

# Looking For New Heavens and a New Earth (Part One)

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*A basic principle of the Reformation was the priesthood of all believers. Not only could sinners receive the merits of Jesus Christ directly, but they also were given the high and holy privilege to study the Bible directly. Private interpretation does not mean interpretive autonomy. Scripture must be used to interpret Scripture. Nowhere is this principle more vividly illustrated than in a study of 2 Peter 3 and its language of a "new heaven and a new earth."*

According to St. Peter's second epistle, Christ and the apostles had warned that apostasy would accelerate toward the end of the "last days" ([2 Pet. 3:2-4](#); cf. [Jude 17-19](#)) - the forty-year period between Christ's ascension and the destruction of the Old Covenant Temple in A.D. 70.<sup>[1]</sup> He makes it clear that these latter-day "mockers" were *Covenant apostates*: familiar with Old Testament history and prophecy, they were Jews who had abandoned the Abrahamic Covenant by rejecting Christ. As Jesus had repeatedly warned (cf. [Matt. 12:38-45](#); [16:1-4](#); [23:29-39](#)), upon this evil and perverse generation would come the great "Day of Judgment" foretold in the prophets, a "destruction of ungodly men" like that suffered by the wicked of Noah's day ([2 Pet.3:5-7](#)).

Throughout His ministry Jesus drew this analogy (see [Matthew 24:37-39](#) and [Luke17:26-27](#)). Just as God destroyed the "world" of the antediluvian era by the Flood, so would the "world" of first-century Israel be destroyed by fire in the fall of Jerusalem.

St. Peter describes this judgment as the destruction of "the present heavens and earth" (v. 7), making way for "new heavens and a new earth" (v. 10). Because of what may be called the "collapsing-universe" terminology used in this passage, many have mistakenly assumed that St. Peter is speaking of the final end of the physical heaven and earth, rather than the dissolution of the Old Covenant world order. The great seventeenth-century Puritan theologian John Owen answered this view by referring to the Bible's very characteristic metaphorical usage of the terms *heavens and earth*, as in Isaiah's description of the Mosaic Covenant:

*But I am the LORD thy God, that divided the sea, whose waves roared: The LORD of hosts is his name. And I have put my words in thy mouth, and I have covered thee in the shadow of mine hand, that I may plant the *heavens* and lay the foundations of the *earth*, and say unto Zion, Thou art my people ([Isa 51:15-16](#)).*

John Owen writes:

*The time when the work here mentioned, of planting the heavens, and laying the foundation of the earth, was performed by God, was when he "divided the sea" ([Isa. 51:15](#)), and gave the law ([v. 16](#)), and said to Zion, "Thou art my people" - that is, when he took the children of Israel out of Egypt, and formed them in the wilderness into a church and state. Then he planted the heavens, and laid the foundation of the earth - made the new world; that is, brought forth order, and government, and beauty, from the confusion wherein before they were. This is the planting of the heavens, and laying the foundation of the earth in the world. And hence it is, that when mention is made of the destruction of*

a state and government, it is in that language that seems to set forth the end of the world. So Isaiah 34:4; which is yet but the destruction of the state of Edom. The like is also affirmed of the Roman Empire, [Revelation 6:14](#); which the Jews constantly affirmed to be intended by Edom in the prophets. And in our Saviour Christ's prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem, [Matthew 24](#), he sets it out by expressions of the same importance. It is evident then, that, in the prophetic idiom and manner of speech, by "heavens" and "earth," the civil and religious state and combination of men in the world, and the men of them, are often understood. So were the heavens and earth that world which was then destroyed by the flood. <sup>[2]</sup>

Another Old Testament text, among many that could be mentioned, is [Jeremiah 4:23-31](#), which speaks of the imminent fall of Jerusalem (587 B.C.) in similar language of *decreation*:

I looked on the earth, and behold, it was formless and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light....For thus says the LORD, the whole land shall be a desolation [referring to the curse of [Lev.26:31-33](#); see its fulfillment in [Matt.24:15!](#)], yet I will not execute a complete destruction. For this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above be dark....

**New Creation Language** From the very beginning, God's covenant with Israel had been expressed in terms of a *new creation*: Moses described Israel's salvation in the wilderness in terms of the Spirit of God hovering over a waste, just as in the original creation of heaven and earth ([Deut. 32:10-11](#); cf. [Gen. 1:2](#)). <sup>[3]</sup> In the Exodus, as at the original creation, God divided light and darkness ([Ex. 14:20](#)), divided the waters from the waters to bring forth the dry land ([Ex. 14:21-22](#)), and planted His people in His holy mountain ([Ex. 15:17](#)). God's miraculous formation of Israel was thus an image of Creation, a redemptive recapitulation of the making of heaven and earth. The Old Covenant order, in which the entire world was organized around the central sanctuary of the Jerusalem Temple, could quite appropriately be described, before its final dissolution, as "the present heavens and earth."

**The Mosaic Economy** The 19th-century expositor John Brown wrote:

A person at all familiar with the phraseology of the Old Testament scriptures knows that the dissolution of the Mosaic economy, and the establishment of the Christian, is often spoken of as the removing of the old earth and heavens, and the creation of a new earth and heavens....The period of the close of the one dispensation, and the commencement of the other, is spoken of as 'the last days' and 'the end of the world'; and is described as such a shaking of the earth and heavens, as should lead to the removal of the things which were shaken ([Hag. 2:6](#); [Heb. 12:26-27](#)). <sup>[4]</sup>

Therefore, says Owen,

On this foundation I affirm that the heavens and earth here intended in this prophecy of Peter, the coming of the Lord, the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men, mentioned in the destruction of that heaven and earth, do all of them relate, not to the last and final judgment of the world, but to that utter desolation and destruction that was to be made of the Judaical church and state - i.e., the Fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. <sup>[5]</sup>

This interpretation is confirmed by St. Peter's further information: In this imminent "Day of the Lord" which was about to come upon the first-century world "like a thief" (cf. [Matt. 24:42-43](#); [I Thess. 5:2](#); [Rev.3:3](#)), "the elements will be destroyed with intense heat" ([2Pet 3:10](#); [12](#)).

**Elementary Principles** What are these *elements*? So-called "literalists" lightly and carelessly assume that the apostle is speaking about physics, using the term to mean atoms (or perhaps subatomic particles), the actual physical components of the universe. What these "literalists" fail to recognize is that although the word *elements* (*stoicheia*) is used several times in the New Testament, it is *never* used in connection with the physical universe! (In this respect, the very misleading comments of the *New Geneva Study Bible* on this passage [inserted below by JEGjr] violate its own interpretive dictum that "Scripture interprets Scripture." For possible meanings of this term, it cites pagan Greek philosophers and astrologers - but never the Bible's own use of the term!) Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of New Testament Words* observes that while in pagan literature the Greek word *stoicheia* is used in a number of different ways (referring to the "four elements" of the physical world, or to the "notes" on a musical scale, or to the "principles" of geometry or logic), the New Testament writers use the term "in a new way, describing the *stoicheia* as weak and beggarly. In a transferred sense, the *stoicheia* are the things on which pre-Christian existence rests, especially in pre-Christian religion. These things are impotent; they bring bondage instead of freedom." <sup>[6]</sup>

**Study notes for II Peter 3:10 from the *New Geneva Study Bible*; and *MacArthur Study Bible*:**

NGSB (p.1983) **elements**. Greek *stoicheia*, a term used for (a) the elements making up the world (according to the philosophers these were earth, air, fire, and water)...

*MacArthur Study Bible* (p.1959) **the heavens will pass away with a great noise**.

The "heavens" refer to the physical universe. The "great noise" connotes whistling or a crackling sound as of objects being consumed by flames. God will incinerate the universe, probably in an atomic reaction that disintegrates all matter as we know it (vv.7, 11, 12, 13). **the elements will melt with fervent heat**. The "elements" are the atomic components into which matter is ultimately divisible, which make up the composition of all the created matter. Peter means that the atoms, neutrons, protons, and electrons are all going to disintegrate (v.11).

Throughout the New Testament, the word "elements" (*stoicheia*) is *always* used in connection with the Old Covenant order. St. Paul used the term in his stinging rebuke to the Galatian Christians who were tempted to forsake the freedom of the New Covenant for an Old Covenant-style legalism. Describing Old Covenant rituals and ceremonies, he says "**we were in bondage under the *elements* (*stoicheia*) of this world...How is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly *elements* (*stoicheia*), to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years...**" ([Gal. 4:3, 9-10](#)). He warns the Colossians: "**Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the basic *principles* (*stoicheia*) of the world, and not according to Christ...Therefore, if you died with Christ to the basic *principles* (*stoicheia*) of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations - 'Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle'" ([Col. 2:8, 20-21](#)).**

The writer to the Hebrews chided them: "**For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the *elements* (*stoicheia*) of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food**" ([Heb. 5:12](#)). In context, the writer to the Hebrews is clearly speaking of Old Covenant truths particularly since he connects it with the term *oracles of God*, an expression used elsewhere in the New Testament for the provisional, Old Covenant revelation (see [Acts 7:38](#); [Rom.3:2](#)). These citations from Galatians, Colossians, and Hebrews comprise *all* the other occurrences in the New Testament of that word "elements" (*stoicheia*). Not one refers to the "elements" of the physical world or universe; all are speaking of the "elements" of

the Old Covenant system, which, as the apostles wrote just before the approaching destruction of the Old Covenant Temple in A.D. 70, was "becoming obsolete and growing old" and "ready to vanish away" ([Heb.8:13](#)).

St. Peter uses the same term in exactly the same way. Throughout the Greek New Testament, the word *elements* (*stoicheia*) always means ethics, not physics; the foundational "elements" of a religious system that was doomed to pass away in a fiery judgment.

**The Time Factor** In fact, St. Peter was quite specific about the fact that he was not referring to an event thousands of years in their future, but to something that was *already* taking place:

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the *elements* (*stoicheia*) will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things *are being dissolved*, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the *elements* (*stoicheia*) *are being melted* with fervent heat? ([2 Pet. 3:10-12](#))

Contrary to the misleading renderings of translators blinded by their presuppositions, St. Peter insists that the dissolution of "the present heaven and earth" - the Old Covenant system with its obligatory rituals and bloody sacrifices - was already beginning to occur: the "universe" of the Old Covenant was coming apart, never to be revived:

When did prophet and vision cease from Israel? Was it not when Christ came, the Holy one of holies? It is, in fact, a sign and notable proof of the coming of the Word that Jerusalem no longer stands, neither is prophet raised up, nor vision revealed among them. And it is natural that it should be so, for when He that was signified had come, what need was there any longer of any to signify Him? And when the Truth had come, what further need was there of the shadow?...And the kingdom of Jerusalem ceased at the same time, kings were to be anointed among them only until the Holy of holies had been anointed. <sup>[7]</sup>

St. Peter's message, John Owen argues, is that:

...the heavens and earth that God himself planted - the sun, moon, and stars of the judaical polity and church - the whole old world of worship and worshippers, that stand out in their obstinacy against the Lord Christ - shall be sensibly dissolved and destroyed. <sup>[8]</sup>

## Notes

[1] For a defense of this position, see my *Paradise Restored: A Biblical Theology of Dominion* (Tyler, TX: Dominion Press, 1985), 112-22. The fact is that every time Scripture uses the term "last days" (and similar expressions) it means, not the end of the physical universe, but the period from AD 30 to AD 70 - the period during which the Apostles were preaching and writing, the "last days" of Old Covenant Israel before it was forever destroyed in the destruction of the Temple (and consequently the annihilation of the Old Covenant sacrificial system). See Acts 2:16-21; I Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 3:1-9; Hebrews 1:1-2; 8:13; 9:26; James 5:7-9; I Peter 1:20; 4:7; I John 2:18; Jude 17-19. See also Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: The Obsession of the Modern Church* (Atlanta, GA: American Vision, 1993).

[2] John Owen, "Providential Changes, An Argument for Universal Holiness," in William H. Goold, ed., *The Works of John Owen*, 16 vols. (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965-68), 9:134.

[3] See Chilton, *Paradise Restored*, 59.

[4] John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, [1852] 1990), 1:171-72.

[5] Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord* ,1:171-72.

[6] Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (abridged in one volume), Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 1088.

[7] St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word of God* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), [40] 61-62.8. Owen, "Providential Changes, An Argument for Universal Holiness," 9: 135.

[8] Owen, "Providential Changes, An Argument for Universal Holiness," 9: 135.

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