

A Dozen Reasons Why 2 Peter 3 Is Not about Planet Destruction

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IN SOME TRANSLATIONS OF 2 Peter 3, we see implied that the planet itself (heavenly bodies/elements) will be “burned up.” The majority view today about this passage is that, indeed, it is talking about the end of time and the destruction of the universe.

However, there are many reasons why this is not literally about the physical cosmos, but rather is about the coming events of AD 70 when God judged old covenant Israel. The critical verse is 3:10. Here’s how the New Living Translation renders this verse:

*“But the day of the Lord will come as unexpectedly as a thief. Then the heavens will pass away with a terrible noise, and the very **elements** [stoicheion] themselves will disappear in fire, and the earth and everything on it will be found to **deserve judgment** [katakaio].”*

Let’s dig into this text and explore its meaning, using Scripture to interpret Scripture.

1. The Greek word for “heavenly bodies/elements” (which were to be “burned up” in verse 3:10) is STOICHEION. Everywhere else in the New Testament where this word is used, it is about the “elements” of the OLD COVENANT, not physical universe things. Look up these passages: Galatians 4:3, 9; Colossians 2:8-9, 20-22; Hebrews 5:12-13.
2. The Bible elsewhere anticipates a never-ending earth (Eccl 1:4; Ps 78:69, 104:5, 148:3-6; Eph 3:21) and that God would never again strike down every living creature (Gen 8:21; 9:11).
3. The context of Peter’s letters and speeches is the utter imminence of the culmination of the last days: The end of “all things” was “at hand” per 1 Peter 4:7. It was “time for judgment to begin” per 1 Peter 4:17. Peter was living in the last days per Acts 2:14-20 and 1 Peter 1:20.
4. The “Day of the Lord” (3:10) in the Bible is consistently about God’s judgments on specific groups of people—not about the literal destruction of the planet. For example, this is true in Ezekiel 30:2-4 (judgment against Egypt) and Amos 5:18-25 (against Israel). There are approximately 17 Day-of-the-Lord passages in the Old Testament, and five in the New Testament. I detail all of them in my book, *Christian Hope Through Fulfilled Prophecy*.

5. It is interesting that the Thessalonian Christians thought that the Day of the Lord had already come (2 Thess 2:1-2)! So, they had a different understanding about the Day of the Lord than modern Christians. They believed in a Day of the Lord that could be MISSED.
6. The language about COSMIC DISTURBANCES and DISRUPTIONS IN THE CREATED ORDER is standard Hebraic apocalyptic language, used in non-literal terms about THEOLOGICAL or COVENANTAL events, *and especially about actual judgments by God on guilty groups of people*. This is discussed in Chapter 8 of my book, *Prophecy Primer: Essays on Eschatology*.
7. Peter drew the “heaven and earth” language (3:13) from elsewhere in the Old and New Testaments. Foundational passages about the New Heaven and New Earth are found in Isaiah 65-66 and Revelation 21. In these passages, we see that God judges His enemies, but regular human history continues, in which there is still death and sin (Isa 65:20; Rev 22:15) and the need for evangelism because some people had not yet heard of God (Isa 66:19-24). So, the New Heaven and New Earth cannot be the end of history.
8. The Greek word for “burned up” is KATAKAIÖ, which is rendered in various translations as “exposed,” “found to deserve judgment,” or “laid bare.” Fire is judgment language. This is appropriate language for what happened in AD 70 to the old covenant order.
9. We are given in the text the comparison of Noah’s day (3:6) when only the ungodly were destroyed, and Noah and his family were saved from this destruction (cf. 2 Pet 2:5). Noah’s flood is similar to what happened in AD 70, where God took vengeance on old covenant Israel for their sins and refusal to accept Jesus as Messiah (Matt 23:29-24:2; etc.). But the physical planet remained. And Christians in Jerusalem escaped the slaughter by fleeing the city when they saw Jerusalem surrounded by armies as warned by Jesus (Luke 21:20-21).
10. The “day as a thousand years” language (3:8) is often used to dismiss the numerous time-statements in the New Testament. But “day as a thousand years” cannot be literal, because otherwise it would be nonsense. Thus, it cannot mean that a short time means a long time. (Was Jesus in the tomb 3,000 years?) A “thousand” in the Bible can be used as a symbolic term of completeness.
11. Peter told his readers in verses 11-13 that **THEY** should be looking for the coming Day of the Lord. If we are to receive a message as to the timing of the events in the statement about a thousand years being as a day, perhaps we should consider that it means the *opposite* of what many Christians think. Peter meant that the expected events were a *short* time into the future—

not a long time—especially given his other imminence statements (Acts 2:14-20; 1 Pet 1:20; 4:7, 17).

12. What about Jesus' "coming" (3:3)? It seems that certain scoffers (3:3) were deriding Christians, claiming that Jesus had not come as He had promised to destroy the temple in their generation (Matt 24:1-3; 29-34). Peter retorted, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promises" (3:9). Peter was telling the scoffers that they should not make the mistake of believing Jesus had overlooked His promise of judgment on Israel while some of them were alive (Matt 10:15-23; 16:27-28; 26:64; Rev 1:1-3; etc.) The perceived delay or "slackness" was simply God's patience toward all who would come to repentance and be saved in the last days of the Old Covenant Age.

Finally, some questions: Does the thought of a burning planet somehow give you hope? What about the people who would be destroyed who have not yet come to know Jesus, including your unborn or infant offspring? Does this sound like a God who promised never again to strike down every living creature (Gen 8:21)? Was Jesus' sacrificial death not adequate for God to satisfy His anger and justice? ✝

(This article is Chapter 13 of Mr. Meek's book *Prophecy Primer*. The book is available at Amazon. He is also the editor of the website ProphecyQuestions.com.)