

# THE DAY OF THE LORD WILL COME: AN EXPOSITION OF 2 PETER 3:1–18\*

*Craig A. Blaising*

**A** NEW TELEVISION DRAMA has recently been announced featuring a leading character who has perfect memory. What makes the program interesting, of course, is that no one has perfect memory. But the writers want you to be entertained at the prospect of how this ability might be useful in solving crimes and other mysteries.

Much more common are stories, whether comedies or tragedies, about the loss of memory. For who has not needed from time to time reminders whether simple or more serious?

The apostle Peter devoted an entire letter, in fact his second letter, to function as a reminder to the church. It was to be a reminder about the coming of the Lord and how believers are to live in light of that coming. Early in the letter he wrote, “Therefore, I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have. I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder, since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me. And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things” (1:12–15).<sup>1</sup>

Then Peter reminded them of how they had learned of the coming of the Lord and warned them of the problem of false teach-

---

\* This is the fourth article in a four-part series, “The Day of the Lord,” delivered as the W. H. Griffith Thomas Lectureship, March 29–April 1, 2011, Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas.

Craig A. Blaising is Executive Vice President, Provost, and Professor of Theology, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas.

<sup>1</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.

ers. In the third chapter of his letter he returned to his intention in writing. “This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles” (3:1–2).

Peter wanted his readers to remember the teaching of the prophets about the coming of the Lord in the day of the Lord. And this is the focus of this fourth lecture in this series.

#### AN IMPORTANT REMINDER

Peter explicitly directed the church to remember the words of the Old Testament prophets. Peter had been with the Lord on all of the occasions when the Lord spoke of His coming. He was with Him when the Lord delivered the Olivet Discourse. He was present at the Lord’s ascension and personally heard the angelic proclamation that the Lord will come again in the same way in which He went. Peter could speak as an eyewitness, as he did in 2 Peter 1. But repeatedly in his preaching and his teaching, Peter called attention to the Old Testament prophets.

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter invoked the prophet Joel to explain the phenomena taking place. He spoke of David’s prophecies concerning the resurrection of the Christ and His ascension. He proclaimed the cross as a fulfillment of prophecy and declared that the ascended Jesus would remain in heaven until the time when all things spoken by the prophets would be fulfilled (Acts 3:21). He preached to Cornelius that all the prophets bear witness to Jesus (10:43). And in his first letter Peter wrote that all the prophets “searched intently” to understand the grace that had now come to people in Christ (1 Pet. 1:10). Following his eyewitness testimony in 2 Peter 1:16–18, Peter directed his readers to pay attention to “the prophetic word . . . a lamp shining in a dark place.” The prophetic word deserves attention because it is the Word of God (vv. 19–21).

However, in spite of this apostolic emphasis on the relevance of Old Testament prophecy, many today avoid the topic of eschatology. Many pastors do not preach on it, and many teachers do not teach it. And why is that? Because, they say, it is controversial.

But what part of theology is not controversial? What about sanctification? Is that noncontroversial? Three books on my shelf contrast multiple views about sanctification.<sup>2</sup> But that does not

---

<sup>2</sup> Donald Alexander, ed., *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988); Melvin E. Dieter et. al., *Five Views on*

keep us from preaching on the need for holiness! I remember years ago hearing Charles Ryrie say from the pulpit in Chafer Chapel, “Whatever your theology of sanctification is, just make it work!” I thought that was wise advice. Any area of theology can become controversial. That does not excuse us from an obligation to study and understand God’s Word nor from the responsibility of declaring to the church the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27).

Pastoral neglect of eschatology has a negative impact on sanctification because such neglect hinders the church’s maturation in hope. Hope and holiness go together. In Titus 2:13 Paul wrote of “the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.” John wrote that believers are to live in such a way that they “not shrink from him in shame at his coming” (1 John 2:28). He added that “everyone who thus hopes in him [being like him at his coming] purifies himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:3). The writer to the Hebrews referred to the hope that serves as an anchor of the soul (Heb. 6:19). If the anchor of hope is not strong, then people drift aimlessly, lacking purpose, and are not tethered to the plan of God in Christ. So Peter told his readers to pay attention to the prophetic word, because it is the Word of God, shining like a light in a dark world (2 Pet. 1:19), revealing and clarifying the plan of God in Christ for us.

In light of this, Peter added that believers need to be reminded of “the commandment of the Lord and Savior given through the apostles” (3:2). Peter used the singular form, leading some to ask, Of which commandment was he speaking? Perhaps he meant the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations. Included in that commission is the charge to teach them “all that I have commanded you.” So the commandment in the singular entails all the Lord’s commandments. Jesus said in John 14:21, “He who has my commandments and keeps them is the one who loves me.” Or perhaps the reference in 2 Peter 3:2 is to the “new commandment” given in John 13:34–35 (cf. 1 John 2:7–11). This is the commandment “that you love one another just as I have loved you.” Paul taught that all the commandments are summed up in the commandment to love others (Gal. 5:14). Similarly Peter said love is the culmination of the qualities he counseled for his readers (2 Pet. 1:30), just as it was a key focus in his first letter (1 Pet. 1:22).

Either way of understanding the singular form of “command-

ment” in 2 Peter 3:2 encompasses the entirety of Christ’s teaching and reinforces the fact that knowledge of the Lord’s coming is meant to lead to obedience to Christ in holy love and mission. This is the exhortation Peter related to his comments on the day of the Lord at the end of the chapter (3:11, 14–15). Knowledge of our hope is sobering, for it puts us in a frame of mind to be obedient and walk with Him.

Remembrance of prophetic prediction and its implications for our conduct will especially be important in the face of worldly challenges to our hope. So Peter wrote that we should keep this remembrance: “knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, ‘Where is the promise of his coming? For, ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation’ ” (3:3–4).

The problem Peter identified here is not the so-called “delay of the parousia” posed as a problem in New Testament studies over a hundred years ago. Peter spoke not of a concern about a delay but of disbelief, incredulity, that such a “coming” should ever occur. The parousia as proclaimed by the Lord and His apostles is no small matter. But is such an event really to be expected? To these scoffers, such a parousia is unlikely because there is no indication in the order of things that any change might possibly take place. Everything is continuing just as it has from the beginning.

Remembering the prophets should prepare the church for this unbelief. Jeremiah spoke of those in his day who “contradicted the Lord and insisted, ‘It [Jeremiah’s prophecy of coming judgment] won’t happen. Harm won’t come to us; we won’t see sword or famine’ ” (Jer. 5:12, HCSB). Amos noted that scoffers in his time were saying, “Disaster shall not overtake or meet us.” On the contrary, Amos predicted, they will “die by the sword” (Amos 9:10). Ezekiel, likewise, challenged the same kind of disbelief with strong words: “And the word of the Lord came to me: ‘Son of man, what is this proverb that you have about the land of Israel, saying, “The days grow long, and every vision comes to nothing”? Tell them therefore, “Thus says the Lord God: ‘I will put an end to this proverb, and they shall no more use it as a proverb in Israel.’ ” But say to them, “The days are near, and fulfillment of every vision. For there shall be no more any false vision or flattering divination within the house of Israel. For I am the Lord; I will speak the word that I will speak, and it will be performed. It will no longer be delayed, but in your days, O rebellious house, I will speak the word and perform it, declares the Lord God” ’ ” (Ezek. 12:21–25).

This unbelief, which we can see in the prophets and concerning

which Peter warned his readers, is certainly present in our own day as well. Naturalism has replaced the Christian worldview in Western culture, and many of the intellectual elite believe that the Christian hope of Christ's future coming is a myth. In fact the very idea that God directly intervenes in any way in the world order of things is considered mythical. Whether in economics, the physical sciences, political or social events, people do not expect God to personally or directly intervene in world affairs.

Peter charged that these scoffers are motivated by "their own sinful desires" (3:3). The charge continues a theme from the second chapter of his letter regarding the motivation of false teachers generally. However, it also reinforces the connection between Christian hope and purity—the predictions of the prophets and the commandment delivered through the apostles. The absence of any such hope leaves one without a sure foundation for present morality and ethics. Resignation to the way of the world as an unchangeable order is also a resignation to its relative ethical structure—a structure that Scripture repeatedly says is constituted by ἐπιθυμία, "sinful desire."<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly we see increasing immorality in direct proportion to the society's growing disbelief in any intervention by God in this world.

### WHAT THE WORLD OVERLOOKS

Peter brought two challenges to this disbelief—two things that should not be overlooked. Both have to do with the relationship between the Word of God and the physical, temporal order.

First, the scoffers overlook the relationship between the Word and the physical order as revealed in creation and the flood. "They deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word, the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly" (2 Pet. 3:5–7).

The scoffers fail to understand the nature and power of the Word, for the existence and continuance of the order of things is dependent on the Word of God, as the biblical accounts of creation and the flood demonstrate. "By the word of the Lord the heavens

---

<sup>3</sup> Peter repeatedly calls attention to this in his correspondence. See 1 Peter 1:14; 2:11, 4:2–3; 2 Peter 1:4; and 2:10. See also Ephesians 2:3; 4:22; and 1 John 2:16.

were made and all their hosts by the breath of his mouth” (Ps. 33:6). Creation took place by means of and in response to the Word. God said, “Let it be,” and it was! Peter highlighted the presence of water in the original order. Its place in the order of things was defined by the Word. “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear” (Gen. 1:9). It came about in accord with the Word. The flood took place by means of a radical alteration of the original order. Its occurrence demonstrated that the order could in fact be changed. But the change, like the origination of the earlier created order, was directed by the Word. However, in this case, the Word first came in prophetic form, announced to Noah before the actualization of the event. Accordingly, the Lord told Noah, “I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die” (Gen. 6:17).

Again, in Genesis 7:4, the Lord says, “I will send rain on the earth forty days and forty nights, and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.” And Genesis 7:11–24 says in effect, “It was so.”

Peter’s point is that the order of things depends on the Word of God. God created everything, and He sustains it “by His powerful word” (Heb. 1:3). Just as He created it, so He can rework and recreate it. And if He declared that that is what He will do, that Word by its very nature will be actualized, scoffers notwithstanding. Consequently, there is an interconnection between all forms of the Word in biblical theology.

A scene from the movie *The Matrix* illustrates this point. At the end of the movie (the first in the trilogy) is a scene in which the main character, Neo, is in a building. The building around Neo becomes a grid that begins to move and expand, because at this point in the plot Neo has come to believe and understand that the world of the Matrix is a computer program that he can control by his mind. As Neo alters the program, the reality of the Matrix changes.

The world is not a computer program. But its existence and its future depend on the plan and design of God expressed by His Word. By His Word, He brought it into being, and by His Word He has altered it—in and through judgment. This is what scoffers in Peter’s day and naturalists and secularists in our day do not understand. So they do not appreciate the fact that “by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly” (2 Pet. 3:7). As in the case of Noah, the Word has appeared first in prophetic form. Its future actualization is thereby certain.

## WHAT WE SHOULD NOT OVERLOOK

Second, not only do scoffers overlook these things to their peril, but there is something that the church should not overlook. This also concerns the relationship of the Word to the physical-temporal order. Peter wrote, “But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pet. 3:8–9).

Peter was alluding to Psalm 90, a hymn of praise to the everlasting God. The everlasting God, the psalm says, is the one who determined the temporal finitude of our existence: “You return man to dust and say, “Return, O children of man” (Ps. 90:3, note the stress on what God says, a reference to the Word)! These words in the psalm constitute a further intertextual allusion, this time to Genesis 3:19. The Lord had said in Genesis 2:17, “In the day you eat of it you shall surely die.” That warning of the Word was put to the test by human disobedience. So after the transgression had taken place, the Lord said to Adam, “To dust you shall return” (3:19). After alluding to these words, the psalmist wrote in the very next verses, “For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night. You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers” (Ps. 90:4–5).

The issue here is the meaning of “day” in the prophetic warning, “In the day you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:17). They did die. They returned to the dust, as the Lord decreed after the sin and as the psalmist notes. However, this did not happen on the solar day in which the transgression occurred. If that had been the case, the human story would have ended there. In God’s mercy, He allowed time for humanity to multiply and expand. How much time? In the genealogies, beginning in Genesis 5, no one lived past one thousand years. They all died within a thousand-year period. Thus the actual time granted to human life spans, recorded in Genesis 5, reveals how the Lord chose to define the meaning of “day” in the word of prophecy, given in Genesis 2:17.<sup>4</sup> So Peter, alluding to the psalm, wrote, “With the Lord, one day is as a thou-

---

<sup>4</sup> Of course they also died through the effects of depravity and spiritual death that set in instantaneously with the fall (e.g., Eph. 2:1–2). However, the particular issue in Psalm 90 is with physical death and how that death recorded in Genesis 5 relates to the warning in Genesis 2:17 and the decree in Genesis 3:19.

sand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Pet. 3:8). However, the length of time allotted to these first humans was not simply for the propagation of the race. It granted them an opportunity to repent before death came. Even in the changed conditions after the Flood, in which the human *day* has been shortened considerably (Ps. 90:10), the time mankind has been given allows them to seek the mercy of the Lord (vv. 11–17). Here is seen something of the character of God in the way He applies the prophecy of judgment. The Lord is merciful and gracious, and He is willing to delay judgment for the sake of repentance. This is a major theme in biblical theology, which is highlighted in Exodus 34:5–7 and can be traced through the prophets (e.g., Jon. 4:2) to the New Testament. But it can already be seen in the Lord’s response to the first sin.

This theme of God’s mercy is significant for understanding prophetic time. The prophesied Word is true, but so is the Word about His character. The interval between prophecy and fulfillment reveals the remarkable patience of God, a patience extended to allow for repentance. But Peter added that the day of the Lord will come as it has been prophesied (2 Pet. 3:10). In Exodus 32:34, in the midst of the narrative concerning Israel’s idolatry at Sinai, the narrative in which the mercy and grace of God are revealed, the Lord declared that there will be a day “when I will punish them for their sin.” That day of visitation is taken up by the prophets to become the prophesied Day of the Lord. The Lord has a day of judgment on sin. Its coming is sure.

### THE COMING OF THE DAY OF THE LORD

How will the day of the Lord come? Peter wrote, “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be refined. Since, all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet. 3:10–13).

These lectures have focused our attention on patterns of the Day of the Lord presented in Scripture. In the first lecture, we saw that the day of the Lord can sometimes be described as a singular event of destruction. It comes as “destruction from the Almighty” (Joel 1:15; cf. Isa. 13:6). But that simple description of destruction



can also be elaborated as an extended event, which unfolds through the rousing of an army, its mobilization, coming, and invasion of the land followed by siege and battle (see, e.g., Isa. 13:1–22; Joel 2:1–15; Ezek. 7:1–27; Nahum 2:1–3:19). Some texts extend the event to include several nations (Zeph. 2:1–15; 3:8–13). And, then there is the twofold movement in Zechariah, involving a multinational siege and destruction of Jerusalem followed by the Lord's judgment on those nations (Zech. 14:1–15; cf. the "aggregate" days of the Lord in Joel 1:1–20; 2:1–11; 2:29–32; 3:1–21). The day of the Lord can be seen in simple or expanded (even narrative) description. Even the simple description of destruction in Joel 1:15 and Isaiah 13:6 occurs in the context of extended patterns.

When Jesus spoke in the Olivet Discourse of a coming time of trouble as being like the labor pains of the parousia, He integrated the Day of the Lord description with the structure of Daniel's seventieth week. In the second half of the Olivet Discourse, He referred to that extended narrative pattern as "that day" (Luke 21:34; cf. Matt. 24:36, 42, 50; Mark 13:32). Here again, we see the interchangeability of simple-descriptive and extended-pattern reference. Also in this part of the discourse the Lord used the image of the "thief in the night" to describe the coming of the day (Matt. 24:43–44). Paul employed the same metaphor with additional emphasis on the onset or arrival of the day. The onset of that day will bring contrasting experiences for believers and for unbelievers, the former being delivered while the latter are "caught in a trap" of destruction (1 Thess. 5:1–11).

Peter's comments on the Day of the Lord come toward the end of this canonical discussion. His use of the thief metaphor clearly connects to the teaching of Jesus and Paul and carries a similar parenetic emphasis related to the inception of the day. Peter saw himself as consistent with the teaching of Paul on these matters (2 Pet. 3:15–16). The question is how to understand Peter's subsequent description in relationship to all that we have seen so far.

First, we need to understand Peter's description of the Day of the Lord in the terms in which he presented it. Peter's account of the day of the Lord's coming is presented in parallel description in 2 Peter 3:10 and 3:12–13. Each description is followed by an exhortation to holiness and godliness (3:11, 14). The descriptions can be set side by side for analysis:

*2 Peter 3:10*

The heavens will pass away  
with a roar

*2 Peter 3:12–13*

The heavens will be set  
on fire and dissolved

The στοιχεῖα [AV: elements; The στοιχεῖα will melt  
 ESV: heavenly bodies] will burn as they burn  
 [ESV: burn up] and dissolve

The earth and the works done —a new heavens and  
 on it will be refined [AV: burned new earth in which  
 up; ESV: exposed] righteousness dwells

The interpretation of two words in this structure is crucial for determining the sense of Peter's imagery. The first is the verb εὑρεθήσεται that appears at the end of 3:10, translated in the English Standard Version as "exposed." The second is the word στοιχεῖα in 3:10 and 3:12, translated in the King James Version as "elements" and in the English Standard Version as "heavenly bodies."

The verb εὑρεθήσεται literally means "will be found." The problem lies in understanding how "will be found" makes any sense in this context. The King James Version reads "will be burned up" because it translates the Textus Receptus, which has a different word here, the verb κατακαήσεται. However, modern textual criticism has established εὑρεθήσεται as the preferred reading. The difficulty lies in making sense of it. Some recent English translations, such as the English Standard Version and the NET Bible, follow Richard Bauckham's commentary on this verse and render it "will be exposed" (ESV) and "will be laid bare" (NET). The Holman Christian Standard Bible is similar with "will be disclosed." Some, such as the New King James Version and New American Standard Bible, continue the King James Version reading in spite of its poor textual support, but they note in the margin an alternate reading "will be found" or "discovered."

In determining the sense of εὑρεθήσεται Bauckham preferred the lexical rendering of "will be found" but suggested that it carries the sense of "will be revealed" *for the purpose of condemnation at the judgment*.<sup>5</sup> This sense is not entirely satisfactory, but many have chosen it because there does not seem to be a better option. However, an important study by Wolters suggests a technical, metallurgical meaning for εὑρεθήσεται that fits the refinement imagery used in this verse.<sup>6</sup> Considered in this way, "its meaning would then be something like 'emerge purified' (from the crucible); with the connotation of having stood the test, of being tried and

<sup>5</sup> Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Nelson, 1996), 316–21. Bauckham is dependent here on a study published by W. E. Wilson, "Heuerethesetai in 2 Pet. iii. 10," *Expository Times* 32 (1920–21): 44–45.

<sup>6</sup> Al Wolters, "Worldview and Textual Criticism in 2 Peter 3:10," *Westminster Theological Journal* 49 (1987): 405–13.

true.”<sup>7</sup> This sense fits very well with Peter’s use of the verb in 1 Peter 1:7, where refinement imagery is also present: “so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found [εὐρεθῆ, ‘may emerge purified’] to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

The notion of refinement fits with imagery used in the prophets and applied specifically to the day of the Lord in Malachi 3:2–4 (cf. 4:1–3): “But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.”

Whereas Malachi focused on Levi specifically, Peter looked more generally at the earth and “the works done on it.” The point is that both describe the day of the Lord’s coming using the imagery of refinement. The refinement is meant to lead to a situation “in which,” as Peter said in 2 Peter 3:13, “righteousness dwells.”<sup>8</sup>

Complicating the decision about how to interpret εὐρεθήσεται in 2 Peter 3:10, as Wolters points out, is an assumption many make about Peter’s eschatology. Wolters writes, “This assumption is that the worldview which is given expression in 2 Peter 3 envisages the coming judgment as a cosmic annihilation, a complete destruction or abolition of the created order.”<sup>9</sup> Bauckham also notes that many believe that “the context demands a reference to the annihilation of the earth.”<sup>10</sup> And this assumption appears to guide nuances in translation and interpretation given to the other verbs in the pas-

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 412.

<sup>8</sup> Paul speaks similarly in 1 Corinthians 3:13–15: “Each one’s work will become manifest [φανερὸν], for the Day will disclose it [δηλώσει], because it will be revealed by fire [ἐν πυρὶ ἀποκαλύπτεται], and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.”

Bauckham and others have argued that the verb εὐρεθήσεται in 2 Peter 3:10 is similar to the verbs φανερὸν, δηλώσει, and ἀποκαλύπτεται in this passage (Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 319). This is certainly a strong argument. However, one needs to acknowledge that this kind of *disclosing, manifesting, and revealing* takes place by means of a refining fire. Also Peter’s nuance in 2 Peter 3:10 seems slightly different from Paul’s in that Peter focuses on the positive purpose of the refinement—to *disclose* a righteous result—as can be seen by the parallel in 2 Peter 3:13.

<sup>9</sup> Wolters, “Worldview and Textual Criticism in 2 Peter 3:10,” 408.

<sup>10</sup> Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 320.

sage, such as “burn up” [ESV] for καυσώ in 3:10. A more accurate translation would be “burn with intense heat.”<sup>11</sup> This worldview assumption is most likely the reason some later versions replaced εὔρεθήσεται with κατακαήσεται, and why even with the better textual reading identified, some modern translations continue to prefer that substitution today. However, this assumption must be questioned. It does not fit with biblical eschatology generally, which speaks of a redemption and renewal of the creation, not of its annihilation. The idea of cosmic annihilation properly belongs to Gnostic eschatology, which generally held that materiality as such would be annihilated to make way for a purely spiritual order. Biblical eschatology knows nothing of this, but emphasizes rather a holistic redemption of the created order. What will be eliminated in the Day of the Lord is not the cosmos or materiality as such, but sin and evil. And this is where the language of refinement by fire finds its proper place.

But what about Peter’s declaration in 3:10 and 3:12 that the elements will burn, melt, and dissolve? This brings us to the second crucial term for interpreting Peter’s description of the coming Day of the Lord. Many English versions translate the word στοιχεῖα in these verses as “elements.” The translation is not necessarily wrong. However “elements” carries different senses in English. When they read the word “elements,” many modern readers think of physical/chemical elements such as those identified in the periodic table. Then when they read that “elements” will melt, dissolve, and burn up (especially in versions following the KJV), many think of materiality undergoing something like nuclear fission, ionization, and eventually annihilation.

Of course Peter did not have in mind the elements of the periodic table, since those were identified long after his time. Nor is it likely that he had in mind what in his day were commonly designated as the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water, since earth, fire, and water are used separately from στοιχεῖα in this text. Most commentators believe that the choice for στοιχεῖα here is between (a) angelic powers (e.g., Gal. 4:3; Col. 2:8, 20) or (b)

---

<sup>11</sup> Wolters, “Worldview and Textual Criticism in 2 Peter 3:10,” 408–9. This lexical rendering is contrary to that given in Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 536. They say καυσώ means “be consumed by heat, burn up.” However, the thought of renewal is consistent with that found in Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek–English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 932. The view of Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich implies annihilation, and the view of Liddell and Scott suggests renovation or renewal.

heavenly bodies (such as the sun, moon, and stars). The latter view is preferable. Not only is it a proper sense for στοιχεῖα in the literature of the time, but it naturally fits between “heavens” and “earth” in the cosmic structure presented in 2 Peter 3:10, 12–13.<sup>12</sup>

Understanding εὐρεθήσεται and στοιχεῖα helps us appreciate the imagery Peter was conveying by this cosmic structure. He was speaking of the coming of the Day of the Lord as a movement from the heavens, through the heavenly bodies, to the earth. And this movement is that of a refining fire descending from the heavens, refining the cosmos as it descends, finally bringing that refinement to the earth and the works done on it. The result is “a new heavens and new earth in which righteousness dwells” (3:13).

Certainly we see the intertextual link between Peter’s description of the coming day of the Lord and Malachi’s description in Malachi 3, which also uses the image of a refining fire. But the intertextual linkage to Old Testament prophecy is much greater than this one passage. To see what Peter had in mind when he set his remarks within an exhortation to remember the predictions of the holy prophets, we need to turn to Isaiah, the book that stands at the beginning of the canonical prophetic corpus.

The first chapter of Isaiah functions as an introduction both to the book of Isaiah specifically and to the prophets as a whole. In this chapter the Lord formally brought a charge of sin against His people, with an appeal for repentance. But Isaiah anticipated that the appeal would not be heard. The last third of the chapter (Isa. 1:21–31) sets forth what the Lord will do about it. Here in this introductory chapter to the prophetic corpus we find the imagery of refinement. The unrighteousness of Jerusalem is pictured as silver that has become dross (v. 22). The Lord declares, “I will turn my hand against you and smelt away your dross as with lye and remove your alloy. . . . Rebels and sinners will be broken together and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed . . . . And the strong shall become tinder and his work a spark and both of them shall burn together with none to quench them” (vv. 25, 28, 31). The process of refinement is presented here in the crushing (“broken together”), leeching (“as with lye”), burning, smelting, and separating of metals. What will emerge from this refinement? The next verses, 2:1–4, state that it is the righteous kingdom of God. But the righteousness pictured here is not just for Israel; it extends to all the nations of the earth. All will be in submission to the Lord.

<sup>12</sup> Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 315–16. See also, Peter H. Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 283–87.

The second half of Isaiah 2, however, returns to the judgment-refinement process announced in Isaiah 1. This must take place first. And here is the first canonical prophetic reference to the Day of the Lord: “For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up” (2:12). On that day the Lord will arise in “the splendor of his majesty” (2:11, 19, 21). When He rises, all will be humbled before Him. The “splendor” refers to the shekinah, the bright shining glory that manifests the presence of God. That splendor appears as a fire, which either destroys or sanctifies. And indeed, the oracle begun in Isaiah 2 is completed in 4:2–6 with another picture of the righteous kingdom of God in which the people have been cleansed “by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning.” Then the glory of the Lord will be seen over Zion as cloud, smoke, and “the shining of a flaming fire” (4:5). The refinement predicted in 1:21–31 will be accomplished not by any ordinary fire, but by the fire of God’s own glory, the coming of which is appointed for a certain day.

This imagery reappears at the close of Isaiah (66:15–16), where it leads to the new heavens and the new earth (66:22; cf. 65:17–25), and again at the close of the prophetic corpus in Malachi (3:1–4; cf. 4:1–3), so that it forms a structural feature marking the beginning and the end of both the book of Isaiah and of the whole prophetic corpus. As such, this image of the day in which God comes in fiery glory encloses, as it were, all the other patterns, images, and types of the day of the Lord presented by the prophets, including the various extended and multistaged forms of the “day.” The common motif for all of the patterns is the coming of the Lord with destructive judgment or saving deliverance. The extended patterns in Joel 1–3 and in Isaiah 13 present a narrated theophany with the Lord mustering an army, leading them in invasion, and pouring out His judgment in battle slaughter.

The twofold pattern of Zechariah extends the narrative further with the Lord judging the wickedness of the Gentile invaders as He descends to reign as King on the earth. In the Olivet Discourse Jesus spoke of the seventieth week of Daniel as a day of the Lord unfolding as labor pains in which the Son of Man is coming, appearing visibly in glory at the end. Since the extended, narrated patterns are extended, narrated theophanies, they can be summarized, as it were, by a simpler theophanic image. And this is what is seen in the image of a rising or descending refining, fiery glory. The rising, descending, or coming of the refining fire in the simpler image unfolds as a narrated tribulational judgment sequence in the

extended patterns culminating in the glorious appearing of the Lord and His kingdom.<sup>13</sup>

I was 16 years old when a fire broke out in our home. I woke up in the middle of the night smelling smoke, rousing my mind from a deep sleep to conscious awareness of a present danger. My brother was still asleep in our shared bedroom. My thoughts raced from denial—maybe it's not really that bad—to contingency—how were my brother and I going to get out of there? Suddenly the door burst open and my mother, seeing me sitting up and awake, shouted, "Grab your brother and come this way; the house is on fire!" I pulled Steve out of bed and pushed him to my mother. All three of us hurried down the hall to the back door. I will never forget the scene I passed on the way. There was my dad with the garden hose he had stretched into the dining room, fighting huge flames coming off the wall. By God's grace, he was able to put out the fire and no one was hurt. The house, however, had to be repaired with new construction replacing the old that had passed away.

A fire is coming. It is the glory of the Lord Himself who will return to renew His creation and bring His kingdom into fulfillment. It will unfold as a day of trouble for the present order of things as the old separates like dross from the new that will share in His glory. There is no escaping this fire. Only by repentance and faith can one be received into the glory when it comes. Or destruction will descend on unbelief and hardness of heart. And as we await that day, the Word of God shines like a lamp in a dark place, pointing to the brightness of the glory that is coming, instructing us about that day by the words of the prophets, and teaching us by the command of the Lord through His apostles to walk in the holiness to which we are called and in which we have already begun to share. And we know that as surely as that day is coming, so God has mercifully granted a time for repentance. This is our message; this is our walk, as we await the day that will surely come.

---

<sup>13</sup> The collation of images is seen in Isaiah 66:15–16. The imagery passes from a coming in fire to a military battle. "For behold, the LORD will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire will the LORD enter into judgment, and by his sword, with all flesh; and those slain by the LORD shall be many." One should also note that Peter prepared the reader for an extended day of the Lord by his previous reference to Psalm 90:4 (2 Pet. 3:8–9) and implied that a reason for the extension is to give people opportunity for repentance. This picks up the theme of repentance in many passages on the day of the Lord (e.g., Joel 2:12–17; Zeph. 2:1–3; Zech. 12:10–14; Mal. 4:5–6). Repentance and nonrepentance appear as themes in the book of Revelation, where they are integrated into the extended sequence of judgments (Rev. 7:9–17; 9:20–21; 16:9, 11; cf. 14:9–11).