

RETRIEVING THE EARTH FROM THE CONFLAGRATION: 2 PETER 3.5-13 AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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2 Peter 3.5-13 is, at first sight, one of the least eco-friendly texts in the New Testament. A fiery destiny is predicted for 'the present heavens and earth' (v. 7). We are told that 'the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire' on the coming day of the Lord (v. 12); after the fire, there will be 'new heavens and a new earth' (v. 13). The eschatological scenario projected in these verses appears to offer little incentive for environmental care. Indeed, the writer's exhortation to wait for and 'hasten' the coming of the fiery day of God (v. 12) might seem to encourage practices that lead to environmental decline and ruination. Keith Dyer (2002: 56) thinks that this passage 'presents irretrievable problems for an ethical response to ecological problems'. Yet, various efforts have been made to read the text in a way that supports a biblically based environmentalism.¹ Such attempts largely consist of exegetical and interpretative arguments aimed at showing that what is in view is not the earth's destruction but its transformation. In this essay, I will consider these arguments, concluding that the dissolution of the earth, along with the heavens, is indeed envisioned. However, I will suggest that, even on a destructionist interpretation of it, the environmental implications of this text are perhaps somewhat less egregious than may appear.

2 Pet. 3.4-13

In our passage, the writer is countering the eschatological cynicism of his opponents.² The 'false teachers', as he labels them (2.1), are active within the congregations addressed, undermining traditional apostolic teaching, especially with regard to the Lord's coming. In his polemic, the author portrays the adversaries as 'scoffers' of the last days whose coming (of which the author speaks in the future tense) is a sign

that the last phase of history has arrived (3.3).

The content of their eschatological mockery is cited in verse 4: 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!' The promise under attack is usually taken to be Jesus' own promise (or the promise attributed to him) to return within a generation (Mk 13.30 + par.), but it is more likely to be Old Testament prophetic expectation of God's eschatological coming (e.g. Isa. 64.1-3; 66.15-18; Zech. 14.1-5; Mal. 3.1-4), which the early Christians applied to Jesus' return.³ This fits with the mention of 'the fathers', a term regularly used of the Old Testament fathers,⁴ and also with 1.20-21, which implies that the opponents denounce Old Testament prophecy. The scoffers reject the hope of the Lord's coming because of the great length of time that has elapsed since it was originally expressed (v. 4a). The excessive time of waiting, beyond all reasonable expectation, indicates that the promise is unlikely ever to come true (Adams 2005: 113-14). The temporal objection is buttressed by the assertion that all things continue just as they were from the creation of the cosmos. On the standard interpretation of verse 4b, this clause expresses a dismissal of the possibility of divine intervention in the world.⁵ The opponents' outlook is thought to resemble Epicurean scepticism (see esp. Neyrey 1980): Epicureans rejected divine involvement in the cosmos or human history. However, if the false teachers were radical sceptics in the Epicurean mould, it is difficult to imagine how they could have belonged to the believing community.⁶ The assertion of verse 4b is much better understood as an affirmation of cosmic stability and immutability, reflecting philosophical belief in the imperishableness of the cosmos.⁷ Like Plato (*Timaeus* 32-3) and Philo (*De aeternitate mundi*), the adversaries held that the world is created and indestructible. The idea of the parousia is thus to be rejected because it involves the impossible prospect of cosmic destabilization and collapse.⁸

The author answers the objections of his opponents in verses 5-9, dealing first, in verses 5-7, with their cosmological argument. In response to the claim that the created cosmos continues unceasingly without major change, he argues that the adversaries have deliberately ignored the fact that there was an occasion, the occasion of the flood in the time of Noah, when the created world was destroyed. The flood shows that the world is not imperishable. As God destroyed the world once before, so he will do so once more. In these verses, the writer correlates creation, flood and the final day of judgement: by word and water God created the world; by word and water

¹ Bouma-Prediger 2001: 76-77; Finger 1998: 3-6; Heide 1997: 46-55; Lucas 1999: 97; Moo 2006: 466-69.

² The writer presents himself as Peter, but most commentators doubt that the apostle was the actual author of the epistle.

³ As argued in Adams 2005. This view is also now taken by Peter Davids in his new commentary on 2 Peter (2006: 266). For the influence of the Old Testament and early Jewish hope of God's coming on the New Testament expectation of Jesus' return, see Adams 2006.

⁴ E.g. Mt. 23.30, 32; Lk. 1.55, 72; Jn 4.20; 6.31; Acts 3.13, 25; Rom. 9.5.

⁵ E.g. Bauckham 1983: 294; Horrell 1998: 139; Kraftchick 2002: 152-53.

⁶ For further difficulties, see Adams 2005: 115-16.

⁷ So Bigg 1910: 119. For a fuller defence of this view, see Adams 2005: 116-21.

⁸ In Old Testament prophecies of God's coming, the divine advent is often accompanied by massive upheavals in nature: e.g. Mic. 1.2-4; Nah. 1.3-5; Hab. 3.3-13; Zech. 14.4-5.

he destroyed it; by word and fire, he will destroy it again. In verses 8-9, he responds to their temporal argument by showing that God's sense of time is very different to ours: 'with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day' (cf. Ps. 90.4). He further argues that the seeming delay of the parousia is due to God's forbearance: by appearing to postpone the day of judgement, God is allowing people time to repent.

The writer assures his readers in verse 10 that, despite the apparent delay, the day of the Lord will come. When it arrives, it will do so suddenly: 'like a thief' (cf. Mt. 24.43; Lk. 12.39; 1 Thess. 5.2, 4; Rev. 3.3; 16.15). On that day, the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, the elements will be dissolved with fire, and 'the earth and all its works will be found'. In verses 11-13, the author moves from apologetic to moral application.

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

In the course of the appeal, he repeats his description of the fiery dissolution from verse 10, but now mentions 'new heavens and a new earth'. The 'promise' of which he speaks is almost certainly that contained in Isa. 65.17 and 66.2, verses which specifically foretell the creation of 'new heavens and a new earth' (Kelly 1969: 368). The coming destruction is thus not an end in itself; it prepares the way for a new situation. Unlike John the Seer in Revelation 21-22, the author makes no attempt to describe the new created order; he simply notes that the new creation will be an environment in which righteousness flourishes (in contrast to the corruption that marks the world at present [1.4]).

Destruction or Transformation?

It is generally accepted that 2 Pet. 3.4-13 has to do with the future of the cosmos. It has become fashionable to interpret the language of cosmic catastrophe in Mk 13.24-27 (talk of sun and moon being darkened, cosmic structures convulsing and stars falling at the coming of the Son of Man) as metaphorical for localized socio-political change and as referring to events on the immediate historical horizon, usually the events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE.⁹ Reading the catastrophic and cosmic language in this way is an effective way of nullifying its apparent anti-environmental force. But, I have not as yet come across any scholarly attempt to rescue 2 Pet. 3.4-13

for biblical environmentalism that employs this interpretative strategy.¹⁰ In my view, it is a mark of good exegetical sense that such an approach has not (so far!) been adopted. That the writer is presenting a scenario that is universal and cosmic in scope is very hard to deny. Even if it is insisted that the language (especially the language of fire) is to some extent 'figurative', that the text is about cosmic events is crystal clear. It is noteworthy that even N.T. Wright, the main contemporary advocate of the socio-political interpretation of biblical cosmic catastrophe language, acknowledges that this passage presents an 'end-time scenario' and a 'cosmic drama' (2003: 462).

Writers who have sought to retrieve 2 Pet. 3.4-13 for a biblically based environmentalism have done so mainly by trying to argue that the passage does not describe the destruction of the existing earth but rather its transformation. Whether this text envisages destruction (and re-creation) or transformation is a longstanding interpretative debate,¹¹ but it is deemed to have particular relevance to the environmental question. As Thomas Finger puts it, the conviction that God will transform the present earth, rather than destroy it, means that 'this earth must be precious to God, and that proper stewardship of nonhuman nature is a task with eternal consequences' (1998: 27). By advocating a non-destructionist reading of 2 Pet. 3.5-13, scholars such as Finger also endeavour to bring it more into line with Paul's hope for the liberation of creation expressed in Rom. 8.18-25, which, as Douglas Moo states, 'clearly implies that the destiny of the natural world is not destruction but transformation' (2006: 463).

At least five distinct exegetical and interpretative arguments are used in support of a non-destructionist interpretation of 2 Pet. 3.4-13.

First, it is argued that the analogy with the flood indicates something less than destruction. The author states that at the time of the flood, the world that then existed 'perished' (*apōleto*, 3.6), but as Gale Heide notes, the flood, as described in Genesis 6-9, 'did not destroy the earth completely' (1997: 53). Fish presumably continued to exist and geological features, such as mountains, remained. Every animal species was spared, along with some human beings, by virtue of being in the ark. In other words, 'much of what existed previously in creation survived' (Heide 1997: 54). The comparison drawn between the flood and the fiery judgement suggests that

10 The claim that 2 Peter 3 is about the destruction of Jerusalem was, however, made over a century ago by J.S. Russell as part of his general thesis that the parousia happened in the events in 70 CE. See Russell 1887: 319-26.

11 The issue tends to be presented in dichotomous terms: either total annihilation (destruction into nothing) followed by new creation *ex nihilo*, or transformation. For the annihilationist reading, see, for example, Overstreet (1980: 365): 'Heaven and earth shall be annihilated. In nuclear fission some waste products are always left over. But when God causes this catastrophic event, the destruction will be complete and total.' The scholars with whom I am engaging in this essay (Bouna-Prediger, Finger, Heide, Lucas and Moo) operate with the annihilation/transformation dichotomy. I will argue that the author of 2 Peter envisages destruction, but not absolute annihilation, a concept that would have been inconceivable to him.

the latter, like the former, is about the cleansing of creation from unrighteousness not its complete destruction (Heide 1997: 55).

Secondly, it is maintained that fire is not primarily a destructive agent in 2 Pet. 3.5-11. Moo points out that fire in the Old Testament is often a metaphorical way of speaking of judgement, and even if sometimes the reference is to physical fire, the fire need not be totally destructive (2006: 468). Ernest Lucas notes that 'fire is used as a metaphor of judgement which does not simply destroy, but *purifies*, e.g. Isaiah 21-26; Malachi 1-4' (1999: 97). The purpose of the eschatological fire in 2 Peter 3, according to Lucas, is to 'purge the created order of all evil' (1999: 97). Similarly, Heide suggests that fire in this text is 'the cleansing agent for the stain of sin upon the earth . . . rather than a means for indiscriminate disintegration' (1997: 54).

Thirdly, it is argued that the preservation of the earth is implied in the final clause of verse 10. It is noted that the reading adopted by the KJV and some other versions, 'the earth and everything in it shall be burned up', finds little acceptance nowadays. Most commentators agree that the original reading is: 'the earth and all its works will be found'. On this construal, according to Bouma-Prediger, the earth is 'discovered, not destroyed' (2001: 77). Finger, in line with a number of recent commentators, argues that being 'found' refers mainly to God's assessment of human beings: he maintains that the earth is 'found, or discovered, not to be destroyed, but so that the human works done upon it may be judged' (1998: 5).

Fourthly, it is noted that the word for 'dissolve' in verses 10, 11 and 12 is *lino*, which 'does not necessarily have to refer to annihilation'; according to Heide, the thought is more that of 'breaking down into component parts' or 'release from bondage' (1997: 53). Some form of physical alteration is meant, but not 'a total eradication of all physical substance.' Similarly Moo thinks that the word points not to annihilation 'but a dissolution or radical change in nature' (2006: 468).

Finally, the point is made that the word for 'new' in the phrase 'new heavens and a new earth' is not *neos*, which means 'previously non-existent', but *kainos*, which means 'new in quality' (Lucas 1999: 97). According to Finger, it is not necessary to think of the new state as 'created entirely from scratch' (1998: 6); the wording is consistent with the idea of a transformation of the existing heavens and earth.

A cumulative case is thus built for seeing 2 Pet. 3.4-10 as about 'renewal through transformation, not a total destruction of the old and its replacement by something quite different' (Lucas 1999: 97). The case looks impressive, but on closer scrutiny none of these arguments for a non-destructionist interpretation of the passage holds up.

First, it is true that in the Genesis account of the flood, creation is not totally destroyed, but, as J.N.D. Kelly points out, 'Jewish apocalyptic and speculation dependent on it read this frightening development into the story' (1969: 359). In 1 *Enoch* 10.2, 'the whole earth' is said to have perished at the flood. 1 *Enoch* 83.3-5 depicts the heavens as collapsing onto the earth, and the earth itself as being

swallowed by the abyss.¹² Most commentators agree that the author of 2 Peter goes beyond Genesis and imagines the flood as bringing about the destruction of the whole universe: this is implied by the contrast between the 'heavens . . . and earth' of 'long ago' in verse 5 and 'the present heavens and earth' in verse 7 (Horrell 1998: 177). As well as post-biblical flood tradition that sees the flood as destroying the earth or the whole cosmos, the writer also seems to be influenced by the notion of parallel cosmic destructions by water and fire, an idea found in Stoicism of the period (Seneca, *Naturalis Quaestiones* 3.28.7). One may readily agree that the analogous relation of flood and final act of judgement suggests that the latter, in line with the former, is about the cleansing of creation from sin and evil, but the cleansings take place, for our author, *by means of destruction* not instead of it. *Compare with Rom.*

Secondly, it is also true that fire is sometimes a metaphor for judgement in the Old Testament. For example, Zeph. 1.18 speaks of the whole earth being consumed 'in the fire of his passion'; here fire clearly functions as a metaphor for God's wrath (cf. Isa. 30.27; Jer. 40.4; Zeph. 3.8). But since the writer obviously understands water as a literal agent of destruction in the flood, we can be sure that he thinks of fire as a 'real' destructive force in the coming judgement. Moreover, it is doubtful that the background to the author's expectation of a fiery cosmic destruction is to be found in the Old Testament. As Richard Bauckham notes, in Old Testament texts where fire is an instrument of judgement, its function is mainly to consume the wicked (1983: 300); nowhere in the Old Testament is the total destruction of heaven and earth by fire predicted or visualized (Adams 2007: 97 n. 201; van der Horst 1994: 234-36). In Second Temple Jewish literature, the idea of the complete destruction of the cosmos by fire comes to expression in the Sibylline Oracles (2.196-213; 3.75-92; 4.171-92; 5.206-13, 512-31; Adams 2007: 88-95), but it does so under the influence of Stoic cosmology (Van der Horst 1994: 239). At the time of 2 Peter, the expectation of a cosmic conflagration was commonly viewed as a typically Stoic idea. The doctrine of world conflagration, or *ekpurōsis*, as it was known, was taught by Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, and his immediate successors, Cleanthes and Chrysippus.¹³ It was abandoned by several leading figures of middle Stoicism but was affirmed by first-century CE Roman Stoics including Seneca and Epictetus. Philo (*Aet.* 8) attributes the theorem to the great mass of Stoic philosophers in his day. Given the Stoic provenance of the notion, it seems reasonable to suppose, as many have concluded, that it was from this source that the author of 2 Peter derived it. This is not to say that the writer brought into the cyclic dimensions of the Stoic theory, according to which the cosmos is destroyed and regenerated endlessly; the author presses the Stoic conception into a linear scheme and imagines the conflagration as a one-off and final act of judgement. If a Stoic background to 2 Pet. 3.10-12 is accepted, there need be no distinction between destruction and purification, since in Stoic thought the fire

12 On 'the abyss' as a reference to the primeval waters, see Dennis 2008: 174-75, rightly correcting Adams 2007: 214.

13 On the Stoic conflagration see Adams 2007: 114-24; Long 1985.

that devours the cosmos is both destructive and purifying (it was evidently called a *katharsis* or purification [Lapidge 1978: 180]), consuming all material things and purging the world of evil.

Thirdly, it is correct that the last line of verse 10, on the best textual evidence, does not speak of the destruction of the earth. The meaning of the reading, 'the earth and all its works will be found', which should be regarded as original,¹⁴ is not easy to determine, but as Finger argues, it most likely relates to God's judgement of humans. The point being expressed, as Horrell states, is that '[a]ll the deeds and works of human beings will be laid bare before God'.¹⁵ But this clause should not be interpreted to mean that the earth is preserved through or protected from the fire. The destruction of the earth along with the heavens is expressed in the opening phrase of verse 11: 'since all these things are to be dissolved in this way . . .' The words 'all these things' (*taútōn pantōn*) pick up the references to the heavens, the elements and the earth in verse 10. As Bauckham (1983: 324) points out, the dissolution of the earth is also implied in verse 7 ('the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire') and in verse 13 ('a new earth').

In my view, the earth's dissolution is further implied in verse 10 with the mention of the elements being dissolved with fire (cf. v. 12, 'the elements will melt with fire'). The meaning of the word *stoicheia*, translated 'elements', is debated. Most commentators take the word as referring to the heavenly bodies: sun, moon and stars. Some (e.g. Horrell 1998: 180; Finger 1998: 6) see a double reference to the cosmic bodies and the spiritual powers thought to be controlling them. However, the application of the term *stoicheia* to the heavenly bodies is not securely attested until after the New Testament period (EDNT: 3.278). The most natural meaning of *stoicheia* in 2 Pet. 3.10-12, when the epistle was written, would have been the physical elements of which, it was believed, all earthly things are composed: earth, air, water and fire. Commentators tend to reject a reference to the four material elements because that would seem to entail the absurdity that fire is dissolved by fire. However, no illogicality is involved if the background of thought is Stoic cosmology, since Stoics distinguished between the element fire and the cosmic fire into which all things are resolved at the conflagration (Adams 2007: 115). The author's division of cosmic reality into the heavens and the elements (especially in v. 12, where there is no additional mention of the earth) fits with the standard Stoic division of the cosmos (with the four elements comprising all things in the earthly realm, and ether constituting the substance of things in the supra-terrestrial realm).

Fourthly, it is indeed the case that the word *luō* means more to break down into component parts than to annihilate or obliterate from existence, but the former still has to do with destruction (specifically disintegration) and the latter would not have been considered a conceivable meaning at the time of writing. In Greco-Roman

discussion of whether the cosmos will perish or endure forever, 'destruction' was understood as resolution into some originating principle or breaking down into constituent parts, and not as reduction to nothing. Philo (Aet. 6) is quite clear on this point:

Nothing in fact is so foolish as to raise the question whether the world is destroyed into non-existence. The point is whether it undergoes a transmutation from its ordered arrangement through the various forms of the elements and their combinations being either resolved into one and the self-same conformation or reduced in complete confusion as things are when shattered.

The idea of the total resolution of the cosmos and all matter into nothingness is given serious expression in the mid-second century CE and beyond, largely in heretodox circles on the fringes of the mainstream Church. It was apparently part of Valentinian cosmological teaching (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.7.1), and it is found in certain Nag Hammadi treatises (Orig. *World* 126-7; *Great Pow.* 46). Among the church fathers, it was accepted by Tertullian (*Against Hermogenes* 34), who, unlike Valentinians and 'Gnostics', looked for a new creation *ex nihilo*. But it would be anachronistic to use this notion of destruction as the benchmark for determining whether 2 Pet. 3.5-13 is about the dissolution of the cosmos.

The author of 2 Peter uses the word *luō* in a standard destructionist sense, and so it is correctly translated 'dissolve' or 'destroy' (BDAG: 667). The cluster of verbs used in verses 10 and 13 (*parechōmatē*, 'pass away'; *purōō*, 'set ablaze'; *kansōō*, 'burn up'; *tokōō*, 'melt') is clearly meant to portray violent destruction. The writer appears to envisage destruction by reduction into the primal element fire, as in the Stoic theory of *ekpurōsis*. To interpret his language as rhetorical hyperbole for non-destructive transformation is to ride roughshod over the writer's careful and 'scientifically' appropriate use of terms and to rob his argument of its force as a response to the assertion that the cosmos is indestructible.

Finally, the observation that the word for 'new' is *kainos* not *neos* is not all that significant since the words were plainly being used interchangeably at this time (BDAG: 496-97, 669). The contrast with 'the present heavens and earth' in verse 7 clearly indicates that the author is thinking in terms of a new created order not just a transformation of the present cosmic order.

In sum, therefore, the case for a non-destructionist reading of 2 Pet. 3.5-13 is not very strong and is marked to a certain extent by special pleading. What the author envisages here is the violent dissolution of the heavens and earth and their creation anew. His vision differs markedly from Paul's view of the cosmic future in Rom. 8.18-25 and it should not be made to conform to the Pauline text.

14 So Bauckham 1983: 316-21; Neyrey 1993: 243-44; Horrell 1998: 180-81; Kratichick 2002: 163.

15 Horrell 1998: 181. See further Adams 2007: 228.

Is 2 Pet. 3.5-13, then, beyond retrieval for a biblically informed environmentalism? And does it really matter if the text is deemed irrecoverable? It would be easy to dismiss this passage as expressing a marginal and extreme viewpoint out of harmony with other biblical voices. But the fact is that 2 Pet. 3.5-13 is not alone in the biblical canon in affirming the dissolution of creation (see Ps. 102: 25-27; Isa. 51.6; Mk 13.31 + par.; Heb. 1.10-12 [citing Ps. 102.25-27]; Rev. 21.1), so it is not out on a limb in this regard, though no other biblical passage depicts the destruction of heaven and earth so graphically and violently. Those seeking to derive from the Bible a positive environmental ethic need to acknowledge that the Bible has more than one way of conceiving the cosmic future and that the various statements cannot be pressed into a singular vision of non-destructive transformation.

Although 2 Pet. 3.5-13 cannot be considered a pro-environmental text, there are certain considerations which, even in a destructionist interpretation of the passage, mollify its apparent anti-environmental thrust.¹⁶

First, we can be confident that the expectation of cosmic destruction here articulated does not entail a negative assessment of the present creation as innately evil. According to N.T. Wright (1992: 285), the very idea of the world coming to an end betokens a world-negating, dualistic cosmology. But this was not the case for the Stoics, whose cosmology was firmly monistic. The main Stoic proponents of *ekpurōsis* regarded the conflagration as a wholly positive event (Adams 2007: 120-21). Chrysippus maintained that at *ekpurōsis*, the cosmos turns into light or brightness (Philo, *Aet.* 90). He insisted that the universe does not die (Plutarch, *Moralia* [*On Stoic Self-Contradictions*] 1052c), rather it grows to its acme and is regenerated. As Pieter van der Horst states, for Stoics, the conflagration 'is an act of god in his benevolent providence. It is a blessing, not an evil' (1994: 234). It was perhaps this positive assessment of the conflagration within Stoic cosmology that made it theologically acceptable to the writer of 2 Peter. He clearly views the destruction and re-creation of the cosmos as a positive action of God, bringing judgement, establishing righteousness and fulfilling divine promise. Old Testament and Second Temple Jewish writers can also affirm the destructibility or end of the world without assuming that the earth is inherently bad (Adams 2007: 28-32). The book of Genesis, in its finished form, holds together belief in the intrinsic goodness of creation (Gen. 1.4, 10, 12, etc.) and belief in the mortality of the earth (Gen. 8.22). The writer of 2 Peter alludes to Genesis 1 in 2 Pet. 3.5-6, and we can be sure that he agrees with the verdict of Genesis 1 that creation is intrinsically good.¹⁷

Secondly, the dissolution of the earth is not envisaged as an end in itself; it prepares

the way for a new earthly future. The writer's vision stands in sharp contrast to later 'gnostic' conceptions of the end in which there is no material re-creation after the annihilation of the material order (MacRae 1983: 323). For the writer of 2 Peter, the dissolution of heaven and earth is part of a process of renewal, which brings about a new heavens and new earth in continuity with what has gone before. In Stoicism, the new cosmos was conceived as an exact (or near-exact) replica of the preceding world (Long 1985: 25-26). It is doubtful that the author expected the new cosmic creation to be an exact replication of the present world, but it is very likely that he thought of it as in some sense a restoration and perfection of the original creation.

For the author of 2 Peter, the new heavens and earth are not a *creatio ex nihilo* but a *creatio ex vetere*, a creation out of the old. Material continuity between the present cosmos and the new eschatological creation is assumed, on the basis of the physical continuity that obtained between the antediluvian and postdiluvian worlds, and on the basis of the preservation of matter through conflagration and regeneration as pictured in Stoic cosmology. For the writer of 2 Peter, matter is not to be dumped into eternal nothingness but recycled.

Thirdly, living in the light of the end and re-creation, for this author, does not mean the abandonment of ethical obligations; he issues a moral appeal precisely on the basis of the coming end and renewal (vv. 11-12). In verse 14, pressing further his moral petition, he indicates that as believers await the new heavens and new earth, they should 'strive to be found by him at peace'. The verb 'strive' points to strenuous effort (and thus rules out *passive* waiting). Commentators tend to take 'peace' as meaning the condition of being reconciled to God¹⁸ or the state of holiness or purity that flows from salvation.¹⁹ In the Old Testament, 'peace' (Hebrew, *shalōm*) covers wholeness and well-being in the widest sense; it has a social and public significance 'far beyond the purely personal'.²⁰ Peace is a traditional quality of the eschatological order (Isa. 9.6-7; 32.15-20; 52.7; 60.17-22; etc.) and it embraces harmony with human beings and harmony with the wider creation (especially Isa. 32.15-20; 61.17-22). One wonders whether the broader notion of peace is being evoked in 2 Pet. 3.14, especially when one considers the immediate eschatological context. If so, the injunction to 'strive to be found at peace' might be interpreted as a call to work for wholeness in the present world wherever possible in anticipation of the peace that God himself will establish in the new creation. Since *shalōm* in its eschatological manifestation has an environmental dimension, might not striving for peace be taken to entail the exercise of environmental as well as social responsibility? This would of course be going beyond what the author himself had in mind (it would be absurd to attribute to him an ecological awareness), but it might be seen as an appropriate contemporary extension of his appeal.

But what of the exhortation to 'hasten' the coming of the day of God? Does this

¹⁶ What follows expands and develops Adams 2007: 258-59.

¹⁷ True, the writer believes that there is corruption in the world, but like Paul in Rom. 8.20-21, he sees corruption entering the world by means of a 'fall' event ('because of desire', 2 Pet. 1.4).

¹⁸ E.g. Bauckham 1983: 327.

¹⁹ E.g. Neyrey 1993: 250.

²⁰ See Beck and Brown 1976: 776-83.

not encourage the exploitation of the earth and its resources so as to accelerate the inevitable demise of the present creation? From the author's viewpoint, how one may hasten the day of the Lord is by living godly, holy and peace-seeking lives. The abusive treatment of God's creation is hardly consistent with such a lifestyle. It would be a twisted and pernicious misapplication of the writer's injunction to use it to legitimate the shameless neglect and misuse of the environment.

What about the sense of imminence that attaches to the expectation of the earth's fiery future? Does this not act as a disincentive to meaningful reparative and preservative environmental action? The time signals in this passage are decidedly mixed. On the one hand, there are strong indications of imminence (vv. 3, 12-13), but on other, there is the acknowledgement that the end may be a long way off (v. 8). Readers are thus encouraged to live in expectancy of the end while recognizing that the present world may continue to exist for thousands of years to come. This tension between urgency and long-termism, it seems to me, leaves space for Christian involvement in the wider socio-political world and its problems and for the development of an ethic of environmental care.

Conclusion

2 Pet. 3.5-13 remains a problematic text from an environmental perspective. Attempts to retrieve the passage for the environment based on the claim that what is envisioned is transformation and not destruction fail to persuade. The eschatological scenario depicted involves the destruction of the earth along with the material heavens; the scenario (in and of itself) is hardly one that inspires pro-environmental action. Yet, as I hope to have indicated, relating this passage in a positive way to the environment is not a completely lost cause. The text almost certainly presupposes the created goodness of the earth, which I regard as the primary biblical motivation for environmental concern (along with the stewardship of the earth implied in the 'creation mandate' of Gen. 1.26-28). The thought of the creator 'recycling' the old to produce the new, conserving and reprocessing matter, has positive environmental resonances. And the 'peace' for which readers are called to strive in verse 14 can be legitimately extended to include harmony with the environment. None of this is to suggest that 2 Pet. 3.5-13 can safely be re-labelled an eco-friendly text, but it perhaps shows that the text is not completely devoid of features which are retrievable for a biblical theology and ethic of the environment.

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PART II

INSIGHTS FROM THE HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION