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## *Does God Own a Death Star? The Destruction of the Cosmos in 2 Peter 3:1-13*

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### **Introduction**

In the film *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, the evil Empire's Darth Vader and General Tarkin destroy Princess Leia's home planet of Alderaan using their newly developed weapon of mass destruction: the Death Star. The Death Star is capable of obliterating entire planets, turning them into space dust in one fell laser-beam swoop, and this is exactly what happens to Alderaan. Interestingly, some interpreters of Scripture see a similar annihilation taking place in 2 Peter 3:1-13, where Peter says that when Christ returns the "heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved" (v. 10). Some commentators take this to mean that God will obliterate the entire physical creation, much like the Death Star annihilates planets. Of course this is not an exact parallel—Vader and the Empire do not go on to create a new Alderaan, but God will create, in this interpretation, a "new heavens and new earth" (v. 11; Rev 21:1). Nevertheless, these scholars do claim that the present creation is completely and utterly destroyed, after which God will create a new heavens and new earth, presumably once again *ex nihilo*. Evidence for this view is primarily twofold: the images of burning, melting, dissolving, and passing away are all interpreted as annihilation, and the term "new" is interpreted as "completely distinct from the old."

This article will argue that the total annihilation interpretation of 2 Peter 3:1-13 does not accurately reflect Peter's intention in this passage or, tangentially, John's view of the new heavens and new earth in Revelation 21-22. Four main exegetical and theological observations will demonstrate that God does not own a Death Star, so to speak, and will not obliterate the cosmos, or physical creation, at Christ's return. First, the meaning of "pass away" in the New Testament never indicates annihilation, and in fact is used to speak of events that have already taken place. Second, the metaphor of fire in the New Testament and especially in Peter's epistles is typically used in reference to refining or eternal judgment, not annihilation. Third, the comparison to Noah's flood is instructive about what it means for the earth to be destroyed. Finally, to interpret 2 Peter 3:1-13 as teaching that God obliterates the entire creation does not align with the biblical teaching that God

created his world good and has begun to redeem it. After a brief examination of several annihilationist interpretations of 2 Peter 3:1-13, each of these four arguments will be discussed in detail.

### The Supposed Annihilation of Creation in 2 Peter 3:1-13

Although some have argued that the annihilation position is one found now only in “hyperdispensationalism” and is perhaps waning in broader evangelicalism,<sup>1</sup> there are still a number of contemporary scholars and clergy from a wide range of doctrinal backgrounds who hold to the complete obliteration of the cosmos based on 2 Peter 3. From John MacArthur comes the following:

With the culmination of the final phase of the day of the Lord, **the heavens will pass away with a roar** - a universal upheaval that Jesus Himself predicted in the Olivet Discourse: ‘Heaven and earth will pass away’ (Matt. 24:35). **Heavens** refers to the visible, physical universe of interstellar and intergalactic space. Like Christ, Peter foresaw the disintegration of the entire universe in an instant ‘uncreation,’ not by any naturalistic scenario, but solely by God’s omnipotent intervention.

The term **roar** (*rhoizedon*) . . . connotes the whizzing, crackling sounds that objects emit as fire consumes them. On that future day, the noise from the disintegrating atoms of the universe will be deafening, unlike anything mortals have ever heard before.

. . . The word **elements** (*stoicheia*) . . . [w]hen used in reference to the physical world, . . . describes the basic atomic components of the universe.

The **intense heat** will be so powerful that **the earth and its works will be burned up**. God’s power will consume everything

<sup>1</sup>This seems to be Gale Heide’s assumption. Gale Z. Heide, “What is New About the New Heaven and New Earth? A Theology of Creation From Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (1997): 40. Although I arrived at my conclusions about this passage independent from Heide, after reading his article it is apparent that many of our arguments are similar regarding how to understand 2 Pet 3:1-13. This article seeks to expand on and further Heide’s points, especially in regards to the meaning of the terms “pass away” and “elements,” as well as to the place of a theology of creation in understanding this passage. Additionally, Heide’s article, while still relevant, was published almost two decades ago. Given the continued assumption of the annihilationist position in current scholarship, and especially among conservative evangelicals, it seems appropriate to once again provide a rebuttal to that argument. Finally, Heide’s argument relies heavily on distinguishing 2 Pet 3 as an apocalyptic passage in terms of genre, while this article seeks to provide a more biblical theological approach to understanding Peter’s use of conflagration, fire, and flood language.

in the material realm—the entire physical earth—with its civilizations, ecosystems, and natural resources - and the surrounding celestial universe. Yet even in the midst of that mind-boggling destruction, the Lord will protect his sheep (emphasis original).<sup>2</sup>

The message here is clear: nothing will be left of the current physical creation after the sweeping judgment of the Day of the Lord. On the opposite end of the theological spectrum, Barbara Rossing argues that Peter's view of the end of the world in 2 Peter 3:1-13 is at odds with the rest of the New Testament's teaching on the fate of the created world, and is the only NT text containing the "idea of a fiery eschatological conflagration that consumes the entire planet. . . . Other biblical texts use the image of a refiner's fire or the fire of purification. But no other New Testament text speaks of a total world-destroying fire."<sup>3</sup> She goes so far as to suggest that clergy ought to avoid teaching 2 Peter 3 because its views are so far from the rest of the New Testament, and specifically from John's view in Revelation 21-22.<sup>4</sup> And although Carsten Thiede does not argue that Peter disagrees with the rest of the NT writers, he does contrast Peter's supposed annihilationist view to early church theologians Irenaeus and Origen, who take the transformational view.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, David VanDrunen, in articulating a "two kingdoms" approach to the church's relationship to culture, argues that this present world will be completely destroyed at Christ's second coming, and that the only point of continuity between this world and the new creation (e.g. Rom. 8:21) will be believers' bodies.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to these more academic approaches to the interpretation of this passage, a number of clergy have understood annihilation to be Peter's referent here. Take, for instance, Jerry Falwell's statement, "The earth will go up in dissolution from severe heat. The environmentalists will be really shook up, then, because God is going to blow it all away, and bring down new heavens and new earth."<sup>7</sup> Mark Driscoll recently reportedly quipped at a Catalyst conference, "I know who made the environment. He's coming back, and he's

<sup>2</sup>John MacArthur, *2 Peter and Jude*, MacArthur NT Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 2005), 124-25.

<sup>3</sup>Barbara Rossing, "Hastening the Day When the Earth Will Burn: Global Warming, 2 Peter, and the Book of Revelation," in *The Bible in the Public Square: Reading the Signs of the End Times*, eds., Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, Ellen Bradshaw Aitken, and Jonathan A. Draper (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 30. See also her shorter article version of this essay, "Hastening the Day' When the Earth Will Burn? Global Warming, Revelation and 2 Peter 3 (Advent 2, Year B)," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 35 (2008): 363-73.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 32-33.

<sup>5</sup>Carsten Peter Thiede, "A Pagan Reader of 2 Peter: Cosmic Conflagration in 2 Peter 3 and the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 26 (1986): 79-86.

<sup>6</sup>David VanDrunen, *Living in God's Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 64-67, 81.

<sup>7</sup>Jerry Falwell, "The Myth of Global Warming" (sermon, Thomas Road Baptist Church, Lynchburg, VA, February 25, 2007), as quoted in Barbara Rossing, "Hastening the Day," 29.

going to burn it all up. So yes, I drive an SUV.”<sup>8</sup> Driscoll has since stated that he was “just joking,”<sup>9</sup> but nevertheless the statement appears to sum up what many Christians believe about the fate of the created order at Jesus’ return.

A body of scholarship from earlier in the twentieth century also supports these interpretations of 2 Peter 3 and its view of the end of the world. While MacArthur relies on the terms “roar,” “heavens,” and “burned up” for his interpretation and Rossing opts for an obliterating rather than transforming understanding of fire, Larry Overstreet argues that Peter’s use of the phrase “pass away” clearly refers to the heavens and the earth being annihilated. Indeed, according to Overstreet, “when God causes this catastrophic event, the destruction will be complete and total.” In other words, nothing—not an atom—will be left.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, from a text critical and grammatical perspective, some scholars have taken εὑρεθήσεται<sup>11</sup> to mean annihilation.<sup>12</sup> Finally, commentators such as Jerome Neyrey appear to argue for the annihilationist position,<sup>13</sup> while others leave open the possibility for

<sup>8</sup>Mark Driscoll as quoted by Jonathan Merritt, “Is Mark Driscoll This Generation’s Pat Robertson?” Religion News Service, <http://jonathanmerritt.religionnews.com/2013/05/13/is-mark-driscoll-this-generations-pat-robertson/> (accessed: 23 May 2013).

<sup>9</sup>Mark Driscoll, “Catalyst, Comedy, and Critics,” PastorMark.tv, <http://pastormark.tv/2013/05/15/catalyst-comedy-and-critics> (accessed: 23 May 2013). Notice in this post that Driscoll does not clarify if he believes the earth will be annihilated, only that he does care for the environment because God made it. This is of course not a wrong reason for environmental care, but it does not clarify Driscoll’s statement above concerning God’s supposed obliteration of the world at his return.

<sup>10</sup>R. Larry Overstreet, “A Study of 2 Peter 3:10-13,” *Bibliotheca Sacra [BibSac]* 137 (1980): 365.

<sup>11</sup>For the text-critical issues involved with this reading, see Frederick W. Danker, “II Peter 3:10 and Psalm of Solomon 17:10,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche [ZNW]* 53 (1962): 82; Hellmut Lenhard, “Ein Beitrag Zur Übersetzung von II Ptr 3:10d,” *ZNW* 52 (1961): 128; and idem, “Noch Einmal Zu 2 Petr 3:10d,” *ZNW* 69 (1978): 136. Both Wenham and Wolters’ important articles on the text critical issues will be discussed below.

<sup>12</sup>J. W. Roberts, “A Note on the Meaning of II Peter 3:10d,” *Restoration Quarterly* 6 (1962): 32-33.

<sup>13</sup>Jerome H. Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible, vol. 37C (Doubleday: New York, 1964; reprint, 1993), 243. Neyrey’s specific argument is that “elements” refers to the fundamental components of the world in the ancient understanding of the cosmos (earth, water, air, and fire), which necessarily includes the physical earth. For other commentators and exegetes who take the annihilationist position, see, for example, William R. Baker, “The Future of the Cosmos in the Eschatology of 2 Peter: A Study of the Meaning and Background of 2 Peter 3:7-13” (M.A. Thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1976), 140-44, 160; Danny Petrillo, “The Conceptual Background to the ‘New Heavens and New Earth’ in 2 Pet. 3:13” (M.A. Thesis, Harding Graduate School of Religion, 1981), 50, 69; and perhaps the most influential, Charles Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1959), 288. While particularly in the commentaries there has been a shift towards the transformationalist view in the last 20-30 years, one can see that there is a substantial amount of scholarship supporting the annihilationist view from the mid-twentieth century, and interpreters like MacArthur and Rossing above are still promulgating it. Additionally, contemporary commentators like Schreiner (see n. 10), while seemingly leaning toward a transformationalist view, leave open the possibility that the passage speaks of the annihilation of the cosmos.

either an annihilationist or transformationalist interpretation.<sup>14</sup>

Even though the annihilationist view may still hold sway in some scholarly and pastoral circles, and especially in conservative evangelicalism, and even though it may have some support in previous scholarship, it does not seem to be the best reading of 2 Peter 3:1-13 for at least the following reasons.<sup>15</sup> Peter does not use the phrase “pass away” to denote annihilation; Peter uses the fire imagery to speak of refinement, not annihilation; Peter uses the flood comparison to speak of purification, not annihilation; and Peter writes within a canonical framework that includes a theology of God’s good creation and his promised redemption of it. The remainder of this article will discuss each of these arguments in detail in order to demonstrate that Peter does not view the end of the world as annihilation and re-creation *ex nihilo*, but purification and transformation of the current cosmos leading to the new heavens and new earth.

### Arguments Against the Annihilationist Interpretation

#### The Meaning of “Pass Away”

One of the most important phrases in this passage is found in 2 Peter 3:10, where Peter says that, “the heavens will *pass away* with a roar.” The exact meaning of this phrase is complicated, and the ambiguity of it is not immediately clarified by looking at its use elsewhere in the NT. Although a two-word phrase in English, the wording in Greek is a single verb, *παρελεύσονται*. This verb in its different conjugations can be found twenty-one times in the NT, and is used in at least seven different ways. First, it can be used to speak of walking, going, or coming, as in Matthew 8:28; 14:15; Mark 6:48; 14:35; Luke 12:37; 17:7; 18:37; Acts 16:8. Similarly, it can also

<sup>14</sup>E.g. Schreiner, who explicitly states, “It is difficult to know if Peter thought of the purification and renovation of this world by fire or if he had in mind the complete destruction of this present world and the creation of a new one.” Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude* NAC, vol. 37; ed., Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 377, 385. He is admittedly more open about his transformationalist leanings in his NT theology tome, saying “Some think that [Peter] predicts the annihilation of the present world and the creation of a completely new world (e.g. Overstreet 1980: 362-65). It seems more likely, although certainty is impossible, that God will purify the old world by fire and create out of the same elements a new world (Wolters 1987).” Idem, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 825 n. 61. For the more ambivalent stance taken in Schreiner’s commentary, see also Michael Green, *2 Peter & Jude*, 2nd ed., Tyndale New Testament Commentary, ed. Leon Morris (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 142-44; Robert Harvey and Philip H. Towner, *2 Peter and Jude*, InterVarsityPress New Testament Commentary, ed. Grant Osborne (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), 120-21; and PHEME PERKINS, *First and Second Peter, James, and Jude*. Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1995), 188-94. Like Schreiner, neither Harvey and Towner, nor Green, nor Perkins seems to take a position on the matter, and Perkins does not even mention the options at all.

<sup>15</sup>Again, as noted in footnote 1, I am not here attempting to provide any new exegetical insights. Rather, I want to revisit a position that is still popular among conservative evangelicals today with the intent of compiling and re-arguing older insights in order to persuade those who still hold to an annihilationist understanding.

refer to time passing, as in Acts 27:9 and 1 Peter 4:3. Third, in Luke it is used to speak of neglecting or disobeying a command (Luke 11:42; 15:29), and in James 1:10 it is used fourthly to speak of the mortality of human beings. Jesus also uses it to ask for God to “let this cup pass from me” (Matt 26:39, 42), and Paul uses it to refer to our new nature in Christ, as the old has passed away, in 2 Corinthians 5:17.

Finally, a number of times in the NT this verb is used to refer to the fate of heaven and earth. Other than 2 Peter 3:10, it is used in that sense exclusively in the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus uses it in Matthew 5:18 when he says, “For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass away from the Law until all is accomplished.”<sup>16</sup> A parallel saying is found in Luke 16:17. The other six uses in the Synoptics are found in the parallel passages of Matthew 24:34-35; Mark 13:30-31; and Luke 21:32-33, each of which recount Jesus’ apocalyptic discourse that he gives immediately prior to the Passion narrative. Jesus says in these passages, “this generation will not pass away until these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

The first aspect of these uses that should grab our attention in the context of understanding Peter’s use of the phrase is that it is not at all clear that any of them refer to the annihilation, obliteration, or total destruction of anything. In fact, other than the uses by the synoptic evangelists and Paul, typically this phrase does not refer to destruction at all. And even in the case of the use by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Paul, it is still not clear that “pass away” means anything like annihilation. Second, and relatedly, it seems clear that at least in Paul’s use in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that “pass away” does not mean annihilation.<sup>17</sup> There “the old” has passed away and the new has come, but we still “wait eagerly . . . for the redemption of our bodies” (Rom 8:23), for our final glorification and freedom from sin (1 John 3:2).

One might argue that the uses in the Synoptics are unrelated to Paul’s use, but even here it is ambiguous at best that Jesus means anything like annihilation or destruction by the phrase. In fact, given Mark’s clear connections between the Olivet Discourse and the passion narrative, it appears that at least Mark interprets Jesus’ apocalyptic prophecies, including the reference to heaven and earth passing away, as referring to his death and resurrection.<sup>18</sup> This would mean that in at least Mark, the phrase “pass away” refers to the destruction of the old order at Jesus’ death and resurrection—and clearly heaven and earth were not obliterated or annihilated at that point.

<sup>16</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the English Standard Version.

<sup>17</sup>Heide, “What’s New about the New Heaven and the New Earth?,” 44.

<sup>18</sup>Peter Bolt, *The Cross From a Distance: Atonement in Mark’s Gospel*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 85-115. See also N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 321-68, for the argument that both Matthew 24 and Mark 13 refer to Jesus’ impending passion, resurrection, ascension, and the destruction of the Temple in AD 70.

Given the ambiguity at best of “pass away” as referring to annihilation, the suggestion here is that at this point we ought to be cautious about using it to support an annihilationist interpretation of this passage. This caution is made more important by Peter’s use of other imagery, parallels, and phrasing in 2 Peter 3:1-13.

### Refining Fire

In addition to “pass away,” another important image in Peter’s explanation of Christ’s return is that of destruction by fire. In 2 Peter 3:7, 10, and 12, Peter uses imagery of the world burning and being dissolved. There are a number of questions related to what this imagery means, including the referent for Peter’s term “elements” (στοιχεῖα) and the text-critical issue of the verb in 3:10. For the former, although some scholars take “elements” to mean the basic atomic building blocks of the universe,<sup>19</sup> in which case Peter would certainly be referring to annihilation,<sup>20</sup> the more likely option and the more accepted view in scholarship is that Peter is referring to the heavenly bodies, namely the sun, moon, and the stars.<sup>21</sup> An important point for this interpretation is the fact that Peter appears to be quoting Isaiah 34:4, which refers to the dissolution of the stars, not atomic or elemental building blocks.<sup>22</sup> This view also comports with Revelation 21:23, which states that in the new heavens and new earth there will be “no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the lamb.”<sup>23</sup> Most importantly, perhaps, is the fact that Peter seems to state in his Pentecost sermon that the cosmic disruption of the elements has already happened. In Acts 2:17-21 Peter quotes Joel 2:28-32 as being fulfilled at Pentecost, and part of Joel’s prophecy includes these words: “And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day” (Acts 2:19-20; cf. Joel 2:30-31). Again, Peter quotes this as being fulfilled at Pentecost, when the Spirit of God is poured out on all flesh (Acts 2:17; Joel 2:28). Cosmic disruption

<sup>19</sup>E.g. MacArthur, *2 Peter and Jude*, 124. In the ancient world it would not be atoms but the four elements: earth, water, wind, and fire.

<sup>20</sup>Peter H. Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed., D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 284.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 286.

<sup>22</sup>Richard Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*. Word Biblical Commentary [WBC] 50, eds., David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 316. Bauckham also notes that the interpretation of “elements” referring to the heavenly bodies is supported by Theophilus, Justin, Polycrates, Eusebius, and Tatian. Ibid. For the Isa 34:4 reference, see also Harvey and Towner, *2 Peter and Jude*, 120; and Simon J. Kistemaker, *James, Epistles of John, Peter, and Jude*, NT Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1995), 336.

<sup>23</sup>Note that Rev 21:23 does not say there is no sun or moon, but that there is no need of it. Caution is needed in discussing each of these texts, whether in 2 Pet or Rev or in the OT, as they all contain apocalyptic imagery. So the statement that no sun or moon was needed should not necessarily be taken too concretely. The same can be said of the statement that the sea “was no more” in the new heavens and new earth in Rev 21:2.



and destruction has already occurred at Pentecost and also at Jesus' crucifixion.<sup>24</sup> In neither of these places did it entail the complete annihilation of the universe. The same is true of Noah's flood, to which Peter compares Christ's judgment at the second coming and which will be discussed below.

Another important question in regards to the interpretation of the fire imagery in 2 Peter 3 is the text-critical and exegetical issue of how to read the verb in 3:10. While the KJV has κατακαήσονται, "to burn up," it appears that the more appropriate reading is εὑρεθήσονται.<sup>25</sup> The question is what the latter means in the context of Peter's argument. While the root means "to find," it is hard to see how this makes sense on a cursory reading of 2 Peter 3:10. Even with this exegetical difficulty, Bauckham<sup>26</sup> and Wolters have offered compelling solutions, interpreting the verse to mean "the earth and the works done on it will be found out" or exposed (so ESV). Wolters offers the OT background of Malachi 3:2-4 for support,<sup>27</sup> noting that fire is used in the OT and in Malachi particularly to expose the works done by humankind on the earth. David Wenham adds to the probability of this reading by noting Jesus' similar language in the Gospels.<sup>28</sup> There does not appear to be much support for this verb indicating anything like annihilation.

Wolters' discussion of Malachi 3:2-4 also directs the reader of 2 Peter 3 to the author's purpose in using fire imagery. Is it used, as some argue, to describe the world's annihilation, or is it used to denote transformation? Scholars today are increasingly arguing for the latter interpretation, primarily due to the OT background of the passage. Additionally, Peter and Paul both refer to fire as refining (1 Pet 1:5-9; 2 Cor 3:10-15), and in Paul's case he is speaking of the fire of judgment that reveals the character of works done on the earth.<sup>29</sup> This sounds remarkably similar to Peter's use in 2 Peter 3:10. More importantly, it seems to make sense of the works on the earth being exposed (v. 10) and the distinction between the pre-destruction cosmos, full of false teaching and sin, and the new heavens and new earth, "in which righteousness dwells" (v. 13). The point of the fire is to judge evildoers and purify the cosmos, not to annihilate everything. Further, regarding this "new" heavens and earth, the word Peter uses here, and the one John uses in Revelation 21:1, is καινός, not νεός. The former tends to denote newness in terms of

<sup>24</sup>E.g. darkness occurring between the sixth and the ninth hour as a representation of the sun, moon, and stars darkening (Matt 24:29 and 27:45; Mark 13:24-25 and 15:33).

<sup>25</sup>See n. 11.

<sup>26</sup>Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 318-21.

<sup>27</sup>Al Wolters, "Worldview and Textual Criticism in 2 Peter 3:10," *Westminster Theological Journal* 49 (1987): 409. Wolters also notes Peter's use of 1 εὑρεθῆ in 1 Pet. 1:7, where it is again referring to a "purifying fire" in an "eschatological context." *Ibid.*, 410.

<sup>28</sup>David Wenham, "Being 'Found' on the Last Day: New Light on 2 Peter 3.10 and 2 Corinthians 5.3," *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987): 477-79.

<sup>29</sup>Craig Blaising refers to this as the "metallurgical meaning" of "exposed" in 3:10, and also refers to the OT background and NT usage listed here as support. Craig Blaising, "The Day of the Lord Will Come: An Exposition of 2 Peter 3:1-18," *BibSac* 169 (2012): 396-97.

transformation or renewal,<sup>30</sup> not newness in terms of complete distinction, as with the latter.<sup>31</sup> This is also justified by the OT background of Isaiah 65:17-25, where the new creation is described. The word “new” in Hebrew “can mean ‘new in time’ (which fits with re-creation) or ‘new in quality’ (which fits with transformation).” Further, “There is no explicit reference in the oracle or its surrounding context to the unmaking of the present creation.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, the significant words, phrases, and images regarding fire in 2 Peter 3:7, 10, and 12—the fire imagery itself, “elements,” “exposed,” and “new”—do not appear to speak about annihilation but instead refinement, judgment, purification, and, ultimately, transformation and renewal.

### Noah's Flood

Perhaps the most important aspect of 2 Peter 3 in terms of understanding the consequences of the fire judgment is Peter's comparison of fire and flood in 3:5-7. The primary purpose of Peter's comparison between Noah's flood in Genesis 6-9 and the coming cosmic conflagration of which he speaks is to counter the false teachers that say Jesus' second coming will not happen and that the world will continue on as it always has.<sup>33</sup> The flood demonstrates that God has both disrupted the created order and judged false teachers before now and that he will do so again. But Peter does not just compare the fact of judgment; he also compares the means and the purpose. Just as God once destroyed *and cleansed* the world by water, so he will soon destroy it *and cleanse it* by fire. Of course there may be a sense of typological intensification here,<sup>34</sup> especially since the flood was not the final judgment at

<sup>30</sup>Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 280. Hoekema also cites Rom 8:21, 1 Cor 15:35-49, and the cosmic victory of Christ over Satan as support for the transformationalist view. *Ibid.*, 280-81.

<sup>31</sup>This is contra the stoic view that the world is continually destroyed through fire and re-created. For a description of this view see, e.g., Edward Adams, “Does Awaiting ‘New Heavens and a New Earth’ (2 Pet 3.13) Mean Abandoning the Environment?” *The Expository Times [ExpTim]* 121 (2010): 171; idem, *The Stars Will Fall From Heaven: Cosmic Catastrophe in the New Testament and its World*, Library of New Testament Studies (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 215. As Adams notes in the article, he does not subscribe to the stoic view, but nevertheless believes it is perhaps in the background of Peter's thought here. The biblical view, and Peter's, however, is much more beholden to Jewish apocalyptic thought and linear in its understanding. As Gene Green states, in Scripture and in Peter's view, “there are three worlds: the past, the present, and the future. God is the one who creates, sustains, judges, and then re-creates without any suggestion that the process is anything other than linear.” There is, in other words, no evidence of the stoic cyclical understanding influencing Peter's thoughts. Green, *Jude & 2 Peter*, 323. See also Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 300-301; Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 378; and Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 530.

<sup>32</sup>Adams, “Does Awaiting ‘New Heavens and a New Earth’ (2 Pet 3.13) Mean Abandoning the Environment?,” 169.

<sup>33</sup>Sam Meier notes not only the conceptual parallels but also the semantic and syntactical similarities in how Peter describes Noah's flood and the coming cosmic conflagration. Sam Meier, “2 Peter 3:3-7 - An Early Jewish and Christian Response to Eschatological Skepticism,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 32.2 (1988): 255.

<sup>34</sup>E.g. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 377.

Christ's return, as the fire judgment is. But intensification does not necessitate annihilation. In fact, Peter compares the coming fire judgment so closely to the flood judgment that it seems to rule out the possibility of annihilation completely.

On a *prima facie* level, we may simply ask if the earth and all that was in it was obliterated by the flood, and the answer is of course no. What was created in Genesis 1 still survives after the flood, albeit perhaps radically altered in regards to geography.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, in the Genesis narrative, Moses presents the flood as an act of de-creation and re-creation. Noah is saved from judgment through the ark, but as the waters flood the earth they are called "formless and void" like the waters in Genesis 1:2. After Noah is placed back on "dry land," he is issued incredibly similar commands to the ones Adam and Eve receive in Genesis 1:28 and 2:7, namely to "be fruitful and multiply" and "cultivate and keep" the land.<sup>36</sup> Noah is presented as a new Adam, and the land on which he is placed has been de-created and re-created. It was placed under the formless and void waters only to have God once again separate them and place his image bearer on dry land.

When reading 2 Peter 3:1-13, one ought to take this restorational orientation of the Noahic flood seriously. Yes, God destroys the world, but he also then restores it. Further, in his destruction of it he clearly does not annihilate it, but instead purges the sinful and rebellious world order and those who walk in it from the earth.<sup>37</sup> This of course may have radical effects on the physical creation, but nowhere is annihilation mentioned as the final fate of the world. Instead, the world is purged of evil and purified to be the place where God dwells with his people.<sup>38</sup> This is the language Peter uses for the coming cosmic conflagration as well—judgment, refinement, and renewal.<sup>39</sup> The difference is in the means and the scope—fire instead of water, final instead of temporal judgment—but the purpose and effect are the same. And while the final judgment is of course intensified, as it includes the whole scope of creation and all of those who oppose God for all time, this intensifi-

<sup>35</sup>Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 299; and Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, 271.

<sup>36</sup>Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1, eds., David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 192-96, 204-08.

<sup>37</sup>Douglas Harink notes that, "Throughout the scriptures, water and fire are the manifest signs and instruments of the Spirit's purifying arrival." Douglas Harink, *1 & 2 Peter*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, ed., R. R. Reno (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 178. Or, as David Wilkinson puts it, "The function of fire was to consume the wicked, not destroy the world. Indeed, in Jewish eschatology in the post-biblical period such judgment with fire was seen to have a parallel with the flood." David Wilkinson, *The Message of Creation: Encountering the Lord of the Universe*, *The Bible Speaks Today*, ed. Derek Tidball (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), 249. See also Heide, "What's New About the New Heaven and the New Earth?," 51, 53-54.

<sup>38</sup>Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, 287.

<sup>39</sup>Notice Peter's use of the verb ἀπόλετο ("was destroyed") in reference to the flood (3:6) and its nominal form ἀπόλειας ("destruction") in reference to the fire judgment (3:7). The destructions are the same. Wolters, "Worldview and Textual Criticism in 2 Peter 3:10," 408.

creation is in terms of scope and not effect on the material creation. It is *creatio ex vetere*, not *creatio ex nihilo*.<sup>40</sup>

### God's Good Creation<sup>41</sup>

A biblical-theological argument against the annihilationist view comes not only from 2 Peter 3 but from the biblical storyline and a biblical theology of creation. God creates everything "good" in Genesis 1 (vv. 3, 9, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31), and "blesses" both the living creatures in his creation and his image bearers, human beings (vv. 22, 28). This ought to give us pause when speaking of the final fate of the material creation. God can of course do what he wants, but God's delight in his creation should cause cautious readings when it comes to texts like 2 Peter 3.

Continuing in the biblical storyline,<sup>42</sup> creation is included in both the fall and redemption. When God judges Adam, Eve, and the serpent after the fall, he curses the ground because of Adam's sin (Gen 3:17). As God embarks on his redemption project, he includes the entire scope of the curse and the effects of the fall in his covenant promises. The promises to Abraham of land, people, rulers, and blessing echo what was lost in Genesis 1 and 2,<sup>43</sup> and as we saw above the Noahic flood and covenant includes restorational language. The tabernacle and Temple in both the Mosaic and Davidic covenants clearly contain references to a renewal of creation.<sup>44</sup> In the NT, Jesus' healings and exorcisms restore not only the spiritual but the physical as well; they are connected to the created order. Preminent in Jesus' work of restoring creation is his resurrection; the physical body of the Christ is renewed, a picture of future renewal at his second coming. Jesus is not gnostic; he is not seeking release from his corporeality, but instead renews his materiality in his resurrection. This is a prophetic vision of the future of believers' bodies (1 Cor 15:35-49), and as the firstfruits of the new creation believers also give hope to the creation itself for its redemption from the effects of sin (Rom

<sup>40</sup>Edward Adams, "Does Awaiting 'New Heavens and a New Earth' (2 Pet 3.13) Mean Abandoning the Environment?," 173.

<sup>41</sup>Much of this section is reliant upon Matthew Y. Emerson, "Victory, Atonement, Restoration, and Response: The Shape of the New Testament Canon and the Holistic Gospel Message." *Southeastern Theological Review* 3 (2012): 177-94.

<sup>42</sup>For an overview of the biblical narrative, see, for instance, T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008); G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 29-186 and esp. 129-60; Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 13-86; Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), e.g., 62-65; N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009; reprint, London: SPCK, 2005), 114, 119-22, 130-53.

<sup>43</sup>James Hamilton, "The Seed of Woman and the Blessing of Abraham," *Tyndale Bulletin* 58 (2007): 253-73.

<sup>44</sup>G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004) and Andrea Spatafora, *From the "Temple of God" to God as the Temple: A Biblical Theological Study of the Temple in the Book of Revelation*, *Tesi Gregoriana Serie Teologia* 27 (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1997).

8:21). Jesus thus not only creates and sustains “all things” but also redeems “all things” (Col 1:15-20).<sup>45</sup> Finally, the consummation of God’s redemptive project in Christ is the new creation of Revelation 21-22, a new heavens and new earth that includes cultural and material qualities that mirror the old creation. The difference is that the effects and source of sin have been purged in Revelation 20:7-15. Thus, God cares for and redeems his “good” creation through the work of his Son. For God to annihilate the material world, even in order to create again *ex nihilo*, seems contrary to his creative and redemptive purposes for the cosmos.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

### Ethical Situation and Implications

The reader of 2 Peter 3 should not overlook the context of Peter’s talk of destruction. Second Peter 3:10 is situated within a larger argument, an argument in which Peter exhorts his readers to “holiness and godliness” (v. 11), eschatological hope for the new creation “in which righteousness dwells” (v. 13), diligence and peace (v. 14), and doctrinal fidelity and wisdom (vv. 15-17). This discussion of the destruction of the cosmos is, in other words, a highly ethical matter for Peter. Eschatology is a thoroughly ethical doctrine in the New Testament and that is no exception here. Because the Lord will return in judgment, where even the heavenly bodies burn as his holy fire sifts through the wheat and the tares of both people and their works, his people, his body, ought to be pursuing Christlikeness.

Part of pursuing Christlikeness includes our conduct, and for our purposes here especially how we treat God’s creation. I do not wish to overstate here the implications of one’s interpretation of this passage for creation care, but neither do I wish to pass over them. All Christians can recognize together that God’s creation is good and that, therefore, we ought to exercise our God-given dominion over it properly. “Dominion” does not equal a license for wanton destruction by humans. But in an annihilationist interpretation, are we perhaps more prone to a kind of fatalism regarding the environment? “Well it’s all going to burn anyway” may be a crass colloquialism that doesn’t accurately reflect an annihilationist’s treatment of creation in real life, but certainly a belief that God will radically destroy everything that currently exists and re-create at Christ’s return changes the way one treats the current material creation. I do not here wish to argue for specific practices regarding environmental care that fall into one interpretive category or the other, nor do I wish to bind believers’ consciences on practical matters like recycling or

<sup>45</sup>“All things” here clearly refers to the entire creation, both in terms of creation and sustainment and also redemption. It seems unlikely that Paul would use the same term twice in the span of five verses in different ways.

<sup>46</sup>Heide, “What’s New About the New Heaven and the New Earth?,” 40; Ruth Ann Reese, *2 Peter and Jude*, Two Horizons Commentary, eds., Joel Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 218.

even deforestation. Nevertheless, it is clear that this passage and its interpretation thus have important implications for our conduct, and especially for our ethics of creation care, and so that is yet another reason to take our interpretation of 2 Peter 3 with utmost seriousness.

### **Final Thoughts**

God does not own a Death Star. Or at least, if he does, he is not going to use it on the *cosmos* at Christ's return. Second Peter 3:1-13, while certainly containing language that indicates a radical judgment of the present evil age and the purging of the effects of sin, does not teach that God will annihilate the universe at the end of time. Instead, Peter uses the language of "pass away," fire imagery, and the comparison to Noah's flood to teach his readers that God will purify the heavens and the earth, his "good" creation, from the effects and source of sin and thereby transform it into the "new heavens and new earth where righteousness dwells" (2 Pet 3:13). Believers can therefore look forward to the day when God brings the restored new heavens down to the restored new earth, dwelling with his people in a Garden-City-Temple, the culmination of the biblical storyline. As Gene Green states in his commentary on 2 Peter, "In spite of the destructive forces of the divine judgment (3:7, 10-12), the Christian hope is the renovation of creation and not its annihilation. As the ancient world destroyed by the flood (2:5; 3:6) gave way to the present order, so also the present world will suffer divine judgment (3:7), but in turn God will usher in the new creation."<sup>47</sup>

<sup>47</sup>Gene L. Green, *Jude and 2 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, eds., Robert H. Stein and Robert L. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 334.