

Looking For New Heavens and a New Earth (Part Two)

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As we saw in the [previous article](#), Puritan theologian John Owen argued that the teaching of 2 Peter 3 about the coming "Day of the Lord" was not about the end of the physical universe, but of the Old Covenant and the nation of Israel. He points out that the term "heavens and earth" are often used in the Old Testament as a symbolic expression for God's covenantal creation, Israel (see [Isa. 51:15-20](#); [Jer. 4:23-31](#)). Owen writes: "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." ^[1]

Owen offers two further reasons ("of many that might be insisted on from the text," he says) for adopting the A.D. 70 interpretation of 2 Peter 3. First, he observes, "whatever is here mentioned was to have its particular influence on the men of that generation." ^[2] That is a crucial point, which must be clearly recognized in any honest assessment of the apostle's meaning. St. Peter is especially concerned that his first-century readers remember the apostolic warnings about "the last days" ([vv. 2-3](#); cf. [1 Tim.4:1-6](#); [2 Tim. 3:1-9](#)). During these times, the Jewish scoffers of his day, clearly familiar with the Biblical prophecies of judgment, were refusing to heed those warnings ([vv. 3-5](#)). He exhorts his readers to live holy lives in the light of this imminent judgment ([vv. 11, 14](#)); and it is these early Christians who are repeatedly mentioned as actively "looking for and hastening" the judgment ([vv. 12, 13, 14](#)). It is precisely the *nearness* of the approaching conflagration that St. Peter cites as a motive to diligence in godly living!

An obvious objection to such an exposition is to refer to what is probably the most well-known, most-misunderstood text in St. Peter's brief epistle: "**But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day**" ([2 Pet. 3:8](#)). This means, it is said, that "God's arithmetic is different from ours," so that when Scripture uses terms like "near" and "shortly" (e.g., [Rev. 1:1-3](#)) or "at hand" (e.g., [James 5:5-7](#)), it doesn't intend to give the impression of soon-approaching events, but of events possibly thousands of years in the future! Milton Terry refuted this seemingly plausible but [spurious](#) theory:

The language is a poetical citation from [Psalm 90:4](#), and is adduced to show that the lapse of time does not invalidate the promises of God....But this is very different from saying that when the everlasting God promises something *shortly*, and declares that it is *close at hand*, He may mean that it is a thousand years in the future. Whatever He has promised indefinitely He may take a thousand years or more to fulfill; but what He affirms to be at the door let no man declare to be far away. ^[3]

J. Stuart Russell wrote with biting disdain:

Few passages have suffered more from misconstruction than this, which has been made to speak a language inconsistent with its obvious intention, and even incompatible with a strict regard to veracity. There is probably an allusion here to the words of the Psalmist, in which he contrasts the brevity of human life with the eternity of the divine existence....But surely it would be the height of absurdity to regard this sublime poetic image as a calculus

for the divine measurement of time, or as giving us warrant for wholly disregarding definitions of time in the predictions and promises of God.

Yet it is not unusual to quote these words as an argument or excuse for the total disregard for the element of time in the prophetic writings. Even in cases where a certain time is specified in the prediction, or where such limitations as 'shortly,' or 'speedily,' or 'at hand' are expressed, the passage before us is appealed to in justification of an arbitrary treatment of such notes of time, so that soon may mean late, and near may mean distant, and short may mean long, and vice versa....

It is surely unnecessary to repudiate in the strongest manner such a non-natural method of interpreting the language of Scripture. It is worse than ungrammatical and unreasonable, it is immoral. It is to suggest that God has two weights and measures in His dealings with men, and that in His mode of reckoning there is ambiguity and variableness which will make it impossible to tell 'What manner of time the Spirit of Christ in the prophets may signify' [cf. [1 Pet. 1:11](#)]...

The Scriptures themselves, however, give no countenance to such a method of interpretation. Faithfulness is one of the attributes most frequently ascribed to the 'covenant-keeping God,' and the divine faithfulness is that which the apostle in this very passage affirms....The apostle does not say that when the Lord promises a thing for today He may not fulfil His promise for a thousand years: that would be slackness; that would be a breach of promise. He does not say that because God is infinite and everlasting, therefore He reckons with a different arithmetic from ours, or speaks to us in double sense, or uses two different weights and measures in His dealings with mankind. The very reverse is the truth....

It is evident that the object of the apostle in this passage is to give his readers the strongest assurance that the impending catastrophe of the last days were on the very eve of fulfillment. The veracity and faithfulness of God were the guarantees of the punctual performance of the promise. To have intimated that time was a variable quantity in the promise of God would have been to stultify and neutralize his own teaching, which was that 'the Lord is not slack concerning His promise.'^[4]

Continuing his analysis, John Owen cites verse 13: "**But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.**" Owen asks: "What is that promise? Where may we find it?" Good question. Do *you* know the answer? Where in the Old Testament does God promise a New Heaven and Earth? Incidentally, this raises a wider, fascinating issue: When the New Testament quotes or cites an Old Testament text, it's often a good idea to hunt down the original context, see what it meant in its original context, and then see the "spin" the New Testament writer places on it. (For example, Isaiah's prophecy of a gigantic highway-construction project [[Isa. 40:3-5](#)] is not interpreted literally in the New Testament, but metaphorically, of the preaching ministry of John the Baptist [[Luke 3:4-6](#)]. And Isaiah's prophecy of a "golden age" when the wolf dwells peaceably with the lamb [[Isa 11:1-10](#)] is condensed and cited by St. Paul as a present fulfillment, in the New Covenant age [[Rom. 15:12](#)]!) But John Owen, this Puritan scholar, knows his Bible better than most of the rest of us, and he tells us exactly where the Old Testament foretells a "new heaven and earth":

What is that promise? Where may we find it? Why, we have it in the very words and letter, [Isaiah 65:17](#). Now, when shall this be that God will create these "new heavens and new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness"? Saith Peter, It shall be after the coming of the Lord, after that judgment and destruction of ungodly men, who obey not the gospel, that I foretell, But now it is evident, from this place of Isaiah, with chapter [66:21-22](#), that this is a prophecy of gospel times only; and that the planting of these new heavens is nothing but the creation of gospel ordinances, to endure forever. The same thing is so expressed in [Hebrews 12:26-28](#).^[5]

Owen is right on target, asking the question that so many expositors fail to ask: Where had God promised to bring "new heavens and a new earth"? The answer, as Owen correctly states, is only in Isaiah 65 and 66 - passages which clearly prophesy the period of the Gospel, brought in by the work of Christ. According to Isaiah himself, this "New Creation" cannot possibly be the eternal state, since it contains birth and death, building and planting ([65:20-23](#)). The "new heavens and earth" promised to the Church comprise the age of the New Covenant - the Gospel's triumph, when all mankind will come to bow down before the Lord ([66: 22-23](#)). John Bray writes: "This passage is a grand description of the gospel age after Christ came in judgment in 70 A.D. and took away the old heavens and the old earth. We now have the new heavens and the new earth of the gospel age." ^[6] St. Peter's encouragement to the Church of his day was to be patient, to wait for God's judgment to destroy those who were persecuting the faith and impeding its progress. "The end of all things is at hand," he had written earlier ([1 Pet. 4:7](#)). John Brown commented:

"The end of all things" here is the entire end of the Jewish economy in the destruction of the temple and city of Jerusalem, and the dispersal of the holy people. That was at hand; for this epistle seems to have been written a very short while before these events took place....It is quite plain that in our Lord's predictions, the expressions "the end" and probably "the end of the world" [KJV wrongly translates [Mtt.24:3](#) as "world." Should be "age" - "...and the end of the age" NOT "...end of the world." JEGjr] are used in reference to the entire dissolution of the Jewish economy (cf. [Matt.24:3](#), [6](#), [14](#), [34](#); [Rom. 13:11-12](#); [James 5:8-9](#)). ^[7]

Once the Lord came to destroy the scaffolding of the Old Covenant structure, the New Covenant Temple would be left in its place, and the victorious march of the Church would be unstoppable. According to God's predestined design, the world will be converted; the earth's treasures will be brought into the City of God, as the Paradise Mandate ([Gen.1:27-28](#); [Matt.28:18-20](#)) is consummated ([Rev. 21:1-27](#)).

This is why the apostles constantly affirmed that the age of consummation had already been implemented by the resurrection and ascension of Christ, who poured out the Holy Spirit. St. Paul, writing of the redeemed individual, says that "if any man is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" ([2 Cor. 5:17](#)). St. John, recording his vision says the same thing: "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth....The first things have passed away....Behold, I am making all things new" ([Rev. 21:1-5](#)). The writer to the Hebrews comforts his first-century readers with the assurance that they have already arrived at "the City of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" ([Heb. 12:22](#); cf. [Gal.4:26-28](#); [Rev. 21](#)). Even as the old "heaven and earth" were being shaken to rubble, the early Christians were "receiving a Kingdom which cannot be shaken," the eternal Kingdom of God brought in by His Son ([Heb. 12:26-28](#)). Milton Terry wrote:

The language of [2 Pet. 3:10-12](#) is taken mainly from [Isa. 34:4](#), and is limited to the parousia, like the language of [Matt. 24:29](#). Then the Lord made "not only the land but also the heaven" to tremble ([Heb. 12:26](#)), and removed the things that were shaken in order to establish a kingdom which cannot be moved. ^[8]

It is crucial to note that the apostle continually points his readers' attention, not to events that were to take place thousands of years in the future, but to events that were already beginning to take place. Otherwise, his closing words make no sense at all: "Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless....You, therefore, beloved, since you know these things beforehand, beware lest you fall from your own steadfastness..." ([2 Pet.3:14-17](#)). If these things refer to a late-20th-century thermonuclear holocaust, why would the inspired apostle direct such a serious exhortation against "falling from steadfastness" to thousands of readers who would never live to see the things he foretold? A

cardinal rule of Biblical interpretation is that Scripture must interpret Scripture; and, particularly, that the New Testament is God's own inspired commentary on the meaning of the Old Testament.

Once the old had been swept away, St. Peter declared, the Age of Christ would be fully established, an era "in which righteousness dwells" ([2 Pet. 3:13](#)). The distinguishing characteristic of the new era, in stark contrast to what preceded it, would be righteousness - *increasing* righteousness, as the Gospel would be set free in its mission to the nations. There have been many battles throughout Church history, of course, and many battles lie ahead. But these must not blind us to the very real progress that the Gospel has made and continues to make in the world. The New World Order of the Lord Jesus Christ has arrived; and, according to God's own promise, the saving knowledge of Him will fill the earth, as the waters cover the sea ([Isa. 11:9](#)).

Notes

[1] John Owen, "Providential Changes, an Argument for Universal Holiness," in *The Works of John Owen*, 16 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust), 9:135.

[2] "Providential Changes, an Argument for Universal Holiness," 134.

[3] Milton Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 406.

[4] J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia* (Bradford, PA: Kingdom Publications, n.d.), 321-23.

[5] "Providential Changes, an Argument for Universal Holiness," 134-35.

[6] John L. Bray, *Heaven and Earth Shall Pass Away* (Lakeland, FL: John L. Bray Ministries, 1995), 26.

[7] Quoted in Roderick Campbell, *Israel and the New Covenant* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1954), 107.

[8] Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 489.