes that he will dedicate a future study to the subject.

This is a clearly argued, well-written book that treats the sources fairly and intelligently. It should prove highly valuable to those interested in New Testament eschatology as well as scholars of early Jewish and Christian apocalypticism.