

WHAT IS NEW ABOUT THE NEW HEAVEN  
AND THE NEW EARTH? A THEOLOGY OF CREATION  
FROM REVELATION 21 AND 2 PETER 3

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The message of hope answering the many cries for help throughout the centuries since Christ's ascension finds perhaps its fullest expression in the words of Revelation 21. John's vision of the new heaven and the new earth provided an escape for those enduring persecution for their commitment to Jesus. Though their life may end, they could hold fast to the knowledge that a better life awaited them at the fulfillment of God's plan for this world. Even today this vision exceeds the limits of our imagination as we anticipate the beauty and joy that will be revealed when the Lord makes his home on the new earth. The new Jerusalem is described in majestic terms. It stretches our capacity to visualize the colors, materials, and precision of the craftsmanship. We have been told explicitly of its likeness, but yet we fully expect the reality of it to take our breath away. Undoubtedly the same was true of John's original audience. When they heard the description they had no memory of anything to which this vision might compare. It could only be imagined. The vision helped to inspire the ecstasy of hope, a hope that could bear the realities of broken dreams, burned homes and violent bloodshed.<sup>1</sup>

Apocalyptic literature played a crucial role in the life of the early Church. It gave hope to those in the midst of trial. It gave strength to those weighed down by discouragement and fatigue. It provided security when it seemed as though the world was about to end. The careful symbolism that depicted the rise and fall of nations and kings pointed to the power of a provident God who controlled the course of history. Of course, deciphering these symbols has given commentators difficulty for centuries. The visions of Daniel and John still divide Biblical scholars worldwide. The debates rage as modern-day prophets attempt to read the signs of the times and predict the end of the world.

In the midst of these debates, and because so many people wish to distance themselves from them, I fear several essential elements of apocalyptic

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of a beautiful place in which to live ("The New Jerusalem: People as Place, Not Place for People," *NovT* 24/3 [1987] 254–264). It symbolizes the purity, beauty, and unending pleasure of dwelling in communion with God. The new Jerusalem is a vision of release from the growing persecution and fear that leads to silence into the freedom of unfettered fellowship in the very presence of the Lord.

literature have been forgotten or at least overlooked. Often interpreters seem to meld apocalyptic into simple prophetic, forgetting that images in the vision are sometimes meant to symbolize rather than represent the details of an event.<sup>2</sup> It is with just such a problem in mind that I am forced to ask, “What is new about the new heaven and the new earth?” Does John, and did Isaiah before him, mean that God will create a new heaven and earth *ex nihilo*? Or does this language symbolize a political or spiritual event instead of a physical event? Will the new earth be a reproduction of the original creation, or will it somehow be a renewal of this present earth? How are we to understand the passages that speak of a new heaven and a new earth?

#### I. PRESUPPOSITIONS

One of the most difficult aspects of interpreting apocalyptic literature is attempting to separate what one expects the passage to say from what the passage actually says. I say this is difficult because of the symbolic nature of apocalyptic and the impossibility of reaching an interpretive neutrality or objectivity as a beginning point for interpretation. The symbolism opens apocalyptic to many possible applications and perhaps even many temporal interpretations. (Though each of the seven churches in Revelation had its own historical problem, they all could hear the same apocalypse with their context in mind.) When we attempt to interpret an apocalypse we also bring a host of expectations from other parts of Scripture about what the future holds.

<sup>2</sup> I do not mean here to portray apocalypse as somehow unrelated to prophecy. On the contrary, though apocalypse does not always make use of a prophetic concern for repentance I believe apocalypse is a specific type of prophecy. It is well within the category of prophetic literature but occupies a place of its own due to its specific use of imagery and its unique revelatory method. Thus John’s visions can be called both “apocalypse” (Rev 1:1) and “prophecy” (1:3; 22:7, 10). The categories become a bit imprecise when applied to a Christian apocalypse like Revelation (Revelation is presented as epistolary and is not pseudonymous). Certain elements in Revelation, however, do remain as consistent with the apocalyptic genre, distinguishing it from other types of prophecy. The primary distinction I wish to make here is simply that though apocalyptic literature does depict future events, it does so through the use of symbolic language that is representative of rather than identical with reality. Though some prophetic literature might also use such symbols, a simpler form of prophecy would state the historical events as the prophet saw them occurring in the future. Apocalypse makes extensive use of symbols and images to make the description have a stronger visual and emotional impact on the audience. This draws nothing away from the reality of the events in the vision. The supernatural guides in apocalyptic describe events the recorder believes will take place. But such symbolism does mean that we must approach apocalyptic visions with caution, allowing them to be representative of supernatural as well as natural events that may not be obvious from the symbol. Such interpretive openness guards against the abuse of symbolic language made by those who wish to calculate and predict the time and place of the events of the day of the Lord. This open hermeneutic is what G. E. Ladd refers to as a combination of the preterist and futurist interpretations (*A Theology of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974] 621–622). A great deal of attention has been devoted to the subject of apocalypse as genre recently. For a good introduction to some of the scholarly debate on this issue cf. several articles in *Semeia* 14: *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (1979) and *Semeia* 36: *Early Christian Apocalypticism: Genre and Social Setting* (1986). Also see D. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 107–121, 274–288; “Intertextuality and the Genre of the Apocalypse,” *SBLSP* (1991) esp. pp. 159–160.

This dilemma causes problems for interpreters who wish to remain literal in their interpretation, representing meaning as the product of authorial intent in the historical and grammatical context. At many points apocalyptic literature defies the normal use of history and grammar. Nevertheless I believe we can still discover some sense of how apocalypse was to be understood in its day and how it can be interpreted and appreciated today. In order to do this we must first acknowledge that interpreting the various visions revealed in apocalypse means allowing them to remain visionary. When we say that we wish to maintain a literal hermeneutic, we are simply saying that we are attempting to interpret a passage according to its intent, literary style or genre, and grammatical structure. While apocalyptic literature does intend to convey physical realities, they may not be the same realities represented in the vision. This is obvious in some apocalyptic passages where the vision is explained and reference is made explicit (e.g. Daniel 7–8). When visions are not explained we cannot assume that they are any less visionary, nor should the symbols of the vision be treated in a nonsymbolic manner.

With regard to how one should treat the visions of the new heaven and the new earth in Revelation, commentators are somewhat split. Some have interpreted the vision as physically representative of the planet earth and the sky above it.<sup>3</sup> Others see it as a vision of political and spiritual import, with reference to physical realities being secondary if at all.<sup>4</sup> As will be seen below, this issue becomes even more complex when 2 Peter 3 is brought into the conversation. The difference of opinion may seem immaterial if left as simply a debate about semantics. I have recently been compelled, however, to consider the question again from an ethical standpoint. If this earth on which we live is going to be completely destroyed, as many evangelicals believe it is, then we have little more responsibility to it than to act as good stewards of the resources God has given us. But if this world has a future in God's plan, being renewed rather than re-created *ex nihilo*, then perhaps we have a much greater responsibility than to merely act as good managers.

<sup>3</sup> R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (Edinburgh, 1920) 2.204–205; J. Fekkes, "Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions in the Book of Revelation: Visionary Antecedents and their Development," *JSNTSup* 93 (Sheffield, 1994) 228–229; M. Rissi, "The Future of the World: An Exegetical Study of Revelation 19:11–22:15," *SBT* 23 (Naperville: Allen, 1966) 54–57.

<sup>4</sup> G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper, 1966) 262–266; J. M. Court, *Myth and History in the Book of Revelation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979) 154 ff.; *Revelation* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1994) 72–73; W. J. Dumbrell, *The End of the Beginning: Revelation 21–22 and the Old Testament* (Homebush West: Lancer, 1985) 166–174; L. Morris, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 236–239; D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (London, 1964) 280 ff.; J. P. M. Sweet, *Revelation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979) 297; H. B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951) 274–276; R. W. Wall, *Revelation* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991) 247. I. T. Beckwith (*The Apocalypse of John* [New York: Macmillan, 1919] 749–751) leans toward renovation of creation but makes it clear that John's apocalyptic style and vision make him unconcerned with details (cf. G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972] 275–276).

While I do not think of myself as an environmentalist, I must admit that they are concerned about the right things. Too often this issue is passed off by Christians as a secular or liberal concern, important only to radicals or new-age spiritualists. Evangelicals speak of it only occasionally, and then usually from the standpoint of a mere consumer. Further, when evangelicals do address creation's future it often sounds quite dismal. A. Truesdale, believing this is indicative of eschatology run rampant, states:

Theologians and scientists who are evangelicals should join hands to help lead evangelical Christianity out of its bondage to an errant eschatology. Dispensational premillennialism defrauds the creation of the gospel's promise that it too "will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21, NKJV). It also cripples the witness of evangelical faith in the world.<sup>5</sup>

While I am not ready to abandon the progressive nature of revelation or to relegate apocalyptic literature within the canon to a lower status than other passages (something Truesdale appears ready to do), I must agree that the exaggeration and galvanization surrounding this eschatology have led to inappropriate conclusions regarding the nature and scope of apocalyptic literature.<sup>6</sup> Indeed they have fostered an insensitivity, even neglect, toward passages teaching continuity between the old and new earth. Certainly these problems are being corrected, but as yet the corrections have not reached the people in the pews.<sup>7</sup>

As evangelicals we believe that God created this world, in whatever way we think that took place.<sup>8</sup> We should further believe that this world has a future in God's plan of redemption (Hos 2:14–23; Rom 8:18–25; Col 1:16–20).<sup>9</sup> If God cares enough about his creation to redeem it, how can we be apathetic, or merely economically inclined, toward it? With these presuppositions in mind, I am forced to reconsider the interpretation of passages believed to address the future of this earth and the beginning of the new earth. Of all people, evangelicals should be the first in line to teach how God's crea-

<sup>5</sup> A. Truesdale, "Last Things First: The Impact of Eschatology on Ecology," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 46/2 (June 1994) 119–120.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 118–119.

<sup>7</sup> Even Truesdale recognizes that the hyperdispensationalism he is arguing against no longer holds prominence in evangelical scholarship. But he rightly identifies it as entrenched in many churches. Perhaps what he calls "progressive dispensationalism" (*ibid.* 116) will eventually trickle down to the churches. But I cannot help wondering what will be the cost to creation and the evangelical reputation in the meantime.

<sup>8</sup> This study could be cut short by simply presenting a model of creation based on the view of God establishing order out of chaos in Genesis 1 rather than creating absolutely (cf. Dumbrell, *End*, esp. chap. 5). While I recognize that this view has great merit, and while I am especially attracted to its perception of the sea as representative of chaos, it is not widely accepted in evangelical circles. Since my intention is to address the more common belief of creation *ex nihilo* in both Genesis and Revelation (a belief that I too hold with regard to the Genesis narrative), I will focus more strictly on this viewpoint.

<sup>9</sup> For an excellent discussion of Christ's cosmic redemption see L. L. Helyer, "Cosmic Christology and Col 1:15–20," *JETS* 37 (June 1994) 235–246.

tion should be treated. What better way to demonstrate God's love for us than to show love for his creation, both human and nonhuman?

## II. REV 21:1–8

The passage that is most often used to describe the new heaven and new earth is found in Revelation 21. Here John draws on OT prophetic language to portray the final fulfillment of God's promise of the end times. He sees a vision of everything new and eternal. But to understand the newness described here, we must begin in Revelation 20 where the final judgment takes place: "And I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them" (Rev 20:11).<sup>10</sup> The "great white throne" judgment is the culmination of a series of judgments described throughout Revelation in the three visions of seven seals, trumpets and bowls (5:1–8:1; 8:2–11:19; 15:1–16:21). This throne activity follows the pattern of judgment described elsewhere in Scripture (Dan 7:9–10; Matt 25:31–46; Rom 14:10; 2 Cor 5:10) and by other apocalyptists (2 Esdr 7:31–44; *1 Enoch* 90:20–27). The primary point of interest for our discussion is the verb used to describe the activity of the earth and heaven in the presence of the One who is seated on the throne. John uses the verb *pheugō*, which generally means "to flee." This meaning seems especially appropriate in this passage since John goes on to state that "no place was found for them." It is extremely unlikely that John is making a metaphysical statement about the "non-eternity of matter."<sup>11</sup> Indeed such an interpretation would not be much of an encouragement to John's audience.<sup>12</sup> Instead John seems to be pointing to the comprehensiveness of the final judgment. This judgment addresses the living and the dead, even extending to the

<sup>10</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this article are taken from the NASB.

<sup>11</sup> A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993) 6.463.

<sup>12</sup> If one was to interpret this passage as a metaphysical statement, a host of problems arise. The first problem arises with the question, "What then is the new earth to be like?" If matter is futuristically noneternal (perhaps implying that it is somehow evil), does this mean that the new earth will not be a material reality? It appears as though resurrected bodies do have a physical existence (Luke 24:36–43) even though a transformation must take place (Phil 3:20–21). Certainly the new earth must similarly have a material existence. Obviously I am not attempting to argue for an eternality of matter similar to the Hellenistic belief that matter has always existed. Creation *ex nihilo* means that matter did have a beginning. My questions regard whether matter has an end, and what exactly that end may be. It does not appear to me from Scripture that the new heaven and earth are nonmaterial. Matter may be transformed in order to reverse the original curse, but it will not be eradicated. A second problem relates to what can be assumed about the author. If the author of this apocalypse is the same John who wrote the epistles of John, a belief many evangelicals like myself hold as highly probable, then at the very least it would be ironic for him to be making a statement about the noneternal future of matter. The author of 1 John argued vehemently against the docetic gnostics. They claimed that since matter was inherently evil and Jesus could not have been touched by any stain of evil, Jesus must have been a spirit-being without a physical body. John incessantly denies this by witnessing to the physical reality of the person Jesus. If the same John is writing here of the vision of the new heaven and new earth, surely he must be referring to something other than material reality "passing away."

personification of death itself (i.e. “death and Hades,” Rev 20:13–14). The point of the earth and heaven not finding a “place” symbolizes the fact that no one and nothing can hide from this judgment. The earth and heaven and all people and things will be judged before the great white throne of God. There is no escape.<sup>13</sup>

Following the vision of judgment, the sight of the new heaven and the new earth must have been awe-inspiring (21:1). This vision signified that all the consequences of original sin were vanquished. No longer would tears, death, mourning, crying, or pain plague God’s people (21:4), since the first things have ended. No longer will God’s people long to know him, for he will dwell in their midst. God makes it very clear that these will be revolutionary times when he says, “Behold, I am making all things new” (21:5). But even though this statement is somewhat reminiscent of the Genesis creation, does it necessarily mean that he is going to begin again from scratch?

Before we examine more closely what John’s meaning is in this passage, we must first discuss the issue of Biblical precedents for the vision. One can hardly get through a chapter of Revelation without discovering several allusions to OT visions and prophecies.<sup>14</sup> It should not surprise us that John reuses material from the OT since he is giving witness to the end times described by many prophets before him. In fact such allusions give his visions cohesion with both OT and NT prophecies, making it a climax to the hope of Christian believers familiar with the Scriptures. Without the use of some familiar language and symbols John’s audience could not have participated in the hope of the vision, nor could they have grasped its historical significance. Just as surely as John is addressing future history he is also relying on a familiarity with the context of the history of Israel and the brief history of Christianity.

Isaiah plays a prominent role throughout John’s visions and is especially pertinent for the vision of the new heaven and the new earth: “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind” (Isa 65:17). Jan Fekkes demonstrates quite convincingly that John in Rev 21:1 is following closely the Hebrew text of Isa 65:17a rather than the LXX, because of word order and the omission of the definite articles.<sup>15</sup> But identifying a possible source for the visionary language does little good in this instance, since it is unclear whether Isaiah means a renewal of creation or an absolutely new creation.<sup>16</sup> Precedence for the idea of the first heaven and first earth passing away may derive from 65:17b, but there is little similarity. A closer resemblance can be found in *1 Enoch* 91:16: “And the first heaven in it shall pass away, a [new] heaven [shall appear].” But since the earth is not mentioned in *1 Enoch* and there is still some question regarding John’s firsthand knowledge of that work, a

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Matt 25:31–46.

<sup>14</sup> The Biblical books of Daniel, Ezekiel and Isaiah play especially important roles in providing material for John’s visions.

<sup>15</sup> Fekkes, “Isaiah” 227–228.

<sup>16</sup> Fekkes clearly outlines the differences of opinion among modern scholars regarding the meaning of Isa 65:17; 66:22 (ibid. 228–230).

more compelling precedent may be found in the words of Jesus when he uses the expression “heaven and earth shall pass away” (Mark 13:31; Matt 5:18; 24:35; Luke 16:17).<sup>17</sup> What does John mean, however, when he describes the first heaven and earth “passing away”?

John’s explanation for the existence of a new heaven and new earth is given in Rev 21:1: “For the first heaven and the first earth passed away.” A cursory reading of this clause appears to indicate the death of the first heaven and first earth. The words “passed away” in our English translation are commonly used in conversation to describe the death of a person.<sup>18</sup> But the verb here, *aperchomai*, more frequently means “to depart, go away.” In John’s vision it simply means that the first heaven and earth had gone from his sight. He does not attempt to give any type of description of the destruction of the first heaven and earth (although elements of the three visions of seven seem to indicate the demise of certain portions of the creation).<sup>19</sup> Typical of apocalyptic style, John is simply conveying what he sees and what he does not see.<sup>20</sup> He is using symbolic language familiar to his audience to emphasize the fact that the final judgment is over. The point of his statement is not to tell his audience where the first heaven and earth have gone, or to give them details of the event. John is not saying that God has simply wiped everything away to begin again with nothing. Indeed it appears as though John still sees both God’s people and those who were cast into the lake of fire (21:7–8). He recognizes that a purging judgment has taken place that encompassed everything. But his point is not to recite a list of the physical elements that remain. Instead he is simply indicating to his audience that

<sup>17</sup> Jesus uses language very similar to what appears later in Revelation, but this does not clarify the issue for us since Jesus’ statements could be considered symbolic of the world order and since his references to “passing away” make it appear to take place sometime before the final judgment. This is particularly evident in Matt 24:35 where the description of heaven and earth passing away comes between a time of tribulation and a day of the gathering of the elect. Jesus does not seem to pinpoint a time of the passing away in this passage, but the entire context is the supernatural struggle between God and the forces of evil, and the purpose is to encourage preparation for the coming of the Son of Man. Luke parallels this event with the consummation of the kingdom of God (Luke 21:31–33), perhaps indicating a spiritual reality rather than physical (though certainly some physical changes would be expected).

<sup>18</sup> This appears to be exactly how L. S. Chafer understood them several decades ago when he added a secondary qualification in his explanation: “The present heaven and the present earth [will] pass away and disappear forever” (*Systematic Theology: Christology* [Dallas: Dallas Seminary, 1948] 5.362).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. P. S. Minear, *I Saw a New Earth: An Introduction to the Vision of the Apocalypse* (Washington: Corpus, 1968) 264–269. Minear argues that even the plagues of the visions are statements of spiritual warfare rather than descriptions of physical realities.

<sup>20</sup> For those who accept the classification of apocalyptic literature as representative of a distinct genre, one of the criteria used to identify a certain type of apocalypse is its use of visionary revelations. The revelation of apocalyptic material is generally mediated by a supernatural being who may or may not explain the significance of certain elements within the apocalypse. The one who records the vision typically describes everything that is seen in the vision but likewise may or may not understand its significance. In Revelation, John is the recorder, not the originator of the vision. As such, he simply writes whatever he sees and hears (Rev 1:1–3, 11, 19), unless he is told otherwise (10:4). Cf. D. E. Aune, “The Apocalypse of John and the Problem of Genre,” *Semeia* 36 (1986) 65–96; J. J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination* (New York: Crossroads, 1987) 2–11, 210–214.

the judgment has ended and God is beginning again. God is not making all things anew. He is making all things as new.<sup>21</sup>

This point can be further illustrated by John's statement that "the sea is no longer." On the surface this phrase seems to say that the waters of the sea no longer exist. But such an understanding is exactly what comes from confusing more precise prophetic prediction with apocalyptic vision. Certainly the sea of John's vision has disappeared, and it will not return. But let us not be too hasty in equating this sea with the Pacific, Atlantic, Mediterranean, or any other. We need only turn back a few chapters to Revelation 13 to discover a rather symbolic representation of the sea. Here we have two beasts coming "up out" of the sea and the earth. Some have taken this language to mean that the beasts (who are symbolic of kings or nations) will come in a specific manner or from a certain direction.<sup>22</sup> While I certainly admit that this is possible, John's vision seems to be more emphatic about the beasts actually coming from the depths of the sea and earth. John sees them coming "up out" (*ek* with *anabainō*) of the depths of the sea and the ground of the earth. The sea and the earth are their places of origin. This leads me to believe that the sea and earth are being used here symbolically to heighten the fact that the beasts are of ungodly origin. In other words, John uses the earth and the sea to represent opposition to God, who dwells in heaven.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> We perhaps have a reflection of this newness in our own spiritual rebirth. 2 Corinthians 5:17 makes it clear that we are new creatures in Christ, the old having passed away. Yet in the midst of this radical discontinuity, a context of continuity with the past is maintained (6:1–7:1). In the new heaven and new earth all evil will be removed, but we will not be separated totally from our history. The fact that our future existence is historical implies that past history will be remembered, even if only for the sake of rewarding the faithful (1 Cor 3:10–15). One possibility for understanding this newness is to see Revelation 20–22 as the final fulfillment of the new-covenant promises, especially those found in Ezekiel 36–44. The parallels between the chapters from these two books make it plausible that John used the vocabulary and imagery of new-covenant promises to describe his own vision. The implication of making such a comparison is discovered as we see newness as the old transformed. Instead of representing a time for starting over again, the new heaven and new earth are the climax to God's salvation in history and his salvation of history. Without an economic identification of God, such appellations as Alpha and Omega, beginning and end, and the Lamb would be meaningless (assuming that these are somehow eternally significant names). The new covenant, which was inaugurated through the blood of the Lamb (1 Cor 11:25), is an already/not-yet reality. The newness is visible but only vaguely, since we are yet living under the curse (2 Cor 5:17). Nevertheless this connectedness, this sense of continuity, of the history of Israel and the Church to the new heaven and new earth causes me to believe that, instead of a remaking of matter, the newness will be a release from the bondage of decay and death into the inheritance of the imperishable (Rom 8:18–25; 1 Cor 15:42 ff.). All the stains of original sin will finally be removed (Rev 21:4), and the abyss that has caused separation between God and his people will at last be dissipated (21:3). Then we shall see his face and live rejoicing in his presence (22:4).

<sup>22</sup> A. W. Wainwright provides us with a very useful survey of prominent theologians' interpretations of this and other apocalyptic visions throughout history (*Mysterious Apocalypse: Interpreting the Book of Revelation* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1993], esp. chaps. 2–6).

<sup>23</sup> Though the dragon (Satan) of chap. 12 does appear in a heavenly vision, this does not make him any less hostile toward God's plan. John's description of the dragon originating in heaven may simply be an indication of Satan's origin (cf. Isa 14:12–15?) or locus for activity (Job 1:6–12). It is not insignificant that John continues on to describe the war that caused Satan to be thrown down to the earth. The earth and sea appear to be the places where John sees evil dwelling. For a more comprehensive discussion of John's use of "earth" and "heaven" in the visions of Revelation see Minear, *I Saw a New Earth* 261–278.

Such an interpretation also fits well with John's placement of the harlot (who is quite obviously an instrument of evil) on "many waters" (17:1, 15). This would explain why John would no longer see the sea, or the first heaven and first earth, following the final judgment. The earth and sea have represented the places where God's opposition dwells. To conquer them God has sent forth judgments from heaven. After the final judgment is over, there is no longer any need for the representation of heaven as a place from which judgment emanates. Nor is there a need for representations of evil (earth and sea) since all evil has been vanquished. Evil does not have any more usefulness in God's plan for his elect. To say that "the sea is no longer" simply means that the old order/system and the power of evil have been removed from John's sight.<sup>24</sup> It is no longer a part of his vision for God's people. He now sees only God and his people dwelling together in a place that is cleansed from the stain of sin. The sea has disappeared along with the old heaven and the old earth. John now sees the new existence described by the symbols "new heaven" and "new earth."<sup>25</sup>

John has finally arrived at the climax of hope for his audience. They have listened to his description of several dismal images displaying the horrific force of evil and the mighty hand of God in judgment. Now he is able to soothe their ringing ears with a promise that God not only will address their present circumstances but also will finally correct every deviation from his original creation.<sup>26</sup> John has couched his message in celestial language because the enemies of God's people are of cosmic proportions. His words betray the nature of apocalypse, opening the imagination and renewing the heart of those whose future is uncertain and perhaps even bleak.

<sup>24</sup> Swete makes it clear that this is the primary reference as he states: "The Sea has disappeared, because in the mind of the writer it is associated with ideas that are at variance with the character of the New Creation" (*Apocalypse* 275). John is not unique with this idea since it does appear in other Jewish apocalyptic literature (*T. Levi* 4:1; *As. Mos.* 10:6; *Sib. Or.* 5:159, 160, 447); cf. Caird, *Commentary* 262–263; Charles, *Commentary* 204–205; Ladd, *Commentary* 276.

<sup>25</sup> Some (e.g. Beckwith, *Apocalypse* 750–751, and elaborations made by Swete, *Apocalypse* 275–276) have interpreted the disappearance of the sea from John's vision as a statement about the ancient culture's fear of the turmoil that occasionally arose when humans were caught in storms while attempting to traverse the seas, or about their fear of creatures thought to inhabit the depths (e.g. Leviathan, *Isa* 27:1). Certainly John is relying on some of the apprehensions associated with the sea, but that is not the primary reason the sea has disappeared. It has much greater significance than simply a perilous form of travel. Others (e.g. Dumbrell, *End* 166–174) understand the sea as representative of chaos, comparing the new creation to the first creation in Genesis. The Genesis creation is, in this interpretation, understood to have been the establishment of order out of chaos. The establishment of the firmament represents the origination of order from the former chaos of a world covered in water, an idea that is also common in Babylonian creation narratives. This view likewise has merit since I agree that the sea in Revelation is representative of opposition to God's order, especially as John is viewing the establishment here of God's righteous order for the new heaven and earth. As I mentioned earlier, however, I am hesitant to limit the opposition to God in Revelation to this explanation.

<sup>26</sup> Their present circumstance may be the persecution of Domitian, though it is difficult to conclude how extensive this persecution and other persecutions of Christians were at the time of John's vision. Nevertheless persecution and/or the fear of persecution is the context of John's audience (*Rev* 1:9).

We have seen how John's message is one of symbol and sign, used to depict the conflict of transcendent powers, rather than metaphysical explanation.<sup>27</sup> But what of those in Scripture who appear to give a more precise description of future events? How are we to harmonize Scripture's teachings regarding the future redemption of creation with teachings that appear to be intentionally predicting its destruction?

### III. 2 PET 3:10–13

Several OT prophecies speak of the seemingly imminent eradication of the world. The "day of the Lord" is used to describe the time of God's judgment. Often this day is portrayed as a time of cosmic turmoil. The sun, moon and stars will all go dark, and the earth will be judged with all its inhabitants (cf. Isa 13:10; 24:23; Ezek 32:7; Joel 2:10, 31; 3:15–17; Amos 5:20; 8:9; Zeph 1:14–18). Attestation to this idea of destruction can also be found in various noncanonical sources (2 Esdr 6:20; *1 Enoch* 1:6 ff.), indicating that it was a prominent method used to describe the end times. Jesus uses the same imagery to describe the period of God's triumphant entry following the period of tribulation (Matt 24:29–31). In later epistolary literature, the concept of cosmic judgment and re-creation still serves to provide hope for those who are awaiting the day anxiously (2 Pet 3:10–13). But this is where the dilemma arises. With all of these references to the destruction of the present heaven and earth, how are we to understand the redemption of creation promised by Paul (Rom 8:18–25)? Although some of these references appear full of apocalyptic symbolism once again, a few seem to use language depicting a real destruction. The most forceful and obvious image of destruction is found in chap. 3 of 2 Peter.

2 Peter 3:3–13 is the primary passage used to support the view of total obliteration and re-creation *ex nihilo*.<sup>28</sup> Peter uses language in vv. 10–13 that depicts a violent end to the old heavens and the old earth in preparation for

<sup>27</sup> Minear develops this theme more extensively by characterizing even the spatial and temporal elements of John's vision as statements of conflict and affirmation (*I Saw a New Earth* 270–278). Without denying the reality of space and time references in the visions, he understands the references in a thoroughgoing theological context. While I am not sure I wish to go this far, I do find his argument compelling enough to warrant lengthy quotation: "When the prophet saw God's judgments operating in the first creation, he did not predict its end as something which could be noted on a calendar. Nor was he speculating on the arrival of a future day on which the final cosmic conflagration would take place. He saw the slain Lamb seated on the throne. The Lamb disclosed what had taken place in the cross and in many other events, along with what must soon take place, i.e., how the power released by God would continue to operate. He disclosed the decision of God to dwell with his people in a new city. That city was devoid of neither time nor space, since it bound together acts of human obedience with acts of divine sovereignty. Yet neither was it confined by space or regulated by time. It comes down 'out of heaven from God.' The vision of that city was not designed to tease men with ontological riddles, or to encourage them to set the date for coming events, or to construct elaborate charts covering the rise and fall of civilizations. It was rather designed to lead the congregations of Asia to worship God in ways conformable to his purpose as revealed in Jesus and thus to become as radical in their monotheism as Jesus had been. The validity of John's ontological outlook rested not so much on his pictures of heaven and earth as on his affirmations concerning God, and on the vocational corollaries of those affirmations" (ibid. 278).

the new heavens and new earth: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, on account of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells." This passage seems to give the old heavens and old earth little hope for a future existence. The verbs "destroy," "burn" and "melt" appear to leave no doubt as to their final end. As one author states:

In view of the tremendous energy locked into every material atom, the same God who locked in this energy can unlock it and destroy it, reducing it to nothing. . . . Since the power of God that locked in atomic power can also unlock it, it is possible that the destruction of the physical earth and heaven will be a gigantic explosion in which all goes back to nothing. Out of this God could create a new heaven and new earth as a base for eternity. In any case, the new earth will be totally different from the old earth.<sup>29</sup>

In the process of erasing the stain of original sin, God must completely obliterate all physical substance, creating a new substance that is not tainted by decay and death.<sup>30</sup> According to this view, the new heavens and the new earth are in fact totally new. But unless we are prepared to argue for the existence of an eternal spirit somehow inhabiting the earth and sky, waiting to be given a new material existence (something I am unwilling to do because of the pantheistic/dualistic overtones), this interpretation seems to contradict Paul's teachings about the creation's future.<sup>31</sup>

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forget about Paul's words of reconciliation. But their reading is not without precedent. Modern-day prophets are quite ready to point to 2 Peter as warrant for predictions of doom. H. Lindsey makes it clear that he believes 2 Pet 3:10-13 is speaking of a nuclear destruction of the earth (*The Last Great Planet Earth* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970] 179). In the new creation, "Christ will put the atoms back together to form a new heaven and a new earth, in which only glorified persons without place on the existing earth). The world on which we now live will continue to exist in a transformed state after God releases it from the bonds of corruption (Rom 8:19-22). God will transform the earth much in the same fashion that he transformed the resurrected body of Jesus (Luke 24:36-43) and will

<sup>28</sup> Most scholars exercise caution with regard to making such bold claims about the future of this creation. Such caution, however, is lost on the majority of people who simply read this passage and

<sup>29</sup> J. F. Walvoord, *Major Biblical Prophecies: 37 Crucial Prophecies that Affect You Today* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991) 414.

<sup>30</sup> As will be discussed below, concluding that this language is to be materially or physically interpreted may be a consequence of Platonic overtones in our hermeneutical presuppositions. If matter in this world is necessarily evil, then it stands to reason that it must be destroyed. But perhaps placing this passage in the genre of Jewish apocalypse rather than Hellenistic science provides us with a better interpretive framework.



other hand, Irenaeus (c. 140–202) and Origen (c. 185–253/254) were both

quite hesitant to accept an eschatology of cosmic conflagration “for fear of its Gnostic undertones and its pagan parallels.”<sup>34</sup> Irenaeus portrays the Valentinians’ view of conflagration as ending in a transference of all matter, including the fires of destruction, into nothingness. Quoting the Valentinian teaching according to Ptolemy, Irenaeus states: “When this has taken place, then (they assert) the fire that is hidden in the world will blaze forth and burn: when it has consumed all matter it will be consumed with it and pass into non-existence.” He answers this teaching by concluding that the fires of judgment will not destroy. Instead they will transform the heavens and earth.<sup>35</sup> Origen, in response to Celsus’ *Alēthēs logos* of AD 178, argues against the cyclical view of cosmic conflagrations taught by the stoics. Harking back to Moses as the first to teach a type of cosmic judgment, Origen understands the cause of this conflagration to be sin, not cycles of deluge and conflagration. As a result, the judgment of fire only happens once and only affects the unrighteousness existing in the world. The earth is not annihilated but purified and cleansed by the fires of judgment. Further, Origen believes the use of fire as an agent of judgment is a metaphorical way of speaking of transformation.<sup>36</sup>

While I am not prepared to say that the total-destruction interpretation of 2 Peter 3 derives from Hellenistic dualism or is the result of gnostic apocalypses, it is interesting to note the parallels. Gnostic apocalypses, which likely have their origins in Jewish apocalypse, are quite distinct at certain points.<sup>37</sup> What is relevant for our discussion is the gnostic view of the material creation. Francis T. Fallon makes their view plain when he says,

<sup>34</sup> Thiede, “Pagan Reader” 80.

<sup>35</sup> Irenaeus *Adv. haer.* 1.7.1; 5.35.2–6.36.1. It would be difficult to portray Peter as teaching an annihilation of matter since the new heaven and new earth appear to be as real as the earth that was judged by the flood (2 Pet 3:6–7, 13). The focus of the judgment is not matter but the unrighteousness that permeates all people and things. In this, Peter is consistent with the Jewish prophets and with apocalyptic literary and apologetic intentions. For a more complete discussion of Valentinian salvation, including comparison to the gnostic text *On the Origin of the World*, see G. MacRae, “Apocalyptic Eschatology in Gnosticism,” *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East* (ed. D. Hellholm; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1983) 320–322.

<sup>36</sup> Origen *Contra Celsum* 2.11–21; 4.13. Thiede believes this proves that Irenaeus and Origen had turned from the teaching of 2 Peter (“Pagan Reader” 86–87). But one might as plausibly interpret them as giving a rendering of the teaching in 2 Peter more consistent with apocalyptic intentions. Thiede is finally unclear as to how he understands the conflagration to be interpreted (cf. pp. 80–81 with 87). It is outside the scope of this study to settle the question of what the various fathers believed and why they believed it. Indeed it may be difficult to tease out their beliefs in light of apologetic concerns that may make them appear to say something only for the sake of a particular audience. It is sufficient to note that both views appear to have existed in the earliest stages of Christian tradition.

<sup>37</sup> MacRae, “Apocalyptic Eschatology” 319, 322–323. While some overlap with Christian apocalypse seems apparent, sufficient evidence exists to suggest gnostic development independent of Christianity. For this reason among others, gnostic apocalypses are studied as a genre separate from Christian apocalypse.

“Obviously, there is no interest in these Gnostic apocalypses in cosmic transformation at the end of time, since the cosmos is in principle evil.”<sup>38</sup> George MacRae summarizes the gnostic view quite well:

What is of course most distinctive of the apocalyptic eschatology of Gnosticism is the total absence of any new creation. Given its radically dualistic perspective, expressed in the concept of creation as error, Gnosticism can see the end time only as the dissolution of the created world. . . . Ultimate destiny is the reintegration of the divine particles into God, the dissolution of multiplicity in the restored unity. And with that the whole cosmos disappears.<sup>39</sup>

Both Peter and John make it very clear that they believe a new creation will exist materially, drawing upon OT prophetic teaching and distinguishing themselves from any type of spiritual/physical dualism (cf. 1 John 1:1 ff.; 4:2; 2 John 7). But in fact the primary contrast between the new creation and the old in both authors does not appear to focus on material substance. Instead the focus is upon the evil that dwells within the “ungodly” (2 Pet 3:7). In this they are following the tradition of Jewish apocalyptic.<sup>40</sup> The judgment of the wicked is a constant theme in Jewish apocalypse and is portrayed in cosmic language because of the way sin has permeated the whole of creation and because of the comprehensiveness of the judgment. If we accept the conclusion that gnostic apocalypse developed from Jewish apocalypse, one can see why a gnostic predisposition to regard material creation as evil would lead to the conclusion that Jewish apocalyptic language is speaking more specifically of the material world in contrast to the eternal spiritual world. But Peter realizes that the judgment of the day of the Lord does not mean the end of all creaturely existence. Instead it means the purging of the earth of all unrighteousness, an event parallel to the judgment of the flood (3:5–7).

As modern authors attempt to interpret 2 Peter as transformation rather than annihilation and re-creation, two alternative interpretations are possible. First, it is quite evident that this passage contains some apocalyptic imagery and style.<sup>41</sup> Peter is using the final judgment of God (day of the Lord) to instill hope and endurance in his audience. If his references were only to future visions of God’s judgment, one could conceivably regard this passage as totally apocalyptic. Peter, however, has mixed in some promises about physical realities he regards as sure. By referring to the flood in 2 Pet 2:5; 3:6, an event he believes actually happened, and by comparing the future judgment of the world to the flood in 3:7, he is using language that may be more than symbolic. The question then becomes: “What purpose does the comparison serve?”

The total-destruction viewpoint referred to above takes the language of this passage in its narrowest sense. The future destruction will be total obliteration. The burning will be complete. The melting of the elements will

<sup>38</sup> F. T. Fallon, “The Gnostic Apocalypses,” *Semeia* 14 (1979) 125.

<sup>39</sup> MacRae, “Apocalyptic Eschatology” 323.

<sup>40</sup> R. J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Waco: Word, 1983) 153–154.

<sup>41</sup> M. Green, *The Second Epistle General of Peter and the General Epistle of Jude* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 150.

leave no trace of their former existence. This interpretation understands the passage to be primarily—perhaps even solely—focused on the physical existence of the old creation. But interpreting apocalyptic language used symbolically may not be as simple as this. While I must agree that Peter's vision is of the physical realm and a physical interpretation is necessary to substantiate the reality of the judgment, I am not convinced that we need be so woodenly literal in our application of the language to creation. It is not uncommon for even more direct prophetic language to be somewhat metaphorical. This is especially true when using language to describe judgment (e.g. Pss 9:7–8; 96:10–13; 110). If we understand the passage to be a mixture of apocalypse and prophetic tradition, then the reference to future judgment may have a temporal comparison (i.e. the flood narrative) and still use symbolic language for expected fulfillment.<sup>42</sup> This interpretation would divide the reference of past judgment from future judgment, making them distinct in their physical consequences but similar in their extent and intent. The description of the burning fire as all-consuming may be purposefully exaggerated to highlight the fact that nothing will escape God's holy fire of judgment. While not detracting from the reality of the judgment, even in its physical intentions, the comprehensiveness would then be more indicative of the fact that it is unavoidable and impending rather than merely destructive. The reference to the flood may simply be a reference to the only real judgment that Peter's audience has known of such magnitude. Peter is pointing to that judgment and saying, "Future judgment will be like that." Just as purifying water once covered the world, so fire will once again expose and destroy all unrighteousness. The description of the day of the Lord is where the metaphorical begins.

Interestingly Peter expects his audience to see the day of the Lord, perhaps even in the very near future (2 Pet 3:14–15). But he makes no reference to what will happen to their physical existence at that time. If he is speaking here of total physical destruction, one might at least expect him to make a passing reference to their future existence in some form to assure them that they would survive the fires of judgment and the melting of the elements. After all, they are still a part of the world that is to be judged. While it is pos-

<sup>42</sup> While it is obvious that 2 Pet 3:10–13 is somewhat apocalyptic in its style, it does not appear to be a vision experienced directly by Peter. Peter gives no indication that he is here stating something revealed directly to him by a supernatural being or voice. This does not make the passage less apocalyptic, but it may point toward possible sources for an understanding of the vision. If Peter did not have the vision, he is quoting someone or a mixture of several someones who did. The primary source for his vision seems to be OT prophecy, particularly references to the day of the Lord (Mal 3:19 LXX; Isa 34:4 LXX) and to the new heaven and new earth (Isa 65:17; 66:22). The primary source for this theology, however, appears to be Paul (2 Pet 3:14–16), who on occasion speaks of the redemption of this creation (Rom 8:18–25; Col 1:16–20). It is also possible that Peter drew from the thought of Jude, if Jude is granted an earlier date. Other sources (e.g. *Enoch*) may have played a role, and one may question what was considered canonical at this time, but they are secondary to the prophets. It is possible that Peter is here relying on a Jewish apocalyptic source also used by the author of *2 Clement*. If this is accepted, then *2 Clem.* 16:3 ("But you know that the day of judgment is now coming like a burning oven, and some [?] of the heavens will melt, and all the earth [will be] like lead melting in fire, and then the secret and open works of men will appear") further substantiates the interpretation of 2 Pet 3:10 that understands *heurethēsetai* to be a reference to purging judgment. See Bauckham, *Jude* 304–306.

sible that they already knew they would pass through the judgment (3:8–9, 14–16 could be understood as implying this), the absence of reference to their survival leads me to suspect that this passage may be more symbolic of the final judgment of unrighteousness than descriptive of the end of the physical world. It makes little sense to compel them to live morally if Peter's intent is simply to explain the destruction of the physical world in the last days. It is certain that Peter, like Paul, expects a physical change to take place (cf. 1 Cor 15:50–58 where Paul uses *allagēsometha* to describe the change), but change does not imply annihilation and absolute re-creation.<sup>43</sup> In fact Peter's apocalyptic style and moral intentions imply that he, like John, is really not interested in spelling out every detail of the change.<sup>44</sup> Rather, he is using visionary language to compel his audience to feel hope and assurance in spite of their trials. He is encouraging them to look forward to the end, not because everything will be destroyed but because those who endure shall be victorious. Perhaps it is best to see this passage pointed directly at those who mock the expectation of the day of the Lord (2 Pet 3:3–4). Instead of hearing Peter's promise of the coming day as a condemnation of the entire material creation, including the physical existence of Christians, his audience understood it as a promise of the removal of all unrighteousness and every appearance of sin. "The day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men" (3:7) is coming. The "mockers" will mock no longer (3:3–4). This would have been a strong message of hope, and would have given Peter's audience a compelling reason to diligently persevere until that day.

A second possible interpretation of 2 Pet 3:10–13 moves from stylistic to grammatical concerns in understanding the vision of Peter as a statement of cleansing judgment rather than of total destruction. Three particular points arise as critical for this interpretation. First, "the elements will be destroyed with intense heat" (v. 10). The elements are usually understood to be the natural elements that are part of the physical creation.<sup>45</sup> But the word used here for elements (*stoicheia*) is used in other places in the NT to mean things set in order, such as the alphabet or ceremonial regulations (Heb 5:12; Gal 4:3; 5:1; Col 2:8, 20). While it appears that physical substance may be the more likely object of burning by intense heat (or the melting described later in v. 12), it cannot be ruled out that Peter, like John in Revelation 21, may be speaking here of the disappearance of this world order (cf. 1 Cor 7:29–31; 1 John 2:15–17) or of the order that guides the processes of nature. This would especially be true if Peter's reference to Paul (2 Pet 3:14–16) includes Paul's treatment of *stoicheia* in Galatians and Colossians. Paul's use of *stoicheia* refers only to religious ceremonies and regulations, with no reference given to earth, wind, fire, water, stars, and so forth.<sup>46</sup> But even if we grant that physical realities are the object of the burning, it may still only be a visionary representation of the judgment rather than a description of the ac-

<sup>43</sup> I am also understanding *metathesis* in Heb 12:27 to have the connotation of transformation rather than simple removal.

<sup>44</sup> Green, *2 Peter* 152–157.

<sup>45</sup> For a brief history of *stoicheia* see Bigg, *Commentary* 296–297; G. Delling, "stoicheō, systoicheō, stoicheion," *TDNT* 7.666–687.

<sup>46</sup> Delling, "stoicheō" 683–686.

tual judgment. This point may seem immaterial since Peter goes on to say that “the earth and its works will be burned up.” “The earth,” however, may once again be a comprehensive symbolic reference to everything in the world instead of the physical earth itself.<sup>47</sup> One must also note that a different course of action is taken with regard to the earth. This brings us to our second point.

The statement at the end of v. 10, “the earth and its works will be burned up,” is somewhat suspect. The word *katakaēsetai* (“burned up”) is probably not in the original text. Earlier manuscripts indicate a more difficult reading using *heurethēsetai*. The translation would then be “the earth and its works will be discovered” (i.e. “found” or “laid bare”). If this translation is taken (as the editors of *UBSGNT* recommend), then God’s judgment in this passage is focusing on a cleansing or purging judgment rather than a destructive elimination of all that exists.<sup>48</sup> Peter uses the same verb again in 3:14 where he states of believing Christians: “Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless.” Here *heurethēnai* has the connotation of discovery and endurance in spite of the obstacles that may arise. Perhaps this is a parallel to what Peter intends to say of the earth and its works. The testing fires of judgment will purify the earth even as Peter’s audience is purified through the testing of ridicule and persecution.<sup>49</sup>

The third point to be made is simply that the word translated “destroy” (*lythēsetai*) does not necessarily have to refer to annihilation. It could also mean the breaking down into component parts or even the release from bondage. While it is certain that some form of physical alteration is meant by this word, it may be a process of refinement instead of a total eradication of all physical substance. The comparison Peter makes with the flood is instructive here.

Peter uses the stronger verb *apōleto* to describe the destruction of the earth in the flood (3:6). The parallel he is drawing between this previous destruction and future destruction could hardly be missed by his audience (3:6–7). But even the flood did not destroy the earth completely. Instead the earth was purged of all that was unclean. Fish were not harmed. In fact, for

ignored as a crop since the later specific day makes an image of the of humans of Gen 9:2. But it is significant to note that this one portion of creation is not on the earth do survive the judgment of God.

<sup>47</sup> See Bauckham, *Jude* 319–321. While it is not within the scope of this study to consider the significance of the language used in the flood narrative, I do find it interesting that the earth is

<sup>48</sup> A translation that views the future day of the Lord as a time for purifying judgment and release from all evil, instead of simple destruction, may fit better with the response Peter expects in 3:11–12. It would inspire a great deal more enthusiasm for Peter’s message to believers to remain steadfast in their calling. He is not prophesying for the sake of vengeance but for ethical inspiration (3:14–15). Cf. n. 42 *supra*.

<sup>49</sup> For a more thorough discussion of the justification for *heurethēsetai* see Bauckham, *Jude* 316–321.

subjected to a seemingly encompassing judgment.<sup>50</sup> Plants from the original

creation also apparently grew back (8:11), and every species of animal was spared through the ark along with a few humans (8:13–19)—a tremendous symbol of God’s grace in the midst of his judgment. In a sense, God did destroy the world and start over again. But much of what existed previously in creation survived the judgment of the flood. The comparison between the flood and the fire may be used to demonstrate that though the fire is expected to be as real as the flood, like the flood it does not completely destroy the physical creation. Instead it simply purges it from all unrighteousness.<sup>51</sup>

Just as gold is purified through the process of melting, allowing for the pure gold to be separated from the dross, so the earth may finally be transformed and renewed by God through the testing of its substance and works by a judgment of holy fire. The bonds and impurities of sin will finally be removed. A closer look at the various uses of fire in God’s judgments reveals that it can have such connotations.

Certainly fire often does refer to the destruction of the object of judgment. The primary reference here for Peter is likely the destruction of those in 2 Pet 3:3–7 who are opposed to God (cf. Isa 66:15–16; Ezek 39:6; Zeph 1:18; 3:8; Zech 12:6; Mal 4:1), though they appear not to be totally annihilated (Rev 21:8). Fire, however, can also refer to the testing of the object of judgment (1 Cor 3:10–15). In fact Peter uses just such an image of testing fire in his first letter (1 Pet 1:7). The same fire that destroys all unrighteousness could be considered the cleansing agent for the stain of sin upon the earth (Jer 23:29; Mal 3:1–6) rather than a means for indiscriminate disintegration.<sup>52</sup>

Fire is the common agent of God’s judgment referred to in OT and NT alike (though one may wonder if it is only metaphorical in passages like 2 Peter 3 since it too seems to be a created element).<sup>53</sup> Fire serves this purpose well since it is all-consuming and exemplifies purification by its capacity to totally destroy. But Peter does not see the fires of judgment as the end of the physical world. Though I am certain that a physical and historical

<sup>50</sup> It may be significant to note that Peter uses *kosmos* in 3:6 and *gēs* in 3:7, 10, 13. While one may wish to argue that he is being more scientifically precise by using *gēs*, it seems reasonable to assume that he simply wishes to conform with apocalyptic vocabulary. *Kosmos* is simply an encompassing term for Peter to describe the whole world in the days of Noah. *Gēs* is the term commonly used in passages in the LXX of the “new heaven and the new earth” (cf. Isa 65:17; 66:22). Peter is not making a scientific distinction here. Instead he is paralleling his sources when speaking of the new earth.

<sup>51</sup> See S. J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistles of Peter and of the Epistle of Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 340.

<sup>52</sup> I should point out that this conception of a purifying fire is complementary to the more prevalent notion in Jewish apocalypse of fire as an agent used to destroy the wicked. Peter can make use of both ideas without falling into some form of Zoroastrianism. He remains thoroughly Jewish in his thought. See Bauckham, *Jude* 300–301.

<sup>53</sup> In light of the stoic belief in fire as the primal element from which all things come and to which all things return, it is unlikely that Peter wishes fire to be understood in a scientifically precise manner. He is attempting to describe the indescribable by using corresponding illustrations.

event is expected by Peter, the primary focus of this judgment for him is the destruction of unrighteousness. He expects the judgment to inspire ethical behavior in his audience. Later, when he describes the new heavens and new earth, it is not as a place with new physical substances or new elements of creation. He describes it as a place where "righteousness dwells." The ultimate point of this judgment is not that it will destroy the earth and sky, though something permeating and tumultuous must happen to release the creation from the decaying consequences of sin in the world (Rom 8:20–21). Physical alteration appears at most to be an expression of the extent of God's judgment rather than its intent. In a manner similar to the flood narrative of Genesis, Peter's focus is on the way this judgment will cleanse the world from unrighteousness.

A final interpretive translation of 2 Pet 3:10–13 may resemble the following: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens as we know them will pass from sight with a roar and the order of this world will be refined with intense heat, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare for judgment. Since all these things are to be refined in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, anticipating and hastening the day of God, when the heavens will be refined by burning and the impure order of this world will melt in the intense heat of judgment! But according to his promise we are looking for renewed heavens and a renewed earth, in which righteousness dwells."

While I must admit that I find the first interpretation of 2 Peter 3 more compelling, each of the two has qualities that are attractive. The first interpretation relies on stylistic elements of apocalyptic, and in that sense 2 Peter 3 may be understood as correlative to Revelation. Thus one's hermeneutical approach to the apocalyptic elements of each book should be similar. Caution and an openness to the symbolic must always be at the forefront. Nevertheless the differences of 2 Peter 3 from Revelation make the second interpretation useful. The realistic elements of 2 Peter 3 (e.g. the flood narrative) cause the vision to spill over symbolic boundaries into predictions of actual events. But we must remember that a realistic interpretation does not preclude that language in the vision may still be intentionally metaphorical to heighten both the fear and comfort inspired by it. Perhaps neither interpretation is adequate in isolation, but taken together they can be complementary and convincing.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The main point of this study has been to demonstrate that the creation in which we now live has a future. Though its future state may result from a process similar to what we expect for our resurrected bodies (Phil 3:20–21), it nonetheless will be a transformation and renewal rather than a re-creation *ex nihilo*. Apocalyptic passages that address the destruction or the disappearance of this world must be understood as they are intended. They are visions of future events that, while they are to be regarded as very real, may be described in imagery that is not descriptive of actual physical real-

ities. We can interpret apocalyptic literature as visionary without denying the reality of the essence of the vision. When apocalyptic imagery is encountered that seems to contradict other passages of Scripture more descriptive of future events, we must hermeneutically account for the style and intent of both types of literature. When released from the obligation to be scientifically or materially precise, apocalyptic passages are then freed to have their intended impact upon the audience. They give hope in the midst of despair, consolation in spite of persecution. Perhaps it is only in such circumstances that apocalyptic can truly be appreciated and understood in a manner consistent with the original.

We were given the responsibility to act as stewards over this created world (Gen 2:15–25). This responsibility has not diminished, even though sin permeates the world and all things in it. It would be easy to disregard the creation if we believe it has no future beyond the final judgment. We could simply treat it as a resource to be managed for the sake of optimum production. But if it does have a future existence, and if God feels strongly enough about saving it to make it a part of his eternal plan of redemption, then perhaps we should regard it as more than simply a source of food. It is hard to imagine that God is dispassionate about anything, especially about something he plans to redeem. Scripture teaches quite clearly that the objects of his redemption are also the objects of his love. Certainly God loves those created in his image. But it seems apparent that his love extends even to the minutest of creatures. God loves all his handiwork. Could it be that we should love it too?

The new heaven and new earth are also mentioned in Isaiah 65:17, Isaiah 66:22, and 2 Peter 3:13. Peter tells us that the new heaven and new earth will be "where righteousness dwells." Isaiah says that "the former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind." The creation of the new heavens and new earth brings the promise that God "will wipe every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 21:4). This event comes after the tribulation, after the Lord's second coming, after the millennial kingdom, after the final rebellion, after the final judgment of Satan, and after the Great White Throne Judgment. The brief description of the new heavens and new earth is the last glimpse into eternity that the Bible gives. How to describe the new heavens and new earth? To describe the coming cosmos negatively, we can say that miseries that now cause such damage and distress will be gone: no mourning, pain, death—"no remnant of curse will remain" (Rev. 21:4; 22:3). It is more challenging to portray positively what a world purged of wickedness and woe will be. God's Word reveals enough about the new heavens and earth to impress on us the urgency of the question, "How can I access that promised homeland of pure pleasure in God's presence?" This question brings us to the gospel. The new heavens and earth will be populated by God's "servants" (Rev. 19:14). Yet Revelation's visions underscore the crucial importance of the gospel from another "very sobering" perspective.