

Who were the last days' scoffers (2 Peter 3:3)?

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Introduction

Sometime in the early 60s AD, the apostle Peter penned a letter to the Christians of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). This was his second letter to them (1Pet 1:1; 2Pet 3:1).

To these believers the apostle declared (2 Peter 3:3-4, BSB):

³ *Most importantly, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires.*

⁴ *"Where is the promise of His coming?" they will ask. "Ever since our fathers fell asleep, everything continues as it has from the beginning of creation."*

Who were these scoffers that Peter warns about?

What promise (or promises) were they mocking?

What reason would they adduce in support?

How did Peter counter their claims?

Note that this article should be read in conjunction with two others on this website:

1. *2 Peter 3: A Preterist Interpretation.*
2. *A Thousand Years are as One Day.*

Who were the scoffers?

Peter is warning his readers about men whom they would soon personally encounter.

In just a few months' time — years at the most — these scoffers would proliferate.

The "last days" Peter mentions (in 3:3) are not some far-off epoch of total irrelevance to his first readers.

No, the end of all things was already "at hand" (1Pet 4:7, ESV) and THE Judgment about to begin (1Pet 4:5, 17).¹

Peter wrote to warn his first readers about these men, and to prepare them in advance.

He clearly did not have in mind the false prophets of our own day!

¹ "Last days" in this context means the last days of Israel and of institutional Judaism — prior to that nation's termination in AD 70. See James 5:3; 1 Peter 4:7; 1 John 2:18.

Concerning the reference to judgment in 1 Peter 4:17: The Greek text reads τὸ κρίμα (*to krima*) = THE Judgment. Several translations include the definite article: CJB, Darby, DLNT, GW, JUB, LEB, NABRE, NEB, NOG, YLT.

So, who were these scoffers?

First, they were outsiders.

In chapter 2 of his epistle Peter had railed against the many false prophets who had infiltrated the churches and were wreaking havoc from within. But the scoffers would ridicule the Christian faith from the outside.

(See Appendix 3: False Teachers vs. the Scoffers.)

Second, they were Jewish scoffers.

We can say this because of their reference to the “fathers” (in 3:4).

Their claim: Ever since the time of our Old Testament forefathers everything has been going on as normal.

At what would they scoff?

Obviously, the promise of Jesus’ coming (his *parousia*).

But more than that: The promise that Jesus would return in judgment — against them and their nation!

Judgment would befall them on account of their having crucified the very Son of God.

This is something the early Christians had been proclaiming from the beginning.

Jesus himself had proclaimed coming judgment upon the generation that rejected him.

He would come again in divine glory, on the clouds, to judge (Mt 16:27-28; 24:30, 34; 26:64).

Judgment would befall Jerusalem, its temple, its leaders and citizens.

See Matthew 22:7; 23:33-39; 24:15-20; Luke 19:41-44; 21:20-24; 23:28-31.

Judgment upon the first-century Jews was proclaimed not just by Jesus, but also by:

- John the Baptist in Matthew 3:7-12.
John fulfilled the prophecy of Malachi 4:5 (BSB):
Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful Day of the LORD.
- Peter on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:19-20, BSB):
“... blood and fire and billows of smoke. ... before the coming of the great and glorious Day of the Lord.”
- Stephen. There was undoubtedly some truth to the accusation found in Acts 6:13-14 (BSB):
¹³ ... *“This man never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law.”* ¹⁴ *For we have heard him say that Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us.”*

Coming judgment on the Jews is a prominent theme elsewhere in the New Testament:

1 Thessalonians 2:14-16; 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10; Hebrews 6:8; 10:25, 30; James 5:1-9; Revelation chap. 18.

There is little doubt that Jewish Christians would, as part of their witness, warn their unbelieving friends and neighbors of impending wrath.

What would be their reason?

What reason will the scoffers adduce in support of their mocking?

Basically this: That everything has been going on as usual ever since the days of their forefathers.

And indeed, 30+ years had elapsed since Jesus had promised these things and nothing extraordinary had transpired.

As a result, these scoffers would become emboldened in their defiance.²

Peter's response

1. Peter points to God's intervention at the Flood (3:5-7).

He had already reminded his readers of previous interventions: God's judgment on fallen angels, at the Flood, and on Sodom and Gomorrah (2Pet 2:4-9).

God's threats and promises will be fulfilled — whether tomorrow or in 1000 years' time (3:8).

(Peter saw a close parallel between his own time and the days of Noah. Appendix 2 elaborates on this.)

2. Peter addresses the apparent delay in Jesus' return.

The Lord is patient (3:9), not wanting any of his elect people to perish.

He affords them ample time and opportunity to repent before final wrath breaks out.

Peter probably has in mind individual Jews who will abandon unbelief and trust in Jesus as their Messiah.

Two points concerning this delay:

As discussed in the next section, Jesus himself taught the possibility of a delay in his return.

The book of Revelation describes a delay in judgment until all the elect "firstfruits" from every Jewish tribe have been sealed with the mark of God (Rev 7:1-8; 14:1-4; cf. Jas 1:1, 18).

3. Despite this delay, the "Day of the Lord" was indeed imminent (3:10; cf. Ac 2:20; 1Thes 5:2; Mal 4:5).

Then, "the elements will be destroyed by fire" and "will melt in the heat" (2Pet 3:10, 12, BSB).

Almost certainly, these "elements" refer to the basic principles of Judaism — Jerusalem and the temple, with its priesthood, altars, furniture, genealogical records, etc. — all soon to be consumed by fire.³

4. The promised new age of "righteousness" was on the horizon (3:13).

This new heaven and earth was foretold in Isaiah 65:17ff.

The Jews divided time into two ages. This can be seen, for example, in the disciples' question concerning the temple's demise at "the end of the age" (Mt 24:1-3). The disciples want to know when Jesus would return as King to conclude the old age and usher in the messianic kingdom.

Indeed, Isaiah's new creation is to be identified with the messianic kingdom of his earlier prophecies — compare Isaiah 65:25 with 11:6-9.

² The fact that things were continuing on as normal in the Roman world, for the Jews as well, suggests that their war with Rome had not yet commenced. Following the outbreak of the War in late 66 AD, the Jews could no longer say that things were "normal". Far from it: the years 66-70 AD were, for the Jews, the Great Tribulation that Jesus had foretold (Mt 24:21; Lk 21:23). The War culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and involved huge loss of life. All this requires that the scoffers must have appeared before the year 66, with Peter's warning given some years earlier still. Note that the author of the book of Hebrews, writing in the early 60s, could claim that some signs of the approaching upheaval were already apparent (Hebrews 10:25). But perhaps one needed a certain spiritual insight to discern those things.

³ What should be made of the "elements" that will be burned up (2Pet 3:10, 12, KJV, BSB)? Elsewhere, the Greek term *stoicheia* refers to the basic or elementary principles — the ABCs — of religious teaching. In Galatians 4:3, 9, *stoicheia* refers to aspects of the Mosaic Law which the Judaizers were seeking to impose. A good case can be made that the *stoicheia* of Colossians 2:8, 20 were also aspects of the Mosaic Law. In Hebrews 5:12, *stoicheia* denotes the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. Might the *stoicheia* of 2 Peter 3 similarly denote the elementary principles of Judaism, with that religion's focus on outward, physical entities such as Jerusalem and the temple, the priesthood and the sacrificial and cleansing rituals and so forth? Was it not precisely all these things that were irrevocably terminated just a few years later when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed and burnt?

William Barclay comments:

Some verses [of Matthew 24] paint pictures taken from the Jewish conception of the Day of the Lord. ... The Jews divided all time into two ages — this present age, and the age to come. The present age is wholly bad and beyond all hope of human reformation. It can be mended only by the direct intervention of God. When God does intervene, the golden age, the age to come, will arrive. But in between the two ages there will come the Day of the Lord, which will be a time of terrible and fearful upheaval, like the birth-pangs of a new age.⁴

According to Peter, “righteousness” will dwell in the new creation (3:13).

The Greek verb translated “dwell” (*katoikeō*, Strong’s G2730) means “to settle down as a permanent resident.” The new world will be characterized by ever-increasing righteousness and justice.

Such a characterization should make us recall Old Testament descriptions of the coming messianic kingdom, as found, for example, in Psalm 72; Isaiah 9:7; 11:4-5; 42:1-4; Jeremiah 23:5-6.

5. His readers were to be patient and steadfast as they looked forward to the arrival of the new age.

Jesus himself hinted at a delay in his return

In his Olivet Discourse Jesus twice suggests the possibility of a delay in his return.

That delay will lead to people becoming complacent and acting as if he would never return.

Matthew 24:48-50 (ESV):

⁴⁸ “But if that wicked servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed,’⁴⁹ and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards,⁵⁰ the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know.”

And from the Parable of the Ten Virgins:

Matthew 25:5 (ESV): *“As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept.”*

Conclusion

Jesus promised that he would return to judge the generation that rejected him.

He would come again “on the clouds” (Mt 24:30b) — in divine glory (Mt 16:27).

Via that judgment people would “see” (perceive) him to be the One he had claimed to be — now seated at God’s right hand, ruling over all (Mt 26:64; cf. Ps 110:1; Dan 7:13-14).

The fall of Jerusalem would be the “sign” of his heavenly rule (Mt 24:30a).

The Jewish scoffers were mindful of Jesus’ threats, but as time passed and nothing significant transpired they became complacent and began to mock. But the peace would soon be shattered with the outbreak of the Jewish War (in late 66 AD).

⁴ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1957). Via the Bible Portal website: <https://bibleportal.com/commentary/chapter/william-barclay/matthew/24>.

Appendix 1: Jesus' parables and coming judgment

Some of Jesus' parables unambiguously point to coming judgment of the first-century Jews:

The Parable of the Ten Minas (Luke 19:11-15, 27, ESV):

¹¹ *As they heard these things, he proceeded to tell a parable, because he was near to Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately.*

¹² *He said therefore, "A nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return.*

¹³ *Calling ten of his servants, he gave them ten minas, and said to them, 'Engage in business until I come.'*

¹⁴ *But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us.'*

¹⁵ *When he returned, having received the kingdom, he ordered these servants to whom he had given the money to be called to him, that he might know what they had gained by doing business.*

²⁷ *But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slaughter them before me.'"*

Jesus taught this parable because of faulty notions concerning the coming of his kingdom (vs. 11).

His kingdom would not materialize all at once.

Rather, the king (i.e., Jesus himself) would leave in order to receive his kingdom, before returning (vs. 12).

Prior to his departure his servants would be commissioned to work in his absence (vs. 13).

The citizens who hated him resented his kingship (vs. 14).

Upon his return he called his servants to account (vs. 15).

Those who hated him were executed in his very presence (vs. 27).

This is a clear reference to the judgment of the Jews in AD 70.

Note that Jesus returns to the same people present when he left.

His coming to reign, though delayed, would nevertheless transpire in that generation.

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet (Matthew 22:1-7, BSB):

¹ *Once again, Jesus spoke to them in parables:*

² *"The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son.*

³ *He sent his servants to call those he had invited to the banquet, but they refused to come.*

⁴ *Again, he sent other servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner. My oxen and fattened cattle have been killed, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.'*

⁵ *But they paid no attention and went away, one to his field, another to his business.*

⁶ *The rest seized his servants, mistreated them, and killed them.*

⁷ *The king was enraged, and he sent his troops to destroy those murderers and burn their city."*

Here we have an unmistakable prediction of judgment upon the religious leaders and on Jerusalem. Following a grueling five-month siege of the city, the Romans army burned Jerusalem and its temple in August/September of AD 70.

Appendix 2: Noah's Day and Peter's

It is evident that Peter saw a close parallel between his own time and the days of Noah.

A time of world-judgment was imminent, and the present order was coming to an end (1Pet 4:5, 7, 17).

Amidst all the chaos baptized believers would be "saved", just as Noah and his family were.

For Christ was their Ark, and those in him were safe.

Like Noah, they would be borne above the flood of God's wrath and brought safely into the New World.

For through baptism, they were joined to him who died and who rose again above the power of death and was now in heaven (1Pet 3:20-22).

Appendix 3: False Teachers vs. the Scoffers

The false teachers of 2 Peter 2 were not the same as the scoffers of chapter 3.

John and Jude refer to these false teachers as well.

These men had infiltrated the churches (Jude 1:4) and were leading people astray (1Jn 2:26).

They were arrogant, immoral, and greedy — slaves to depravity (2Pet 2:3, 10, 14, 19).

Rather than promoting truth, they proclaimed fanciful stories (2Pet 2:3; cf. 1:16).

They had gone beyond the apostolic teaching (2Jn 1:9) — promoting things contrary to "the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3, ESV).

They participated in the "love feasts" — the shared meals that also included the Lord's Supper, worship, and instruction (Jude 1:12; 2Pet 2:13). At these they feasted "without fear" (Jude 1:12, ESV), with complete disregard for the sanctity of the Lord's Supper.

They turned God's grace into a license for immorality (Jude 1:4).

They targeted new Christians, promising them freedom (2Pet 2:18-19).

Some were itinerant preachers; John warns his readers against hosting such men (2Jn 1:10-11).

Many had already left the churches, having abandoned their earlier Christian profession (1Jn 2:19).

Thus, they were "twice dead" (Jude 1:12) — having returned to their previous worldly state (2Pet 2:20-22).

Jude calls these men "scoffers" (1:18) — the same (Greek) term that Peter employs in 2 Peter 3:3.

But clearly these men were part of the churches; they were divisive, creating factions (Jude 1:19).

In contrast to these false teachers, the scoffers Peter anticipates (in 2 Peter 3) had not yet turned up.

These would mock and scoff from the outside, and openly ridicule the teaching and witness of the early Christians.

Appendix 4: Sermon by John Owen

John Owen (1616-1683) is considered by many to have been the greatest of the Puritan theologians. He served as chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, and was the vice-chancellor of Oxford University.

Owen held that 2 Peter 3 is a prophecy of the impending destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.

His sermon on 2 Peter 3:11 can be found on the Christian Classics Ethereal Library website:

<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/owen/sermons.iv.xiii.html>.

Sermon 10, entitled *Providential changes, an argument for universal holiness*.

Here is an excerpt from Owen's sermon:

It is evident, from sundry places in the New Testament, what extreme oppositions the believing Jews met withal, all the world over, from their own countrymen, with and among whom they lived. They in the meantime, no doubt, warned them of the wrath of Christ against them for their cursed unbelief and persecutions; particularly letting them know, that Christ would come in vengeance ere long, according as he had threatened, to the ruin of his enemies. And because the persecuting Jews, all the world over, upbraided the believers with the temple and the holy city, Jerusalem, their worship and service instituted of God, which they had defiled; they were given to know that even all these things also should be destroyed, for their rejection of the Son of God. After some continuance of time, the threatening denounced being not yet accomplished, — as is the manner of profane persons and hardened sinners, Ecclesiastes 8:11, — they began to mock and scoff, as if they were all but the vain pretenses, or loose, causeless fears of the Christians. That this was the state with them, or shortly would be, the apostle declares in this chapter, verses 3, 4. Because things continued in the old state, without alteration, and judgment was not speedily executed, they scoffed at all the threats about the coming of the Lord that had been denounced against them.