

EXTREME MAKEOVER: HEAVEN AND EARTH EDITION—WILL GOD ANNIHILATE THE WORLD AND RE-CREATE IT *EX NIHILO*?

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IN THE YEAR AD 180, the early premillennial church father Irenaeus of Lyons wrote:

Neither is the substance nor the essence of the creation annihilated (for faithful and true is He who has established it), but “the fashion of the world passes away;” [1 Cor. 7:31]. . . . But when this present fashion of things passes away, and man has been renewed, and flourishes in an incorruptible state, so as to preclude the possibility of becoming old, then there shall be the new heaven and the new earth, in which the new man shall remain continually, always holding fresh converse with God.¹

Irenaeus’s amillennial counterpart, Origen of Alexandria, held an identical view. Writing around AD 220, he explicitly rejected the idea of a complete annihilation of the universe. After quoting 1 Corinthians 7:31 and Psalm 102:26, he wrote:

For if the heavens are to be changed, assuredly that which is changed does not perish, and if the fashion of the world passes away, it is by no means an annihilation or destruction of their material substance that is shown to take place, but a kind of change of quality and transformation of appearance. Isaiah also, in declaring prophetically that there will be a new heaven and a new earth, undoubtedly suggests a

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¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.36.1, in *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, vol. 1 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 566–67.

similar view. For this renewal of heaven and earth, and this transmutation of the form of the present world, and this changing of the heavens will undoubtedly be prepared for those who are walking along that way which we have pointed out above.²

Likewise, Methodius of Olympus, around AD 300, wrote:

But it is not satisfactory to say that the universe will be utterly destroyed, and sea and air and sky will be no longer. For the whole world will be deluged with fire from heaven, and burnt for the purpose of purification and renewal; it will not, however, come to complete ruin and corruption. . . . God therefore ordered the creation with a view to its existence and continuance.³

Perhaps the best representative of patristic amillennial eschatology, Augustine of Hippo, wrote in the fifth century:

For when the judgment is finished, this heaven and earth shall cease to be, and there will be a new heaven and a new earth. For this world shall pass away by transmutation, not by absolute destruction. And therefore the apostle says, "For the figure of this world passeth away. I would have you be without anxiety." The figure, therefore, passes away, not the nature. . . . And by this universal conflagration the qualities of the corruptible elements which suited our corruptible bodies shall utterly perish, and our substance shall receive such qualities as shall, by a wonderful transmutation, harmonize with our immortal bodies, so that, as the world itself is renewed to some better thing, it is fitly accommodated to men, themselves renewed in their flesh to some better thing.⁴

Rather than a carefully harvested selective reading of the patristic period, these voices from the second through fifth centuries actually represent a unified chorus of fathers who shared the view that this created universe would not cease to exist in a final conflagra-

² Origen, *First Principles* 1.6.4, in *Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, vol. 4 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 262.

³ Methodius, *On the Resurrection* 8, in *Gregory Thaumaturgus, Dionysius the Great, Julius Africanus, Anatolius and Minor Writers, Methodius, Arnobius*, vol. 6 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 365.

⁴ Augustine, *City of God* 20.14, 16, in *St. Augustine's City of God and Christian Doctrine*, vol. 2 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st series, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1887; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 434–35. Augustine's late fourth-century father in the faith, Ambrose of Milan, also drew an analogy between the renewal of the world and the resurrection of the just: "If the earth and heaven are renewed, why should we doubt that man, on account of whom heaven and earth were made, can be renewed?" (Ambrose, *On the Decease of Satyrus* 2.87, in *Ambrose: Select Works and Letters*, vol. 10 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 188).

tion.⁵ Instead, the fires of judgment would purge and purify the present material world, renewing and readying it for eternal life.⁶ Indeed, to find contrary voices during the patristic period, one has to peer across the boundary line of catholic Christianity and look to the Gnostic heretics, who delighted in an eschatology that anticipated the total annihilation of the physical universe.⁷ The patristic theme of renewal, however—whether expressed by literalists or allegorists, premillennialists or amillennialists—resounded with regularity throughout not only the medieval but also the Protestant periods.⁸ Few details of eschatology can claim such his-

⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (New York: Scribner, 1872), 853. See especially the “capstone” of Eastern Orthodox theological thought, John of Damascus, who in the eighth century, wrote, “Wherefore it has been said, *They will perish, but Thou dost endure*: nevertheless, the heavens will not be utterly destroyed. For they will wax old and be wound round as a covering, and will be changed, and there will be a new heaven and a new earth” (John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 2.6, in *Hilary of Poitiers, John of Damascus*, vol. 9 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 22b).

⁶ Cf. 2 Clem. 16.3, in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3d ed., ed. and trans. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 159.

⁷ Cf., e.g., *On the Origin of the World* (NHL II, 5 125.32–127.17), in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3d ed., James M. Robinson (San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco, 1990), 188–89. Blaising writes, “The idea of cosmic annihilation properly belongs to Gnostic eschatology” (Craig A. Blaising, “The Day of the Lord Will Come: An Exposition of 2 Peter 3:1–18,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169 [2012]: 398).

⁸ See Daniel Keating, *First and Second Peter, Jude*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture, ed. Peter S. Williamson and Mary Healy (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 185. Anselm wrote, “We believe that the corporeal structure of this world is to be renewed for the better, and that this will neither take place before the number of elect men is completed and the blessed city perfected nor be postponed beyond its perfection. From this we can infer that from the beginning God intended to perfect both together” (Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo* 1.18, in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, ed. Eugene R. Fairweather, The Library of Christian Classics, ed. John Baillie, John T. McNeill, and Henry P. Van Dusen [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1956], 130). Aquinas stated, “Hence those bodies also will need to receive a greater inflow from the Divine goodness than now, not indeed so as to change their species, but so as to add a certain perfection of glory: and such will be the renewal of the world. Wherefore at the one same time, the world will be renewed, and man will be glorified” (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part 3 [Supp.] Q. 91, Art. 1, in *The “Summa Theologica” of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Third Part (Supplement), QQ. LXXXVII–XCIX and Appendices, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province [New York: Benziger Brothers, 1922], 50). These should suffice for prominent medieval voices.

On the Protestant side, commenting on 2 Peter 3:13 and citing Isaiah 65:17; 30:26; and Matthew 13:43, Martin Luther wrote, “God has promised by the prophets, here and there, that he would create new heavens and a new earth. . . . How that is to pass away we cannot know, except that the promise is, that such a heaven and earth are to be, wherein no sin, but righteousness only, and the children of God shall dwell” (Martin Luther, *The Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude*, trans. John

torical tenacity as the expectation of a renovated rather than re-created universe. In fact, in the late nineteenth century Charles Hodge could still call the view of the “renovated earth” the “common opinion,” though he pointed to post-Reformation Lutheran scholars who introduced the interpretation of “the absolute annihilation of the world.”⁹

Today the ancient and longstanding tradition of a renewed creation has waned. Whereas most fathers, theologians, and reformers read relevant “new creation” Scripture in light of the Bible’s overarching narrative of creation, fall, and redemption, some modern scholars began to deconstruct this narrative based on what they regarded as more faithful, literal readings of the texts, especially Revelation 20:11 and 21:1.¹⁰ Also, whereas proponents of the majority view of a renewed creation strived for theological consistency with the orthodox doctrine of a resurrection body that stood in full continuity with the body that had died, some modern theologians have felt no obligation to retain this doctrinal correspondence.¹¹ Finally, while classic commentators strived to interpret Scripture within a decidedly anti-Gnostic worldview, some

Nicholas Lenker [Minneapolis: Lutherans in All Lands, 1904], 365). Commenting on Isaiah 65:17–18 and cross-referencing Romans 8:20 and Acts 3:21, Calvin wrote, “Let us remember that these things take place in us so far as we are renewed. But we are only in part renewed, and therefore we do not yet see a new heaven and a new earth. . . . But when we shall be perfectly renewed, heaven and earth shall also be fully renewed, and shall regain their former state. And hence it ought to be inferred, as we have frequently remarked, that the Prophet has in his eye the whole reign of Christ, down to its final close, which is also called the day of renovation and restoration” (John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, vol. 4, trans. William Pringle [Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1853], 398–99). Regarding 2 Peter 3:10, Calvin wrote, “Of the elements of the world I shall only say this one thing, that they are to be consumed, only that they may be renovated, their substance still remaining the same, as it may be easily gathered from Romans 8:21, and from other passages” (John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. John Owen [Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1855], 421). Interestingly, the editor attempts to soften Calvin’s clear renewalist interpretation with the following gloss: “All that is said here is, that there will be new heavens and a new earth, and not that the present heavens and the present earth will be renovated. See Rev. xx. 11; xxi. 1” (*ibid.*, note 2).

⁹ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:854.

¹⁰ Cf., e.g., John F. Walvoord, who wrote regarding Revelation 20:11, “The most natural interpretation of the fact that earth and sky flee away is that the present earth and sky are destroyed and will be replaced by the new heaven and new earth” (John F. Walvoord, *Revelation*, The John Walvoord Prophecy Commentaries, ed. Philip E. Rawley and Mark Hitchcock [Chicago: Moody, 2011], 317). Note especially Walvoord’s repeated use of terms like “plain” and “clearly” (*ibid.*, 326).

¹¹ Or they have used the correspondence to argue in a different direction. See Murray J. Harris, *Raised Immortal: Resurrection and Immortality in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 168–71.

twentieth-century evangelicals were not afraid to come to Gnostic conclusions in their interpretations regarding anthropology,¹² soteriology,¹³ or eschatology. The Gnostic view of an annihilated universe due to its essential wickedness again became a viable option.

This article asserts that what can be called the classic interpretation of the “new heavens and new earth” as a renovation of the present physical universe reflects a better canonical and theological reading of the relevant biblical texts and ought to be preferred to the relatively novel readings of more modern commentators.

TWO MODERN VIEWS: RENEWALISM VERSUS RECREATIONISM

According to one popular view today, the present world will be annihilated. In its place God will create a completely new heavens and new earth—*ex nihilo*.¹⁴ This new creation will be not merely *qualitatively* different (“renewed”), but *quantitatively* different (“recreated”).¹⁵ One preacher writes, “The entire present universe will cease to exist. It will be replaced by a completely new heaven and earth where the righteous will live with God forever (Rev. 22:5).”¹⁶ Likewise, John Walvoord asserted that Revelation 21:1 portrays “a totally new heaven and new earth, and not the present heaven and earth renovated.”¹⁷

¹² See the helpful summary and critique of the evangelical tendency toward classically Gnostic “trichotomy” anthropology in Kim Riddlebarger, “Trichotomy: A Beachhead for Gnostic Influences,” *Modern Reformation* 14.4 (1995): 22–26.

¹³ See Earl D. Radmacher, *Salvation*, Swindoll Leadership Library, ed. Charles R. Swindoll and Roy B. Zuck (Nashville: Word, 2000), 107–9, where the discussion of the “new person inside,” created by the divine “seed” in regeneration, is sharply contrasted with the “old man,” the former being sinless, the latter the source of sin.

¹⁴ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 730.

¹⁵ “Nicht eine »Erneuerung« der Welt . . . sondern eine völlige Neuschaffung nach der Zerstörung der alten Welt” (Otto Knoch, *Der Erste und Zweite Petrusbrief, Der Judasbrief*, Regensburger Neues Testament, ed. Jost Eckert and Otto Kuss [Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1990], 285).

¹⁶ John MacArthur Jr., *2 Peter and Jude*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 2005), 125.

¹⁷ John F. Walvoord, “Revelation,” in John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Wheaton: Victor, 1983), 983. Cf. Eric Fuchs and Pierre Reymond, *La deuxième épître de saint Pierre, l'épître de saint Jude*, 2d ed., Commentaire du Nouveau Testament (deuxième série) 13b (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1988), 121.

Those who propagate this view do so by relying on a number of Old and New Testament passages that describe a time when heaven and earth will “pass away” or “perish.” Psalm 102:25–26, quoted in Hebrews 1:10–12, says, “Of old You founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. Even they will perish, but You endure; and all of them will wear out like a garment” (NASB). Similarly, Jesus famously said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away” (Matt. 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33). With vivid images, Isaiah 24:20 pictures the fall of the world: “The earth reels to and fro like a drunkard and it totters like a shack, for its transgression is heavy upon it, and it will fall, never to rise again.” Perhaps the most definitive statements about the ultimate destruction of the universe are found in 2 Peter 3:10 and Revelation 20:11 and 21:1.¹⁸ Peter wrote, “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 John recorded his vision of the new creation in startling terms: “Then 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). And then: “I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea” (21:1).

On the surface, these Old and New Testament texts seem to carry a degree of finality—utter destruction of the present heavens and earth and a replacement with a completely new physical universe. At least this is the interpretation of recreationists.

Yet renewalists come to opposite conclusions. Instead of expecting an annihilation of the present universe followed by a recreation out of nothing, they anticipate a “*transition*, not extinction” of creation.¹⁹ In this view, “neither heaven nor earth will be annihilated,”²⁰ but the coming judgment will purify, change, and renew

¹⁸ Robert L. Thomas notes that the language of 20:11 and 21:1 “is the decisive contextual feature that determines this to be a reference to an entirely new creation” (*Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* [Chicago: Moody, 1995], 440). In addition Revelation 6:12–16, which some regard as a summary of the final judgment, contains terms and imagery reiterated in 20:11 (G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 398–99).

¹⁹ Joseph A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse: Lectures on the Book of Revelation*, 6th ed. (New York: Charles C. Cook, 1900; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1950), 484.

²⁰ Henry C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 516.

the world.²¹ Just as cosmic recreationists can summon biblical texts that say heaven and earth will pass away, renewalists can subpoena their own infallible testimonies.²² In Psalm 148:3–6, all creation is called to praise God: “Praise Him, sun and moon; praise Him, all stars of light! Praise Him, highest heavens, and the waters that are above the heavens! Let them praise the name of the LORD, for He commanded and they were created. He has also established them forever and ever; He has made a decree which will not pass away.” In Psalm 89:36–37 the promise of the eternal covenant with David and his descendants is linked to the eternity of the heavens and earth: “His descendants shall endure forever and his throne as the sun before Me. It shall be established forever like the moon, and the witness in the sky is faithful.”²³

These and other Old Testament passages describe a creation that is not expected to pass away or be destroyed.²⁴ In fact, the sun, moon, stars, and heavens could not cease to exist without disastrous implications for the faithfulness of God and the reliability of His promises. Renewalists also point to New Testament passages that foresee a renovation of creation wrapped up in God’s future plan of cosmic redemption—especially Romans 8:19–22; Acts 3:21; and Matthew 19:28.²⁵

So, which is it? Will this present creation be utterly annihilated and replaced by a new creation *ex nihilo*, as some modern recreationists insist? Or will the present creation, subject to corruption, be purged, purified, and regenerated by the redemptive work of God, as classic and modern renewalists argue? Tracing the theme of the “new heavens and new earth” from its original Old Testament context to its final articulation in Revelation 21 favors the

²¹ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith*, ed. Jeff Purswell (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 467.

²² Thomas notes that the citation of Scriptures for and against recreation vs. renewal creates “a standoff and therefore [is] indecisive,” further arguing that the exegesis of Revelation 20:11 and 21:1 must settle the matter decisively (Thomas, *Revelation 8–22*, 440).

²³ A canonical reading of this passage reveals that the Davidic covenant is fulfilled eternally through Jesus Christ, the final Davidic King. So, just as the Davidic King will endure forever in His incarnate state, the sun and moon, likened to the Davidic promise, must also endure forever. Similarly, God solidifies His promise of everlasting faithfulness to His covenant with Israel by appealing to the continuation of the heavens and earth in Jeremiah 31:35–36.

²⁴ Cf. also Gen. 8:21–22; 48:4; Pss. 15:5; 119:90; Eccles. 1:4. See Seiss, *The Apocalypse: Lectures on the Book of Revelation*, 485–87.

²⁵ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 221–22.

view of the renewalists. Recreationists, on the other hand, attempt to overturn the classic reading with a rebuttable exegesis of one or two selected texts.

ISALAH'S INSTRUCTIVE IMAGERY

The first place to find a description of the “new heavens and new earth” is Isaiah 65:17–25. In this passage the Lord God declares, “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things will not be remembered or come to mind” (Isa. 65:17). Shed of its context, this verse could be interpreted as creation *ex nihilo* following an annihilation of the universe, but the following explanatory passage emphasizes a new *quality* of the world, not a new world *per se*.²⁶

But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem for rejoicing and her people for gladness. I will also rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in My people; and there will no longer be heard in her the voice of weeping and the sound of crying. No longer will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his days; for the youth will die at the age of one hundred and the one who does not reach the age of one hundred will be thought accursed. They will build houses and inhabit them; they will also plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They will not build and another inhabit, they will not plant and another eat; for as the lifetime of a tree, so will be the days of My people, and My chosen ones will wear out the work of their hands. They will not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they are the offspring of those blessed by the LORD, and their descendants with them. It will also come to pass that before they call, I will answer; and while they are still speaking, I will hear. The wolf and the lamb will graze together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox; and dust will be the serpent's food. They will do no evil or harm in all My holy mountain,” says the LORD (Isa. 65:18–25).

²⁶ Premillennialists especially will identify the conditions of Isaiah's “new heavens and a new earth” as the future millennial kingdom following the tribulation judgments and return of Christ. In that eschatological scheme, this present world will endure fiery judgments under the just wrath of God. All wickedness will be wiped clean, and then the world will be restored under the reign of Christ and His saints. Thus, during this thousand-year reign the curse of the Fall will be lifted, the earth will be repopulated by righteous survivors of the Tribulation, and the inhabitants of the earth will experience a quality of life never seen in history. Satan and his demons will no longer be ruling over the heavens; that realm will be controlled by Christ and His saints. In short, peace, harmony, prosperity, and righteousness will reign supreme. Thus, from a premillennial perspective, this condition of renewal and redemption—not a re-creation out of nothing—is what Isaiah 65 identifies as the “new heavens and new earth.” Even non-premillennialists, like G. K. Beale, understand the imagery of Isaiah 65–66 as a passing away not of the material universe, but of the former afflictions of that old order (Beale, *Revelation*, 1043).

Isaiah 66:15–22 also refers to this renewal of the current heavens and earth under the messianic reign. Following a period of judgment by fire, the earth will be renewed: “For behold, the LORD will come in fire and His chariots like the whirlwind, to render His anger with fury, and His rebuke with flames of fire. For the LORD will execute judgment by fire and by His sword on all flesh, and those slain by the LORD will be many” (vv. 15–16). According to this passage, nations will be converted and Israel will be regathered (vv. 17–21). Then God swears by the new conditions of the world described earlier in chapter 65: “‘For just as the new heavens and the new earth which I make will endure before Me,’ declares the LORD, ‘So your offspring and your name will endure’” (66:22). Nothing in the “new heavens and new earth” prophecy of Isaiah suggests an annihilation and new creation *ex nihilo*. In fact, the fiery judgment described in 66:15–16 anticipates survivors and a continuation of the world after the fire (vv. 17, 19–20).

According to the classic interpretation, Isaiah’s imagery of the new heavens and new earth as the renewed condition of this world after a purifying conflagration stands as the background of later canonical development. Therefore, whenever the phrase “new heavens and new earth” appears in the canon, these subsequent references find their inspiration and point of departure from the original use in Isaiah 65:17–25.²⁷

This renewalist reading is confirmed in the next place “new creation” language appears in the canon: 2 Corinthians 5:17. In keeping with the “new creation” idea of redemption and renewal rather than annihilation and recreation, Paul wrote, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.” Here believers have not ceased to exist only to be re-created *ex nihilo*. Neither have their

²⁷ However, appealing to “a common principle in prophecy to bring together events that are distantly related chronologically,” Walvoord seems to have summarily dismissed a careful exegesis of Isaiah 65 and 66 in which the characteristics of the “new heaven and new earth” refer to a purified and renewed world after the fiery judgment of God. He dismisses even Peter’s presentation of the “new heavens and new earth” following the fiery judgment in 2 Peter 3:10–13 (Walvoord, *Revelation*, 325–26). The principle of “prophetic telescoping” can be applied, however, only when it fits with exegesis of a passage, as in Daniel 12:2, that lacks clear chronological indicators. In Daniel 12:2 the two groups are indicated individually as אֲנָשִׁים and are distinguished by a vague י, which later revelation could potentially separate with a greater span of time or other events (cf. similar minimal syntax in Isa. 61:1–2; John 5:28–29). It is a mistake to ignore the syntax and argument of Isaiah 65:17–25, in which the description of restoration that follows the introduction of “new heavens and a new earth” straightforwardly unpacks the conditions of that new reality. In short, any appeal to “prophetic telescoping” must fit exegesis of the text. It cannot be used to trump exegesis.

old ways entirely vanished. Rather, the salvation of a sinner is a regeneration, renewal, and redemption of the old and a transformation into something qualitatively new (Titus 3:5). This progressive sanctification in the present has a view toward entire sanctification upon the believer's resurrection, which itself is in continuity with the present physical life as a seed stands in continuity with its plant (1 Cor. 15:42–44).

PETER'S APOCALYPTIC PROBLEM

The next appearance of “new creation” imagery is in 2 Peter 3, which seems to assert that the universe—even the *elements* themselves—will melt with intense heat prior to the creation of a new heavens and new earth (v. 10). Is this not clear support for annihilation of the present creation in preparation for a completely new creation? To answer this requires examining Peter's entire argument closely, beginning with the general context of the letter.

Peter's second epistle makes reference throughout to the coming judgment, which futurists call the Tribulation—the judgment that culminates in the second coming of Christ. In chapter 2, past judgments are types of the coming judgment. Peter refers to the days of the flood, during which the “world of the ungodly” was destroyed (2:5). Sodom and Gomorrah are also examples. These cities were condemned to “destruction by reducing them to ashes,” and they are thus an example of the coming tribulation judgment (2:6).

Peter then describes the character of the ungodly of this world who await judgment. He notes that they will “in the destruction of those [animal] creatures also be destroyed” (2:12). Peter also refers to the scoffers who make fun of those who expect the Lord's return: “In the last days mockers will come with their mocking, . . . and saying, ‘Where is the promise of His coming?’” (3:3–4). Peter has in mind here the condition of skepticism and cynicism characterizing the end of the age.

In response to this skepticism about the Lord's return, Peter again draws on the analogy of the flood in the ancient world—a world that had been utterly destroyed by water. He writes: “It escapes their notice that by the word of God the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed out of water and by water, through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water” (3:5–6). So, just as the initial order of the world of humanity, animals, and even the earth itself was “destroyed,” leaving only a remnant to return and repopulate the earth, the coming judgment will similarly destroy the present world. But the judgment at Christ's return will be executed by fire rather than water.

Peter writes, “But by His word the present heavens and earth

are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men” (3:7). Considering that Peter punctuates his end-times description with the “new heavens and new earth” language of Isaiah 65:17, it seems likely that his source for the judgment by fire comes from Isaiah 66:15–16, thus connecting Yahweh’s coming judgment by fire in Isaiah with Christ’s imminent judgment of the world at His return.²⁸ This, then, would correspond to the anticipated “day of the Lord,” during which the current world system will be destroyed, just as the pre-flood world ceased to exist, having been replaced by a new order after the flood. Peter refers to this coming judgment as “the day of the Lord” that would come “like a thief” (3:10). There seems to be no reason for understanding this future judgment by fire as anything other than the early church’s anticipated tribulation period, to which Jesus, Paul, and John referred in similar terms (Matt. 24:42–43; 1 Thess. 5:2; Rev. 3:3; 16:15). This coming judgment is what Peter describes with vivid terms of destruction in 3:10–12.

Several exegetically significant issues arise in this passage. First, who or what are the “elements” that will be destroyed in verse 10? The Greek word στοιχεῖα (“elements”) must not be read anachronistically as “the basic atomic components that make up the universe.”²⁹ Rather, three distinct interpretations have been held.³⁰ One might understand στοιχεῖα as wicked angelic beings whose destruction will come at the return of Christ, reflecting the imagery of the removal of heavenly and earthly powers in Isaiah 24:21–22 or 34:4.³¹ A majority of modern exegetes interpret the στοιχεῖα as celestial bodies like the sun, moon, planets, and stars,³²

²⁸ Louis A. Barbieri, *First and Second Peter* (Chicago: Moody, 1977), 122.

²⁹ MacArthur, *2 Peter and Jude*, 124. See Gordon H. Clark, *1 & 2 Peter* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 72.

³⁰ For supporters of each of the three views, see J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and of Jude*, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries, ed. Henry Chadwick (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 364. Peter Davids writes, “All three of these suggestions have a *prima facie* validity and fit the culture in which 2 Peter was written” (Peter H. Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed. D. A. Carson [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006], 284).

³¹ Cf. *1 Enoch* 60.12, *Jubilees* 2.2, Gal. 4:3, 9; Col. 2:8, 20. Modern proponents of this view are rare.

³² Paul Gardner, *2 Peter and Jude*, Focus on the Bible Commentaries (Geanies House, Scotland: Christian Focus, 1998), 121; Daniel Keating, *First and Second Peter, Jude*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture, ed. Peter S. Williamson and Mary Healy (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 181; A. R. C. Leaney, *The Letters of Peter and Jude*, Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 134; Robert Leighton and Griffith Thomas, *1, 2*

or they link the first view with this second view.³³ Still others see στοιχεῖα as referring to the “elements” regarded by ancient philosophers as the building blocks of the world: earth, water, and air, fire itself being the element used for purging the others.³⁴ At least one commentator suggests that Peter intended all three uses of στοιχεῖα to be understood.³⁵

Regardless of which view one takes with regard to the meaning of the word στοιχεῖα, it is important to observe that 2 Peter 3:10 and 12 do not say that “all elements” or even “the elements” will be destroyed, but “elements.” This lack of the article may very well indicate that the most severe fiery judgments of the coming Day of the Lord, in which elements are destroyed, will be localized and limited, not universalized and total. In this case Peter can be read in connection with the later revelation of the future judgment in Revelation 8:1–9:21; 16:1–21, wherein fire is used to judge various elements of this world.

This judgment will result in a radical change to the contents and appearance of the created world, but not its total annihilation. This drastic change—not annihilation—of elements in judgment is also seen in *Wisdom of Solomon* 19:18–20—“For the elements [στοιχεῖα] were changed in themselves by a kind of harmony, like as in a psaltery notes change the name of the tune, and yet are always sounds. . . . For earthly things were turned into watery, and the things, that before swam in the water, now went upon the ground. The fire had power in the water, forgetting its own virtue: and the water forgot its own quenching nature.” In any case, exe-

Peter, Crossway Classic Commentaries, ed. Alister McGrath and J. I. Packer (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999), 284; Richard B. Vinson, Richard F. Wilson, and Watson E. Mills, *1 & 2 Peter, Jude*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, ed. R. Alan Culpepper (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2010), 354.

³³ Davids, *2 Peter and Jude*, 285; David G. Horrell, *The Epistles of Peter and Jude* (Peterborough, U.K.: Epworth, 1998), 180.

³⁴ Fuchs and Reymond write, “Bien que la plupart des exégètes optent pour le sens de corps célestes (astres, étoiles), se fondant sans doute sur une cosmologie à trois niveaux: ciel, astres, terre, nous pensons que le sens d’éléments constitutifs n’est nullement à exclure” (*La deuxième épître de saint Pierre, l’épître de saint Jude*, 118). Some proponents of this interpretation include Clark, *1 & 2 Peter*, 72; George H. Cramer, *First and Second Peter* (Chicago: Moody, 1967), 121; Jerome H. Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 243.

³⁵ Donelson writes, “Not only the sun and the moon, not only the ruling cosmic angels, not only the constitutive elements of the universe, but everything that can be named will melt before the arrival of the Lord” (Lewis R. Donelson, *1 & 2 Peter and Jude: A Commentary*, New Testament Library, ed. C. Clifton Black, M. Eugene Borling, John T. Carroll [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010], 277).

getes go far beyond what the text actually says when they conclude that Peter had in mind the absolute dissolution of all atomic particles in the universe when he referred to the destruction of the στοιχεῖα in 2 Peter 3:10 and 12. The text simply does not say this.

But what, then, does Peter teach? He anticipates this judgment of fire as coming upon the present world system at the return of Christ, that is, during the coming Day of the Lord. This period of judgment will destroy the present system, including all evil and sin. It will also include the destruction of demons and a razing of the world's geography.³⁶ In fact, the fires pictured in 2 Peter 3:10, 12–13 are best interpreted as purifying fires, likely drawing on metallurgical imagery of heating for the sake of purifying and strengthening, not annihilating (Mal. 3:2–4; 4:1–3).³⁷

The new world established after the return of Christ and His fiery judgment, Peter describes thusly: “But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth,” qualifying this statement with regard to its righteous quality—“in which righteousness dwells”—not its creation *ex nihilo* (2 Pet. 3:13). His reference to the “new heavens and new earth” must be understood in his own context of the anticipated coming of Christ in judgment of the present world during the Tribulation and in light of the “new heavens and new earth” promises in Isaiah 65 and 66—both of which refer to the restoration of the world after the coming of the Lord in fire (66:15–16).

Therefore, the destruction language in 2 Peter 3:10–13 gives a vivid picture of judgment referring to the imminent Day of the Lord and the coming of Christ preceding the regeneration of the world (Matt. 19:28). This fits with Peter's earlier expectation, summed up in his message in Acts 3: “Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time” (vv. 19–21).

In sum, a contextual and canonical exegesis of 2 Peter 3 does not demand an annihilation or “uncreation” of the universe and its physical elements. Nor does “new heavens and new earth” in 2 Peter 3 refer to a re-creation *ex nihilo* of a world that has no relation-

³⁶ Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Revelation* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1930), 344.

³⁷ See excellent discussion in Blaising, “The Day of the Lord Will Come,” 395–99.

ship to the present physical world. Just as the pre-flood earth was renewed after judgment by water, the current world will be renewed after judgment by fire. However, Peter’s language implies that the coming judgment at the return of Christ will be analogous to the world-altering flood of Noah, as Alferd says: “The flood did not annihilate the earth, but changed it; and as the new earth was the consequence of the flood, so the final new heavens and earth shall be of the fire.”³⁸

Genesis 1–8		Genesis 8– Revelation 20		Revelation 21–22
Original Heavens and Earth	Judged by Flood	Current Heavens and Earth	Judged by Fire	Future Heavens and Earth
“The world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water” (2 Peter 3:6)		“The present heavens and earth are being re- served for fire” (2 Peter 3:7)		

HOW “NEW” ARE THE NEW HEAVENS AND EARTH?

It is a general methodological assumption of the patristic interpreters, as well as modern renewalists, that John’s vision of the new heavens and new earth in Revelation 21 must be read in light of Isaiah 65–66.³⁹ To read this as annihilation and re-creation *ex nihilo* would be to read into it meanings for “pass away” and “new heavens and new earth” that are foreign to the sum of biblical teaching.

The terms translated “to pass away” do not mean “to be annihilated.” The terms are neutral, referring simply to “going away,” or “departing.” One of these terms, *παρέρχομαι*, refers to the old things of the believer’s life that have “passed away” (2 Cor. 5:17), drawing similarly on new creation imagery and implying a remolding of a person’s life and character, not an annihilation of the old and replacement by the new. First Peter 4:3 uses the same Greek term in a similar sense: “For the time already past [*παρέρχομαι*] is

³⁸ Henry Alferd, *Alferd’s Greek Testament: An Exegetical and Critical Commentary*, 5th ed., vol. 4, part 2 (Grand Rapids: Guardian, 1976), 418.

³⁹ Cf. Beale, *Revelation*, 1041.

sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles.” The time of former sin has “passed away.” A synonymous term, used in Revelation 21:1, ἀπέρχομαι is used in Revelation 9:12 and 11:4 to refer to the first and second woes that had “passed,” that is, they simply came and went, giving way to a new set of circumstances. And Revelation 18:14 and 21:4 refer to previous conditions of the world that had also passed away.

Therefore, even if the vision of passing away has a direct correspondence with the anticipated events, it is not necessarily picturing annihilation of the old to make way for the ontologically new.⁴⁰ The uses of the Greek terms for “pass away” in 2 Peter 3:10 and Revelation 21:1 could refer to a radical transformation of the quality of something rather than to its absolute destruction. This is consistent with the general meaning of καινός, “new,” which “usually indicates newness in terms of quality, not time.”⁴¹ Read in this light, two of the passages that seemed to suggest annihilation actually fit the perspective of a qualitative redemption, not quantitative substitution.

Scripture’s last reference to the new heaven and new earth says, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea” (Rev. 21:1). John said he had seen “the first earth pass away,” which was part of the vision of the heaven and earth fleeing from the presence of God in Revelation 20:11. Remembering that John had been seeing a series of symbolic visions throughout the book, we must allow the text itself to interpret what John was seeing here.⁴² Though it is possible that the symbolic vision was meant to represent a complete annihilation and re-creation, it is just as possible that it symbolized an “extreme makeover” of the present crea-

⁴⁰ See Seiss, *Apocalypse*, 484.

⁴¹ Beale, *Revelation*, 1040. Cf. Hoekema, who notes, “The word *neos* means new in time or origin, whereas the word *kainos* means new in nature or in quality. [Paul looks forward to] not the emergence of a cosmos totally other than the present one, but the creation of a universe which, though it has been gloriously renewed, stands in continuity with the present one” (Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 280).

⁴² Not doing so is perhaps the primary interpretational failure of most recreationist exegetes. While the vision of the heaven and earth fleeing from God in 20:11 and the appearing of a new, perfect creation in 21:1 must be taken as having been literally seen by John, the interpretation of what the vision means is contained in 21:3–5. The vision of vanishing creation and appearing of new creation need not be taken more literally than the vision of a seven-headed monster (13:1–8) or a seven-eyed lamb (5:6–14). The interpretation of this vision must be the decisive factor, not the uninterpreted vision itself (contra Thomas, *Revelation 8–22*, 440).

tion—a “new and improved” version that bears little resemblance to the past order of things.⁴³

Following John’s vision of the fleeing of heaven and earth and its replacement by a new creation, Revelation 21:3–5 interprets the vision in keeping with the idea of qualitative renewal and redemption similar to Isaiah and 2 Peter.⁴⁴ The voice from heaven explained the vision for John immediately after he witnessed it:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.” And He who sits on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” And He said, “Write, for these words are faithful and true” (Rev. 21:3–5).

Revelation 21:4 interprets the symbols of the vision that heaven and earth “passed away”—“the first things have passed away.” What things are these? Not elements, atoms, or molecules, but the evil order of things: death, wickedness, grief, suffering, pain, degeneration, and deterioration that had long held all of these physical and spiritual elements in bondage. Those are the first things that had “passed away.” Thus, the vision of Revelation 21:1–2 and its God-breathed interpretation in verses 3–5 neatly build on, tie up, and complete the “new creation” theme developed throughout the Old and New Testaments, including Paul’s own anticipation of cosmic redemption in Romans 8, when “the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (8:21), which will coincide with the bodily resurrection of the saints at the return of Christ (8:23).⁴⁵

⁴³ See Beale, *Revelation*, 1040, who writes, “This is probably not a portrayal of a literal new creation but a figurative depiction. . . . In light of the qualitative nature of the contrast between ‘new’ creation and ‘first’ creation, it is likely that the meaning of the figurative portrayal is to connote a radically changed cosmos, involving not merely ethical renovation but transformation of the fundamental cosmic structure (including physical elements).”

⁴⁴ Cf. Beale, *Revelation*, 1046, who writes, “The introductory speech clause ‘I heard . . .’ functions as an interpretive formula. Therefore, the quotation that follows interprets the city and marriage pictures of v 2.” This should take one step further and recognize that the imagery of the “new heavens and new earth” in verse 1 is included in the vision that is interpreted in verses 3–5, as the language of “passing away” of former things interprets both images (cf. Isa. 65:17–18, where both new heavens and new earth as well as renewed Jerusalem are paired).

⁴⁵ The greatest misunderstanding concerning the “new heavens and new earth” described in Revelation 21 has been to take the symbolic vision in verses 1–2 too literally rather than learning its meaning from the prophetic interpretation in vers-

CONCLUSION

A majority of writers from the patristic, medieval, and reformation eras advanced a view of the new heavens and new earth as cosmic renewal following purifying fire rather than cosmic recreation *ex nihilo* following an annihilating holocaust. Such a reading is not only allowed by a careful exegesis of the relevant texts, but also presents a more cogent picture of the canonical reading from Isaiah, through Paul and Peter, and into the book of Revelation.⁴⁶ It also represents a reading of the texts that is more consistent with the redemptive themes of Scripture and an orthodox emphasis on the cleansing and restoration of creation rather than the Gnostic notion of utterly annihilating an unredeemable creation that is evil *per se*.

The classic renewalists have always insisted that God's plan is not to surrender to the destructive work of Satan, but to reverse the degeneration of creation through resurrection and regeneration.⁴⁷ As human bodies have been redeemed and will be resurrected and glorified, so the physical world will be redeemed, restored, and glorified at the return and reign of Christ (Rom. 8:18–25).⁴⁸ From the renewalist's perspective, at stake is the ultimate cosmic defense of the goodness and greatness of God.

es 3–5 and from the use of the same phrase elsewhere in the Old and New Testaments. In light of the Bible's entire teaching about "new creation," the present creation is bound for regeneration and redemption, *not* annihilation and re-creation *ex nihilo*.

⁴⁶ See Ironside, *Lectures on Revelation*, 350–52, who notes that 21:1 "reminds us of Isaiah's prophecy" and says "it is to these promises that the apostle Peter refers in his second epistle" (p. 351). Ironside applies all of these passages to the millennium (p. 350).

⁴⁷ See R. C. Sproul, who appeals to God's overall plan of redemption: "God has no design to annihilate this present world. His plan is to redeem it" (*1–2 Peter*, St. Andrew's Expository Commentary [Wheaton: Crossway, 2011], 285).

⁴⁸ G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentary 19 (London: Black, 1966), 265–66.