

2 Peter 3: A Preterist Interpretation

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(Note: All underlining of Scripture quotations for emphasis has been added by the author.)

According to 2 Peter 3, the “day of judgment” or “day of the Lord” will involve the destruction by fire of the heavens and the earth, and of the “elements” (3:7, 10, 12, KJV).

In their place will come “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (3:13).

The following should guide our interpretation of this difficult chapter:

1. Peter had written previously to these same readers (3:1).

Both epistles were probably penned in the early 60s AD.

In his first letter Peter had declared the end of all things to be “at hand” (1Pet 4:7) and THE Judgment about to begin (1Pet 4:5, 17).¹ The “revelation of Jesus Christ” was imminent (1Pet 1:7, 13) — the revelation of his heavenly glory (1Pet 4:13; 5:1).²

2. Here, in 2 Peter 3, the apostle addresses the apparent delay in Jesus’ return.

Jesus’ followers had been proclaiming that their Lord would come again:

They expected Jesus to come back soon, for he had explicitly promised to return in their generation.³

Peter warns his first-century readers that before long, “scoffers” will arise to ridicule the Christian hope of the Parousia (3:3-4).

These will claim that “ever since the fathers fell asleep” everything continues on just as it always has.

The reference to “the fathers” (in 3:4) helps us identify these scoffers:

They will be Jewish scoffers, for their reference will be to their Israelite forefathers of the Old Covenant.

The scoffers will particularly mock the promise and threat of judgment against them and their city and temple. With 30+ years having already elapsed, they will allege the promise’s non-fulfillment.⁴

These scoffers will “come in the last days” — the last days of Israel (3:3; cf. 1Pet 4:7).⁵

¹ 1 Peter 4:17 (Greek text): τὸ κρίμα (*to krima*) = THE Judgment. The following translations include the definite article: CJB, Darby, DLNT, GW, JUB, LEB, NABRE, NCB, NEB, NOG, YLT. Compare this with Hebrews 9:27 where the article is absent in the Greek, yet many of our more familiar English versions choose to include it. Translation biases!

² Concerning Jesus’ “revelation” in 1 Peter 1:7, 13; 4:13: The Greek noun *apokalupsis* (Strong’s G602) is the same as that found in 1 Corinthians 1:7; 2 Thessalonians 1:7; and Revelation 1:1.

³ See, for example, Matthew 16:27-28; 24:34; 1 Corinthians 1:7; Philippians 4:5; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 10:37; James 5:7-9.

⁴ Jesus had promised to return “on the clouds of heaven” (Mt 24:30; 26:64) — as the divine Judge. His return would culminate in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple (Mt 23:35 – 24:21; Lk 21:20-24). All this to transpire before that generation had passed (Mt 16:27-28; 24:34; Lk 21:32).

⁵ “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.

3. To his readers Peter now points to God's intervention at the Flood (3:5-7).
He had already reminded them of previous interventions: God's judgment on fallen angels, at the Flood, and on Sodom and Gomorrah (2Pet 2:4-9).
The point being that judgment, though delayed, was certain.
What God promises will always be fulfilled.
Whether such fulfillment transpires the following day or after 1000 years is irrelevant to God (3:8).⁶
Indeed, the delay shows God's patience, allowing time for all his elect people to repent and be saved (3:9).
Importantly, the purpose of the day of judgment is the "destruction of the ungodly" (3:7).
The world that was destroyed in the Flood (3:6) was the world of wicked men, not the physical globe:
"... he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly" (2Pet 2:5).
And so it would be in the coming judgment by fire.
4. Peter had previously referenced Jesus' transfiguration (2Pet 1:16-18).
In 1:16 Peter recounts what he had personally witnessed on the mountain, namely, Christ's "majesty".
Peter ties what he saw to the message he proclaimed: "the power and coming [*parousia*] of our Lord Jesus Christ." Jesus' return was absolutely certain!
In the Transfiguration, Peter had been granted a preview of Jesus' divine glory (Lk 9:32).
Jesus' glory was restored to him in his resurrection and exaltation (Jn 17:5).
That same glory was about to be manifested when he returned (1Pet 4:13).
Moreover, the Transfiguration was a refutation of the scoffers' denial that the Old Covenant world was coming to an end and that Jesus was about to inaugurate a new order. For the Transfiguration witnessed to the surpassing glory of Christ and his ministry over and above the glory of the Old Covenant represented by Moses and Elijah. (See 2 Corinthians 3:7-11).
5. Peter evidently 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. 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).
6. Peter's initial readers were themselves eagerly awaiting the Day and could even hasten its arrival (3:12).
7. The coming of the new heavens and earth, notes Peter, is in accordance with God's promise (3:13).
Which promise?
Evidently the promises of Isaiah 65:17ff., which mostly describe conditions in a new/renewed Jerusalem.
But note, Isaiah's new creation is to be identified with the messianic kingdom of his earlier prophecies — compare Isaiah 65:25 with 11:6-9.
The whole of Isaiah 40 – 66 relates to the restorative work of Yahweh's Servant (Jesus).
Isaiah is therefore anticipating the messianic kingdom — the present gospel or Church age.⁷

⁶ 2 Peter 3:8 is often misused to assert that God's sense of time is radically different to ours. But that's not what Peter intends! James Stuart Russell, in *The Parousia* (1878), explains Peter's intent thus:

"Yet it is not unusual to quote these words as an argument or excuse for the total disregard of the element of time in the prophetic writings. ... [But Peter's meaning is that to God] one day and a thousand years are alike: that is to say, the promise which falls due in a day will be performed punctually, and the promise which falls due in a thousand years will be performed with equal punctuality. Length of time makes no difference to Him."

All this is further developed in the article on this website: "*With the Lord ... a thousand years [are] as one day*" (2 Peter 3:8).

⁷ Note that people still die in Isaiah's new creation, albeit at a great age (Isa 65:20).

8. “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 permanently characterized by 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.
9. What should be made of the “elements” (Greek: *stoicheia*) that will be burned up (3:10, 12, KJV)?
Elsewhere, *stoicheia* refers to the basic or elementary principles — the ABCs — of religious teaching.
In Hebrews 5:12, *stoicheia* denotes the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith.
In Galatians 4:3, 9, *stoicheia* refers to aspects of the Mosaic Law that the Judaizers sought to impose.
A good case can be made that the *stoicheia* of Colossians 2:8, 20 were also aspects of the Mosaic Law.⁸
Might Peter’s *stoicheia* also denote the fundamentals of Judaism — its focus on outward things such as Jerusalem, the temple service, priesthood, and Mosaic rituals? Wasn’t it precisely these that were irrevocably terminated just a few years later when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed and burnt?
10. The Old Testament prophets often depict God’s judgment in (exaggerated) cosmic terms.
No light from the sun, moon and stars serves as a metaphor for the extinguishing of a nation, usually via foreign invasion. Other “de-creation” imagery is often employed as well.⁹
Note the following examples: Isaiah 13:10 (depicting judgment upon Babylon); Isaiah 34:4 (the nations); Jeremiah 4:23-26 (Judah and Jerusalem); Ezekiel 32:7-8 (Pharaoh and Egypt: “When I blot you out ...”); Joel 2:31; 3:15 (Israel and the nations).
Similar language was employed by Jesus in connection with his return (Mt 24:29).
Note that Peter himself viewed the Flood as a judgment of de-creation, with the waters of the primordial “deep” returning to inundate the dry land (3:5-6; cf. Gen 1:2; 7:11; Eze 26:19).
11. Hebrews 12 relates the coming of God’s kingdom to the prophecies of Haggai (Heb 12:26-28; Hag 2:6).
In Haggai, the future glory of the temple is connected with Yahweh’s promise to “once more ... shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land ... [and] all nations” (Hag 2:6-7).
God first shook the world order when he gave Israel the law at Mount Sinai (Ex 19:18; Heb 12:26).
At that time he broke into the darkness of the pagan world with the light of his law.
But Haggai speaks of a further shaking and toppling of the world order (Hag 2:6-7, 21-22).¹⁰
Of interest here is that the author of Hebrews (in 12:26-28) interprets Haggai’s prophecy in terms of the coming of God’s eternal New Covenant kingdom.
He writes that the material order (the “things that have been made”) will be shaken and removed, so that the “kingdom that cannot be shaken” might remain (Heb 12:27-28).
He is referring to the Mosaic order’s provisional and typical entities — the Jerusalem temple with its priesthood, sacrifices and ceremonies — all these now “obsolete” and “ready to vanish away” (Heb 8:13).
But the unshakeable spiritual city and kingdom will remain (Heb 12:22, 28).¹¹

⁸ Don Preston has cogently argued that Paul’s opponents in Colossae were none other than the Judaizers, for among the *stoicheia* (Colossians 2:8, 20) they sought to impose were circumcision, food laws, sabbaths and other festivals that have all been fulfilled in Christ (2:11-17). Asceticism and angel worship (2:18), along with qualms about handling and tasting and touching things (2:21) were, claims Preston, part of the Judaizing mix. See Don K. Preston, *Minds Misplaced* (Ardmore, OK: JaDon Management, 2017).

⁹ The Psalms connect God’s *reign* with his upholding of the world order that he established in the beginning — both the physical and the moral orders (Ps 93:1; 96:10). Accordingly, when evil prevails and the moral order crumbles, the very “foundations” of the world are said to be undermined (Ps 11:3; 82:5; cf. 75:3).

¹⁰ Note, here, the associated messianic promise concerning Zerubbabel (Hag 2:23).

¹¹ Haggai’s prophecy of the temple’s future glory is fulfilled, in part, in the Church (Eph 2:21; 5:27; Heb 12:22-23; Rev 21:2ff.).

Note the references in the book of Hebrews to fire and judgment (Heb 6:8; 10:27, 30, 39; 12:29) — all this connected with the fast-approaching “Day” and Jesus’ imminent return (Heb 10:25, 37).

These have obvious reference to the looming Jewish-Roman War and the fall of Jerusalem and its temple.

12. Peter’s prophecy needs to be correlated with John’s vision in Revelation 21 – 22.

The new heaven and new earth that John sees is not a new physical/material creation.

Furthermore, John’s visions were to be fulfilled soon; all relate to first-century events (Rev 1:1, 3, 22:6, 10).

Three important points:

First, the new world that John sees is preceded by multiple judgments on the old world — some of which are described in the exaggerated language of the Old Testament prophets (Rev 6:12-14; 8:12; 16:18).

Second, judgment is focused on the Harlot City — Jerusalem (Rev 18:1ff.; cf. 11:8; 18:24).

Judgment on the Harlot comes via the Roman Beast and horns who “burn her up with fire” (Rev 17:16).¹²

Her destruction by fire is explicitly noted to be God’s judgment (Rev 18:8; cf. Mt 22:7).

Her lovers witness “the smoke of her burning” (Rev 18:9).

(See Appendix 1: The burning of Jerusalem and its temple by the Roman army in AD 70.)

Third, the new creation shows Messiah’s kingdom as having finally come (Rev 11:15).

It depicts:

- The time of universal restoration foretold by the Old Testament prophets (Ac 3:21).¹³
- Messiah’s universal, eternal, and righteous kingdom (Psalm 72).
- His reign of peace and justice (Isa 9:7; 11:1-9; Jer 23:5-6).
- His reign from “Jerusalem” over the nations of the world (Ps 2:6-12; 110:1-2).

13. Consider also Peter’s citation of Joel in Acts 2:19-20 (my translation):

“And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below: blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.”

We have already noted that apocalyptic language is exaggerated for effect. Yet Jerusalem and its temple did literally come to a fiery end in AD 70 (see Appendix 1).

That Peter is referring here to the events of AD 70 is evident from his appeal for his hearers to be saved from the wrath that would soon befall that “crooked generation” (Ac 2:40).

“Crooked” or “perverse generation” derives from the Song of Moses (Dt 32:5, 20), which foretells Israel’s future apostasy and the consequent outpouring of God’s covenant wrath upon the nation.

Jesus described his contemporaries in similar terms — see Matthew 12:39; 16:4; 17:17; Mark 8:38.

For the above reasons, many scholars over the past 400 years have viewed Peter’s prophecy (in 2 Peter 3) as fulfilled in the Jewish-Roman War of 66-70 AD, and especially in the War’s conclusion — the fiery destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.

¹² The Greek verb *katakaiō* (Strong’s G2618) used in Revelation 17:16 and 18:8 means “to burn up”, “totally consume by fire”.

¹³ Old Testament prophecies were all fulfilled in the 1st century AD (Lk 21:22; Ac 3:24).

Appendix 1: The burning of Jerusalem and its temple by the Roman army in AD 70

The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (37 to ca. 100 AD) wrote a detailed account of the Jewish-Roman War. The following items are from G. Goldberg, who quotes from Josephus' *The Jewish War*:

1. The Temple is consumed by fire, Av 10 [August], AD 70:

Josephus provides an eyewitness account of the destruction, the fire, and the noise:

“You would indeed have thought that the Temple-hill was boiling over from its base, being everywhere one mass of flame, yet the stream of blood was more copious than the flames.”

Josephus observes that this was on the very day and month that the First Temple had been burnt by the Babylonians. (*The Jewish War*, 6.271ff.)

2. Jerusalem is sacked and set ablaze, Elul 8 [= 28 days after Av 10], AD 70:

The Romans now command the whole city, plant standards on the walls, and loot the city.

All Jerusalem is in flames. (*The Jewish War*, 6.403-408)

Source: <https://www.josephus.org/FlJosephus2/warChronology7Fall.html>.

Chronology of the War According to Josephus; Part 7: The Siege and Destruction of Jerusalem.

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See also David Roberts' 1850 painting of the fall of Jerusalem on this website: *Jerusalem in AD 70*.

Appendix 2: 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 are four excerpts 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.

...

On this foundation I affirm, that the heavens and earth here intended in this prophecy of Peter, the coming of the Lord, the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men, mentioned in the destruction of that heaven and earth, do all of them relate, not to the last and final judgment of the world, but to that utter desolation and destruction that was to be made of the Judaical church and state; for which I shall offer these two reasons, of many that might be insisted on from the text:—

(1) Because whatever is here mentioned was to have its peculiar influence on the men of that generation. He speaks of that wherein both the profane scoffers and those scoffed at were concerned, and that as Jews; — some of them believing, others opposing the faith. Now, there was no particular concernment of that generation in that sin, nor in that scoffing, as to the day of judgment in general; but there was a peculiar relief for the one and a peculiar dread for the other at hand, in the destruction of the Jewish nation; and, besides, an ample testimony, both to the one and the other, of the power and dominion of the Lord Jesus Christ; — which was the thing in question between them.

(2) Peter tells them, that, after the destruction and judgment that he speaks of, verse 13, “We, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth,” etc. They had this expectation. But what is that promise? where may we find it? Why, we have it in the very words and letter, Isaiah 65:17. Now, when shall this be that God will create these “new heavens and new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness?” Saith Peter, “It shall be after the coming of the Lord, after that judgment and destruction of ungodly men, who obey not the gospel, that I foretell.” But now it is evident, from this place of Isaiah, with chap. 66:21, 22, that this is a prophecy of gospel times only; and that the planting of these new heavens is nothing but the creation of gospel ordinances, to endure for ever. The same thing is so expressed, Hebrews 12:26-28.

...

[Concerning the need to be watchful and to live holy lives]:

(1) As it was foretold and threatened by Christ. How were believers cautioned to be ready for it with eminent holiness and watchfulness therein! So Luke 21:34, 36, “Take heed to yourselves; watch, therefore.” Why so? “Christ is coming,” verse 27. When? “Why, in this generation,” verse 32. What to do? “Why, to dissolve heaven and earth,” verse 25; to “dissolve the Jewish church and state. Watch, therefore; give all diligence.” So also Matthew 24:42. “Watch, therefore.” Oh! on this account what manner of persons ought we to be!

...

[Concerning Christ’s ongoing, periodic interventions in world affairs]:

Because in every such providential alteration or dissolution of things on the account of Christ and his church, there is a peculiar coming of Christ himself. He cometh into the world for the work he hath to do; he cometh among his own to fulfil his pleasure among them. Hence such works are called “his coming;” and “the coming of his day.” Thus James exhorts these very Jews to whom Peter here writes, with reference to the same things, James 5:7-9, “Be patient unto the coming of the Lord.” But how could that generation extend their patience to the day of judgment? “Nay,” saith he, “that is not the work I design, but his coming to take vengeance on his stubborn adversaries;” which he saith, verse 8, “ ‘draweth nigh,’ is even, at hand; yea, Christ, ‘the judge, standeth before the door,’ ” verse 9, “ready to enter;” — which also he did within a few years. So upon or in the destruction of Jerusalem (the same work), Luke 21:27, the Son of man is said to “come in a cloud, with power and great glory;” — and they that escape in that desolation are said to “stand before the Son of man,” verse 36.