

# *A New Heaven and a New Earth*

The new heaven and the new earth represent the New Jerusalem, which is the church. Almost two thousand years ago, John, author of the Book of Revelation, writes: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea” (Revelation 21:1). The question that confronts the interpreter is, what is the “first heaven and the first earth” that passed away? Again, we must inquire as to the meaning of the replacement of the old heaven and the old earth with “a new heaven and a new earth.” As we seek answers to the above questions, we cannot consult a dictionary as we seek to unravel the mystery of what John saw. Only the context can determine—along with other books of the Old and New Testaments—the meaning we should attach to the phrase—“a new heaven and a new earth.”<sup>1</sup>

**Tim LaHaye** (1926-2016), well-known Christian writer, gives various explanations in his commentary on Revelation, but he, himself, asserts that the “new heaven and a new earth” is “a refurbished earth to begin the millennium.”<sup>2</sup> Another Christian writer, **John F. Walvoord** (1910-1992), evangelical minister, author, speaker, and president of Dallas Theological Seminary from 1952 to 1986, seems to advance the notion that the new heaven and new earth follows the millennial kingdom.<sup>3</sup> He interprets this phrase literally, not figuratively. He says, “Most of the earth is now covered with water, but the new earth apparently will have no bodies of water except for the river mentioned in 22:2.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>We will observe repetition throughout this chapter. Since this subject of “new heavens and a new earth” is so entrenched in the hearts of men and women from a literal fulfillment of a refurbished heaven and earth, it is necessary to go back and forth with Scripture citations in order to drive home the intent of the authors of Holy Scripture.

<sup>2</sup>Tim LaHaye, *Revelation: Illustrated and Made Plain* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 307. This view is set forth as a result of his “futurist interpretation” of the book. He writes: “The futurist view, which seems to me to be the most satisfactory, accepts the book of Revelation as prophecy that primarily is yet to be fulfilled, particularly from chapter 4 on,” *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>3</sup>John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966, 1976), 312.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 311.

Another fellow believer, **J. Vernon McGee** (1904-1988), ordained Presbyterian minister, who is now with the Lord, postulated the idea that this new earth would be an earth in which the “law of gravity” would be revised.<sup>5</sup> He, too, speaks of “The chief characteristic of the new earth, as we have suggested, is the absence of the sea. This would automatically change the climate, the atmosphere, and the living conditions.”<sup>6</sup> McGee also cites 2 Peter 3:7, 10-11 to bolster his conclusion of a literal earth—“In his second epistle Peter declares plainly that the present earth on which we live will be destroyed by fire.”<sup>7</sup>

**The views set forth in this chapter do not agree with the interpretations advanced by the above authors.** Nevertheless, we should never be caustic toward other Christians whose views differ from the *status quo*, that is to say, our own denominational slant. No one in the Christian community sees everything clearly or exactly right. **It goes almost without saying that every person is a creature of his or her own age.** Very few individuals can lift themselves above their own ideas of their training or culture. As we approach Revelation 21:2 or 2 Peter 3:10-13, we must lay aside preconceived ideas and carefully reexamine long-held traditions. **We must rethink and readjust our hand-me-down interpretations concerning the Book of Revelation.**

The objective of any interpreter is to recover the original idea communicated to the original readers. The Book of Revelation is the unfolding of the victorious Christ over His enemies (Revelation 1—11) and the Church victorious over her enemies (Revelation 12—22). **In this book of prophecy, we witness the old world of Judaism passing away—“the first heaven and first earth had passed away” (Revelation 21:1). In other words, “the first heaven and the first earth” speaks of Israel’s annihilation by the Romans in AD 70, which destruction is depicted in metaphoric words.** This apocalyptic language is descriptive of Israel’s covenant heaven and earth passing away with all its rituals (2 Peter 3:10-13).

Matthew records the Olivet Discourse in which Jesus—forty years earlier—foretold the destruction of apostate Israel with apocalyptic language, a language with which the Jews were familiar. Jesus forewarns His disciples about the destruction of the present world order (Judaism): **“Immediately after the distress of those days ‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken’”**<sup>c</sup> (Matthew 24:29). Just as Isaiah (739 BC) describes the passing away of Babylon (Isaiah 13:9-13) with apocalyptic language of the heavenly bodies, so, too, Jesus employs the same kind of imagery to express the passing away of the old world of Israel in AD 70.

God created Israel by giving to the nation a covenant, but, in AD 70, Israel’s covenant, which is described as heaven and earth, passed away with the overthrow of Jerusalem along with its Temple and with all of its regulations (Hebrews 8:13), which were shadows of things to come (9:1-10; 10:1-4). In the destruction of this Old Covenant heaven and earth, God gave a New Covenant, which represents the new heaven and earth that is also called, by John, “the

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<sup>5</sup>J. Vernon McGee, “Revelation,” *Thru the Bible*, 5 Volumes (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983), 5:1062.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 1063.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>c</sup>Isaiah 13:10; 34:4

Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband” (Revelation 21:2). Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians also refers to this “**heavenly Jerusalem,**” which he describes as “**our mother.**” Paul elaborates this concept as he draws an analogy between Hagar and Sara:

Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? <sup>22</sup> For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. <sup>23</sup> His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise. <sup>24</sup> **These things may be taken figuratively,** for the women represent two covenants. **One covenant is from Mount Sinai** and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. <sup>25</sup> Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to **the present city of Jerusalem,** because she **is in slavery** with her children. <sup>26</sup> But **the Jerusalem that is above is free,** and she is our mother. (Galatians 4:21-26)

Just as John spoke of “the first heaven and the first earth” as having passed away (Revelation 21:1), so, also, Jesus himself tied the passing away of heaven and earth to the passing away of the Law of Moses—the Old Covenant world of Judaism. Listen to Jesus as He calls attention to Judaism—“the first heaven and the first earth”:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup> I tell you the truth, until **heaven and earth disappear,** not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law **until everything is accomplished.** (Matthew 5:17-18)

“Until everything is accomplished” occurred in AD 70 with the annihilation of Jerusalem as had been foretold by the prophets (see Luke 21:20-22, 32; Matthew 23:14-34). This “heaven and earth” does not signify the physical universe, but rather it denotes the covenant world of Judaism (Luke 21:32). In Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, He informs His listeners that “not the smallest letter” or “the least stroke of a pen” will pass from the Law until two eschatological events transpire—(1) heaven and earth disappearing and (2) everything accomplished as foretold by the Law or the Prophets. “Heaven and earth” represent the Old Covenant system. Jesus explains, “Everything accomplished” as:

**When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near.** <sup>21</sup> Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. <sup>22</sup> **For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written.** (Luke 21:20-22)

Shortly before Jesus’ ascension to the Father, He explained the “fulfillment of all that has been written.” Luke reports the following words of Jesus: “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (24:44). In this remark, Jesus is speaking, not only about His Death, His Burial, and His Resurrection, as foretold by the prophets, but also about the passing away of the whole Old Testament world of Judaism, which came to culmination in AD 70.

In the development of our apprehension of the “heaven and earth” passing away, we must reflect upon the Olivet Discourse in which Jesus says, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Matthew 24:35). Upon our first reading of this text, we might arrive at the conclusion that Jesus is speaking of the physical heavens and earth passing away. Yet, as we examine Matthew 24 closely, we discover that Jesus is not discussing the solar system, but rather, He is telling His disciples about the “heaven and earth” of the old Jewish order, a system that will cease to exist with the extinction of the Jewish state as a power—a political and religious power that came to an end with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

Remember, Jesus, approximately three and one-half years earlier, in His Sermon on the Mount, as it is commonly called, referred to the passing away of “heaven and earth.” Listen once more, as cited earlier, to the words of Jesus:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup> I tell you the truth, **until heaven and earth disappear**, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. (5:17-18)

As far as I have been able to discern, the destruction of heaven and earth in the New Testament writings never refer to the physical universe, but rather to the ultimate passing away of apostate Israel. Before this heaven and earth disappears, Jesus asserts that the Law will not pass away until “everything is accomplished” as found in the Law. When we peruse the Old Testament, we quickly observe the use of “heavens and earth” employed in prophetic language to designate the passing away of political powers. How do the prophets utilize the phrase “heavens and earth”? The Song of Moses, found in Deuteronomy 32, is an excellent example of poetic language with the use of the words “heaven” and “earth,” which usage symbolizes Israel. Moses begins his prophecy concerning the ultimate destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 with the following words: “Listen, O **heavens**, and I will speak; hear, O **earth**, the words of my mouth” (Deuteronomy 32:1). In this chapter (32), Moses speaks of Israel as “heaven” and “earth.” Israel was exhorted to “listen” and to “hear.” This song depicts the fate of Israel for not listening to the words of Moses: “For a **fire has been kindled by my wrath**, one that burns to the realm of death<sup>e</sup> below. **It will devour the earth and its harvests and set afire the foundations of the mountains**” (32:22). The “earth” and the “foundations of the mountains” are metaphors for the nation of Israel.

At an earlier time, God had forewarned Israel about His judgment that they could expect for their flagrant disregard for His Law. Pay attention once more to the words of Moses: “The LORD will bring a nation against you from far away, from the ends of the earth, like an eagle swooping down, a nation whose language you will not understand” (28:49). Paul and the author of the Book of Hebrews cite this Song of Moses as having fulfillment in their day. Listen to these two authors as they deal with Israel:

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<sup>e</sup> Hebrew to *Sheol*

Romans 10:19

Romans 12:19

Hebrews 10:30-31

Again I ask: Did Israel not understand? First, Moses says, “**I will make you envious by those who are not a nation; I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding.**”<sup>k</sup>

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “**It is mine to avenge; I will repay,**”<sup>b</sup> says the Lord.

For we know him who said, “**It is mine to avenge; I will repay,**”<sup>a</sup> and again, “**The Lord will judge his people.**”<sup>b 31</sup> It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Deuteronomy 32 sets forth God’s deliverance of Israel from their oppressors as well as God’s punishment for their disobedience. Remember, this Song is a song of deliverance as well as a song of warning. Since the Book of Revelation is about the passing away of the old heavens and earth (apostate Jerusalem with its Temple and its ritual ceremonies) and the establishment of a new heaven and a new earth (the Church, which is the Bride of Christ). In the Book of Revelation, we observe the saints singing the Song of Moses and the song about the Lamb of God as victory is accomplished over the Beast:

And I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God<sup>3</sup> and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb: “Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages.” (Revelation 15:2-3)

A cursory reading of Deuteronomy, Chapters 28 and 32, reveals that Moses foretold the utter destruction of the nation of Israel. Jesus, in Matthew 21—25, sets forth the “time of the end” for the fulfillment of what the prophets had previously forewarned. If we wish to comprehend the phrase “heaven and earth,” we must approach the Old Testament, which is the background for the New Testament discernment. The symbolic language of Deuteronomy 32 depicts the downfall of Judaism and the ultimate victory of God, which victory is depicted in Revelation 15:2-3 as victory over the Beast. Isaiah also employs the symbolic use of heavens and earth in his rebuke against Israel. Sometimes it is difficult to detect the literal use of heavens and earth over against its symbolical use. As in the example above (Deuteronomy

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<sup>k</sup> Deut. 32:21

<sup>b</sup> Deut. 32:35

<sup>a</sup> Deut. 32:35

<sup>b</sup> Deut. 32:36; Psalm 135:14

32:1), we also see Isaiah using figurative language of “heaven” and “earth” in the introduction to his prophecy to a rebellious nation:

**Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth!** For the LORD has spoken: “I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.<sup>3</sup> The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.” (Isaiah 1:2-3)

**The “heavens” and “earth” are identified as “children” and “Israel.”** This same scenario is put forth in God’s response to Israel as He uses the symbolic terms “heaven” and “earth.” At first glance, it appears that God speaks of the literal heaven and earth in Isaiah 51:13, which reads:

That you forget the LORD your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth, that you live in constant terror every day because of the wrath of the oppressor, who is bent on destruction? For where is the wrath of the oppressor?

What does heaven and earth refer to? Is He speaking of the literal heavens and earth? Or is He speaking of the nation of Israel as set forth in Isaiah 1:2-3. Perhaps, the answer is clarified in 51:16: “I have put my words in your mouth and covered you with the shadow of my hand—I who set the heavens in place, who laid the foundations of the earth, and who say to Zion, ‘You are my people.’” The literal heavens and earth were set in place a few thousand years ago. The context indicates that God is talking about Zion. He is speaking of His people—the foundation of Israel as a nation. Heavens, in Scripture, frequently refers to governments or political powers. Jesus, in His Olivet Discourse, uses “heaven and earth” to refer to the political power of the Jews:

Immediately after the distress of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.<sup>c 30</sup> At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.<sup>31</sup> And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.<sup>32</sup> Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near.<sup>33</sup> Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it<sup>d</sup> is near, right at the door.<sup>34</sup> I tell you the truth, this generation<sup>e</sup> will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.<sup>35</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. (Matthew 24:29-35)

This “heaven and earth” no longer exist. A literal interpretation of this phrase does not make sense. The passing of the Law and the passing of the heaven and earth would occur together. Jesus states emphatically that the “heavenly bodies will be shaken” (24:29). This shaken and passing away occurred in AD 70 and refers to the downfall of Judaism, which is the

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<sup>c</sup> Isaiah 13:10; 34:4

<sup>d</sup> Or *he*

<sup>e</sup> Or *race*

“heaven and earth” passing away. This entire chapter of Matthew 24 details the passing away of Israel as a nation. With the passing away of this old heaven and earth, there will be a new heaven and a new earth—the New Israel of God, which is the Bride of Christ (see Hebrews 9:28).

Isaiah sets forth judgment and salvation in Chapter 65. After painting a rather dismal picture of judgment against Israel (65:1-16), he then describes salvation in the form of “new heavens and a new earth” (65:17). Isaiah reports God as saying: “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind” (65:17). The “new heavens and a new earth” represent the “heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God” spoken of by the author of Hebrews (Hebrews 12:22). This new heavens and new earth is also referred to as “the church of the firstborn” (12:23).

Following these comments, the author of Hebrews then describes the passing away of the world of Judaism. In its place, the author speaks of the kingdom of God foretold by Daniel (Daniel 2:44), a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Listen to the author of the Book of Hebrews as he seeks to capture the very essence of this heavenly Jerusalem and the passing away of the old heaven and earth:

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly,<sup>23</sup> to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect,<sup>24</sup> to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.<sup>25</sup> See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?<sup>26</sup> At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “**Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.**”<sup>c</sup> <sup>27</sup> The words “once more” indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe,<sup>29</sup> for our “**God is a consuming fire.**”<sup>d</sup> (12:22-29)

The old “covenant” was shaken and replaced by that which could not be shaken, namely, the kingdom of God—the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:1-2). It is in this equivalent attitude that the author of Hebrews writes: “by calling this covenant ‘new,’ he has made the first one obsolete; and **what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear**” (Hebrews 8:13). It is difficult for Christians to cross over from the literal to the figurative. Yet, the figurative occurs with a great deal of frequency in both the Old and New Testament books. For example, Zechariah (520 BC) records a section concerning Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord (Zechariah 3:1). In this scenario, Satan accuses Joshua as standing before the Lord with “filthy clothes” (3:4). Following this accusation, the angel said to Joshua: “See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you” (3:4). Joshua and his associates were symbolical of the coming of the Messiah. Zechariah writes:

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<sup>c</sup> Haggai 2:6

<sup>d</sup> Deut. 4:24

“Listen, O high priest Joshua and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch (נחֻץ ,x#m^j)<sup>9</sup> See, the stone I have set in front of Joshua! There are seven eyes<sup>c</sup> on that one stone, and I will engrave an inscription on it,” says the LORD Almighty, “and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day.”<sup>10</sup> In that day each of you will invite his neighbor to sit under his vine and fig tree,” declares the LORD Almighty. (Zechariah 3:8-10)

We also see symbolic language again in Isaiah 45:22 as God addresses Israel in her rebellion: “Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.” Israel is referred to as “earth.” Earlier in this prophecy of Isaiah, God addresses both Jacob and Israel (41:27). Again, Isaiah writes: “Be silent before me, you islands!” (41:1). David also uses “gates” and “doors” in a symbolic way in reference to people: “Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in” (Psalm 24:7). People are called gates and doors. Isaiah foretells about the coming of the Messianic age in which he describes in symbolic language the children of God as trees. Pay attention to him as he captures the imagination with highly figurative language:

And provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor. (Isaiah 61:3)

God’s people are called “oaks of righteousness.” Also, Jude, the Lord’s brother, speaks of men who follow the ways of the world in all its sinfulness as “clouds without rain” and “wild waves of the sea” and “wandering stars” (Jude 12-13). “Clouds” and “wild waves” are figurative expressions that capture the imagination. Surely, no one interprets these metaphorical expressions as literal. Also, in the Book of Revelation, we observe “waters” as representative of people: “Then the angel said to me, ‘The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages’” (Revelation 17:15). Paul, as he writes to the Corinthians, calls attention to the apostasy of Israel and refers to Christ as a “rock.” We should keep our minds on the symbolic language that Paul employs in order to comprehend the full impact of Jesus as set forth in the time of Moses:

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea.<sup>2</sup> They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.<sup>3</sup> They all ate the same spiritual food<sup>4</sup> and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. (1 Corinthians 10:1-4)

Thus, the words *heaven* and *earth* are also used as symbolic language to depict nations or political powers. Because of traditional teaching, many Christians automatically interpret “heaven and earth” literally. The context is the deciding factor in seeking the proper application to this phrase. John reports in his introduction to the seven churches of Asia concerning “seven stars” in the right hand of Jesus and a “sharp double-edged sword” coming out of His mouth

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<sup>c</sup> Or *facets*

(Revelation 1:16). Also, John speaks of “seven golden lampstands” (1:13). Are “stars” literal? Is the “sword” literal? Are the “lampstands” literal? No! Jesus declares the figurative meaning of these two passages when He reveals to John the interpretation of what he saw:

The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels<sup>b</sup> of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. (1:20)

Just a perusal of the Old and New Testament writings reveal that the word *heaven* is used in a figurative sense to denote political powers or people. For example, prior to the brothers of Joseph selling their brother into slavery, Joseph reveals a dream in which the “**sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down**” to him (Genesis 37:9). When his brothers reported this dream of Joseph (1915-1805 BC) to Jacob (2006-1859 BC) their father, Jacob rebuked his son with stinging words. Moses records comments about Joseph telling of his dream and his father’s rebuke:

When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, ‘What is this dream you had? **Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?**’ (37:10)

We cannot read this story without a consciousness of the symbolical nature of his dream—a dream with its “sun and moon and eleven stars” bowing before him, which eventually came true in the land of Egypt. When Jesus speaks of the passing away of the “heaven and earth” in His Olivet Discourse, He refers to the passing away of the covenant world of Judaism (Matthew 24:35). Earlier, in this same chapter, Jesus introduces His comments about the Temple with all its rituals coming to an end. Listen to Jesus as He describes the disintegration of the old covenant world of Judaism:

Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. <sup>2</sup>“Do you see all these things?” he asked. “I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.” <sup>3</sup>As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. “Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (24:1-3)

The questions posed by the disciples concerns the fulfillment of Jesus’ forecast (24:2)—“When will this happen, and what will be the **sign of your coming** and of the **end of the age?**” The “end of the age” is the stumbling block for many Christians. Many associate this saying, based upon the KJV, with the end of time, not the “time of the end” of Judaism. The “end of the age” is also rendered “end of the world” in the KJV. What did Jesus mean by this expression? The NIV translates the Greek as “age,” not “world” as in the KJV. How do we determine which English word is correct? Jesus did not utilize the word *world*, but *age*.

We must find the answer to this troubling verse in the Greek text. Just a read-through of the Greek text reveals that the word *world* (κόσμος, *kosmos*) is not employed by the Apostles,

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<sup>b</sup> Or *messengers*

but rather the word *age* (αἰών, *aiōn*). What the Apostles desired to know was when would the “completion of the age” (συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος, *synteleias tou aiōnos*) actually occur (24:3). This age ended in AD 70 when the power of the holy people (Israel) would be “finally broken” (Daniel 12:7). Jesus cites the Book of Daniel in His Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24:21. The following charts set forth the parallel between Daniel and Jesus:

Daniel 12:1

At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered.

Matthew 24:21

For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again.

Jesus tells His disciples about the devastating effects of that “great and dreadful day of the Lord” (Malachi 4:5) spoken of by Malachi (433 BC). Malachi foretold of the coming of Elijah before “that great and dreadful day of the Lord.” As Jesus seeks to convey this impending tragedy that Malachi (4:1-5) prophesied about and announced by John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1-12). This Elijah was none other than John the Baptist who came in the spirit and power of Elijah the prophet in the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC. Jesus discusses the role of John the Baptist and the prophecy of Malachi with His disciples. He says,

This is the one about whom it is written: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’<sup>c 11</sup> I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. <sup>12</sup> From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. <sup>13</sup> For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. <sup>14</sup> And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. <sup>15</sup> He who has ears, let him hear. (Matthew 11:10-15)

Later, Jesus in His Olivet Discourse paints a graphic picture of “that great and dreadful day of the Lord.” In his description of this “coming wrath” spoken of by John the Baptist (3:7-10), Jesus chooses language that Isaiah employed in his description of the fall of political powers. We should focus our attention on the words of Jesus as He captures the demise of Israel’s “clout” and “power” with powerful imagery of the destruction of the world of Judaism with its Temple and its rituals:

Immediately after the distress of those days ‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’<sup>c 30</sup> At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn.

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<sup>c</sup> Mal. 3:1

<sup>c</sup> Isaiah 13:10; 34:4

They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.<sup>31</sup> And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.<sup>32</sup> Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near.<sup>33</sup> Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it<sup>d</sup> is near, right at the door.<sup>34</sup> I tell you the truth, this generation<sup>e</sup> will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.<sup>35</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. (Matthew 24:29-35)

What did “heaven and earth” passing away mean to His disciples? When would this occur? Jesus says, “this generation.” How should we interpret the “sun,” “moon,” “stars,” and the “shaken” of the heavenly bodies? We cannot and must not interpret this hyperbolic language in a way that Jesus did not intend for His words to be applied. This highly figurative language is the language of the downfall of governments or political powers. To illustrate this same scenario, we only have to observe the words of Isaiah as he describes the ultimate overthrowing of the Babylonian Empire—a language that Jesus also employs, as noted above, in His description of the overthrowing of apostate Israel:

See, the day of the LORD is coming—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it.<sup>10</sup> The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light.<sup>11</sup> I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble the pride of the ruthless.<sup>12</sup> I will make man scarcer than pure gold, more rare than the gold of Ophir.<sup>13</sup> Therefore I will make the heavens tremble; and the earth will shake from its place at the wrath of the LORD Almighty, in the day of his burning anger. (Isaiah 13:9-13)

Paul, about AD 55, wrote to the Corinthians about the passing away of the world of Judaism: “For this world in its present form (**σχῆμα**, *schēma*, “fashion”) is passing away” (1 Corinthians 7:31). This passing away came about in AD 70—fifteen years after Paul wrote this letter. Again, Paul writes about apostate Israel with concise language as he depicts its demise:

These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages (τέλη τῶν αἰώνων, *telh twn aiwnwn*, end of the ages) has come. (10:11)

This passing away is the very thing that the author of the Book of Hebrews says, “By calling this covenant new, he has made the first one obsolete; and **what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear**” (Hebrews 8:13).

At the time of the writing of First Corinthians and the Book of Hebrews, the old covenant world of Judaism had not yet disappeared. This same author of Hebrews writes: “They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations **applying until the time of the new order**” (9:10). The “new order” represents the kingdom of God prophesied by Daniel. The “new order” is the Gospel age. The old heaven and earth was about to disappear. The comments of **George Eldon Ladd** (1911-1982), Baptist minister and

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<sup>d</sup> Or *he*

<sup>e</sup> Or *race*

professor of New Testament exegesis and theology, on Hebrews 8:13 are informative and well worth citing. Within the context of his explanation, he cites the words of Hebrews 10:16-18 concerning “forgiveness.” He seeks to capture the essence of Hebrews 8:13 with the following comments:

The passage we have just cited from Hebrews says that when there is forgiveness, there is no longer any offering for sin. The forgiveness wrought by Christ renders invalid and obsolete the Mosaic system. Hebrews asserts the same truth in 8:13: “In speaking of a new covenant, he treats the first as obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.” Whether or not these words refer to the historical destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D., they at least affirm the dissolution of the old Mosaic order, because the new order of redemptive reality has come.<sup>8</sup> (Emphasis mine)

The Mosaic order represents the old heavens and earth. Even Josephus (AD 37-100), Jewish historian and apologist of priestly and royal ancestry, speaks of the Temple of Judaism as “like heaven.” He writes:

Now this partitionment of the tabernacle was withal an imitation of universal nature; for the third part of it, that within the four pillars, which was inaccessible to the priests, **was like heaven** devoted to God, while the twenty cubits’ space, even as earth and sea are accessible to men, was in like manner assigned to the priests alone.<sup>9</sup> (Emphasis mine)

The word *heaven* is a term that is employed throughout Scripture with a figurative connotation, not just a literal application. To develop this concept more clearly, the author of Hebrews (12:26-28) is cited once again in order to reinforce this concept. As cited above, the author writes:

At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “**Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.**”<sup>c 27</sup> The words “once more” indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe. (Hebrews 12:26-28)

We can hardly read these words without a reflection upon the words of Jesus to His disciples concerning the overthrow of apostate Israel in His Olivet Discourse:

Immediately after the distress of those days ‘**the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.**’<sup>c</sup> (Matthew 24:29)

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<sup>8</sup>George Eldon Ladd, *The Last Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 27.

<sup>9</sup>Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, Books I-III, Loeb Classical Library, Vol., 242 translated by H. St. J. Thackeray (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1930, 1998), 375.

<sup>c</sup> Haggai 2:6

<sup>c</sup> Isaiah 13:10; 34:4

“Heavenly bodies will be shaken” is a forecast of Israel’s destruction in AD 70. Remember, Isaiah (739 BC) also employs this kind of terminology as he describes the overthrow of ancient Babylon:

Therefore I will **make the heavens tremble**; and the **earth will shake** from its place at the wrath of the LORD Almighty, in the day of his burning anger. (Isaiah 13:13)

“Heavens tremble” and “earth will shake” represent the utter devastation of Babylon. Haggai (520 BC) also describes the change that will occur with the coming of the Messiah. He writes: “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘In a little while **I will once more shake the heavens and the earth**, the sea and the dry land’” (Haggai 2:6). The author of Hebrews cites from the prophet Isaiah and Habakkuk (609 BC) in order to prove that the events on the horizon were now approaching, which had its fulfillment in AD 70.

So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.<sup>36</sup> You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.<sup>37</sup> For in just a very little while, “**He who is coming will come and will not delay.** <sup>38</sup> **But my righteous one<sup>c</sup> will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.**”<sup>d</sup> <sup>39</sup> But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved. (Hebrews 10:35-39)

When will this shaking of the heavens and the earth occur? Haggai goes right to the heart of the matter when he writes: “I will **shake all nations**, and **the desired of all nations will come**, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the LORD Almighty” (Haggai 2:7). When God shakes all nations, the prophet says, “The desired of all nations will come.” “The desired of all nations” is none other than the Messiah. This One (“the desired of all nations”) is the same as “Shiloh” (שִׁלּוֹחַ, v!,l)h) of Genesis 49:10:

The **scepter will not depart from Judah**, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, **until he comes to whom it belongs<sup>c</sup>** and the obedience of the nations is his.

The “scepter” would not depart from Judah until Shiloh comes, that is to say, until Jesus the Messiah appeared on the scene. The scepter departed completely in the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70—Israel ceased to exist as a political power. As we seek to unravel the meaning of “heaven” and “earth” in the Scriptures, we need to read and reread the words of Peter to God’s elect who were scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia concerning “a new heaven and a new earth” (2 Peter 3:10-13). Listen to Peter as he calls awareness to the dissolution of the old Mosaic order and the institution of the new Messianic order with apocalyptic language:

But **the day of the Lord** will come like a thief. **The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.**<sup>a 11</sup> Since

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<sup>c</sup> One early manuscript *But the righteous*

<sup>d</sup> Hab. 2:3, 4

<sup>c</sup> Or *until Shiloh comes*; or *until he comes to whom tribute belongs*

everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives <sup>12</sup> as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.<sup>b</sup> That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. <sup>13</sup> But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. (2 Peter 3:10-13)

Upon the first reading of this frequently cited passage, especially when read out of its immediate and remote context, many Christians assume that Peter is speaking of the literal destruction of heaven and earth. But upon a closer examination, we discover that this heaven and earth had to do with the destruction of the nation of Israel, which annihilation occurred in AD 70. Prior to introducing this forecast about this extinction, he writes about his first correspondence (3:1). He then reminds them of words spoken of by the prophets and the Lord Jesus concerning the last days of Israel (3:3). He speaks of the “last days” with the following terms:

First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. <sup>4</sup> They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.” <sup>5</sup> But they deliberately forget that long ago by God’s word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. <sup>6</sup> By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. <sup>7</sup> By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. (3:3-7)

The “last days” are the days that the prophets prophesied concerning the last days of Israel. Peter, in his First Epistle, makes reference to the events he describes in his Second Epistle. He states emphatically, “The end of all things is near” (1 Peter 4:7). He then speaks of God’s judgment upon the house of Israel:

For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? (4:17)

These statements sound very similar to the warnings of James, the brother of Jesus:

Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. <sup>8</sup> You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near. <sup>9</sup> Don’t grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! (James 5:7-9)

Milton S. Terry (1840-1918), American Methodist minister and educator, comments upon the traditional exposition of the “new heaven and new earth,” which we find in the following Scriptures: Isaiah 51:16; 65:17; 66:22; 2 Peter 3:10-13; Revelation 20:11; 21:1. He denies the future restoration of the Jews to Palestine and the rebuilding of Jerusalem based upon these Scriptures. He rejects the traditional interpretation placed upon 2 Peter 3 as having

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<sup>a</sup> Some manuscripts *be burned up*

<sup>b</sup> Or *as you wait eagerly for the day of God to come*

reference to a literal destruction of the heavens and earth. In a footnote dealing with these Scriptures, Terry writes with clarity concerning the true import of these often twisted passages by many sincere believers:

But the contexts of these several passages do not authorize such a doctrine. Isa. li, 16 [51:16], refers to the resuscitation of Zion and Jerusalem, and is clearly metaphorical. The same is true of Isa. lxv, 17 [65:17], and lxvi, 22 [66:22], for the context in all these places confines the reference to Jerusalem and the people of God, and sets forth the same great prophetic conception of the Messianic future as the closing chapter of Ezekiel. The language of 2 Pet. iii, 10, 12 [3:10-11], is taken mainly from Isa xxx, 4 [30:4], and is limited to the Parousia, like the language of Matt. xxiv, 29 [24:29]. The Lord made “not only the land but also the heaven” to tremble (Heb xii, 26) [12:26], and removed the things that were shaken in order to establish a kingdom which cannot be moved (Heb. xii, 27, 28) [12:27-28].<sup>10</sup>

Terry cites Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22 as confirmation that the new heavens and a new earth refer to the Messianic future, which is the foundation of 2 Peter 3. Isaiah writes:

Isaiah 65:17

Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.

Isaiah 66:22

“As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me,” declares the LORD, “so will your name and descendants endure.”

Prior to Isaiah speaking of “new heavens and a new earth,” he speaks of a new people who would seek Him:

I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, “Here am I, here am I.” (Isaiah 65:1)

Paul cites this Scripture to the Christians in Rome to demonstrate that this prophecy had been fulfilled at the time of his writing Romans (AD 59): “And Isaiah boldly says, ‘**I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me**’<sup>1</sup> (Romans 10:20). Before the new heavens and the new earth came into full bloom, Isaiah describes God’s rejection of national Israel:

All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations—<sup>3</sup> a people who continually provoke me to my very face, offering sacrifices in gardens and burning incense on altars of brick; <sup>4</sup> who sit among the graves and spend their nights keeping secret vigil; who eat the flesh of pigs, and whose pots hold broth of unclean meat; <sup>5</sup> who say, ‘Keep away; don’t come near me, for I am too sacred for you!’ Such people are smoke in my nostrils, a fire that keeps burning all day.<sup>6</sup> “See, it stands written before me: I will not keep silent but will pay back in full; I will pay it back into their laps—<sup>7</sup> both your sins and the sins of

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<sup>10</sup>Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1898, 1987), 489.

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 65:1

your fathers,” says the LORD. “Because they burned sacrifices on the mountains and defied me on the hills, I will measure into their laps the full payment for their former deeds.” (Isaiah 65:2-7)

After this destruction, Isaiah then speaks of new heavens and a new earth. Again, when would this new heavens and new earth come into existence? Listen once more to Isaiah:

I will bring forth descendants from Jacob, and from Judah those who will possess my mountains; my chosen people will inherit them, and there will my servants live. (65:9)

God speaks of the covenant world of Israel: “You will leave your name to my chosen ones as a curse; the Sovereign LORD will put you to death, but to his servants he will give another name” (65:15). After the termination of fleshly Israel, God then speaks of new heavens and a new earth (65:17 and 66:22). It is in this same fashion, following the destruction of apostate Jerusalem that John writes:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. <sup>2</sup> **I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.** <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. <sup>4</sup> He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for **the old order of things has passed away.**” <sup>5</sup> He who was seated on the throne said, “**I am making everything new!**” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” (Revelation 21:1-5)

Remember, Jesus, in His Olivet Discourse, speaks of this dissolution of the world of Judaism: “I tell you the truth, this generation<sup>e</sup> will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened” (Matthew 24:34). It is in this same vein that John Owen (1616-1683), English Nonconformist church leader and theologian, captures the proper use of heavens and earth, as set forth by Jesus, in his sermon on “The Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth.” His observations are excellent, even though he applies the “shaking” of the heavens and earth to the Roman Empire within the west rather than to Judaism in the first century. In spite of the fact that there is misapplication concerning the shaking of the heavens and the earth, nevertheless, his comments are on target as he applies this phraseology to governments:

The first was between the years 400 and 500 after Christ, when the Roman empire of the west—that which withheld the man of sin from acting his part to the life—was shattered to pieces by many barbarous nations; who, settling themselves in the fruitful soils of Europe, began to plant their heavens, and lay the foundations of their earth, growing up into civil states;—for the most part appointing them to be their kings in peace who had been their leaders in war.<sup>11</sup> (Emphasis mine)

John Owen, yet again, in his sermon “The Shaking and Translation of Heaven and Earth,” delivered to House of Commons on April 19, 1649, correctly identifies the various luminaries in

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<sup>e</sup> Or race

<sup>11</sup>John Owens, “The Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth,” in *The Works of John Owen: Sermons to the Nation*, 23 vols. (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth, [1850-1853], 1999), 8:265.

the solar system as metaphors of political states in both the Old and New Testament writings. He declares:

Not to hold you too long upon what is so plain and evident, you may take it for a rule, that, in the denunciations of the judgments of God, through all the prophets, heaven, sun, moon, stars, and the like appearing beauties and glories of the aspectable heavens, are taken for governments, governors, dominions in political states; as Isa. xxiv. 12-15 [24:12-15]; Jer. xv. 9 [15:9]; li. 25. [51:25]<sup>12</sup> (Emphasis mine)

The thoughts and insights of John Owen on 2 Peter 3 are worthy of citation. In his sermon on “Providential Changes, An Argument for Universal Holiness,” he unfolds the true meaning of the new heavens and the new earth in 2 Peter 3. His comments are extremely helpful in seeking to comprehend this most often misapplied Scripture. In the following comments, he sets forth an awareness that the old heavens and earth represent the old world of the Jewish political power that would be replaced with a new heaven and a new earth—the bride of Christ, an eternal kingdom. He writes with keen observation as he puts pen to paper about the skepticism of some who doubted the transition from the old world to the new world:

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, Eccles. viii. 11 [8:11],—they began to mock and scoff, as if they were all but the vain pretences, 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.<sup>13</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Did the early Christians recognize the depth of what Peter wrote? Some had reservations about this “coming” in judgment upon the nation of Israel (2 Peter 3:3-4). Surely, the early Christians must have related the “coming wrath” of God to those to whom they proclaimed the Good News of God’s salvation “in” and “through” Christ. Even John the Immerser called attention to the impending judgment upon Israel in his comments to the religious leaders of Israel: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the **coming wrath**” (Matthew 3: 7)?

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 8:255.

<sup>13</sup> John Owens, “Providential Changes, An Argument for Universal Holiness,” in *The Works of John Owen: Sermons to the Church*, 23 Vols. (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth, [1850-1853], 1998), 9:132. Remember, this sermon by Owen was delivered in the seventeenth century (no date is assigned to the month or year in which this sermon was preached.)

This “coming wrath” is quite evident from the Gospels as well as the Epistles found in the New Testament writings.

Jesus forewarned His disciples as well as the religious leaders about the impending destruction of their holy city—the old heaven and the old earth. Matthew 24, Luke 21, and Mark 13 are three separate accounts of the same event—destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Yet, Peter, toward the end of his life (65/68—he was martyred during the reign of Nero), put across the finality of the events promised by Christ and the prophets of old. He did this with metaphorical language that the Jews were quite familiar with as found in the Old Testament. Peter introduces the believers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Peter 1:1) to the event previously related by Jesus in His Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24-25).

The scoffers (2 Peter 3:3-4), in their denial of His coming, failed to reflect upon the world of Noah’s day—a world that was destroyed by water. What was destroyed? Was it the physical world of the solar system? Or was it the people of Noah’s day? It is with the same sense that Peter speaks of the “present heavens and earth” as being reserved for the Day of Judgment and destruction of ungodly men (3:7). As we read thoroughly the context of 2 Peter 3, we are immediately conscious that Peter presents the “present heavens and earth” as the world of Judaism with its Temple and its religious ceremonies and its political powers. It is in this matching frame of mind that Paul writes, as cited above, to the Corinthians as he, too, addresses the last days of Israel’s covenant world. We should examine Paul’s reference to the “time is short” and “this world in its present form is passing away” in order to arrive at a correct interpretation of Scripture:

What I mean, brothers, is that **the time is short**. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; <sup>30</sup> those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; <sup>31</sup> those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For **this world in its present form is passing away**. (1 Corinthians 7:29-31)

Shortly after Paul’s comments about the last days, he focuses upon the end of this world of the Jews. At the time of the writing of this First Epistle by Paul to the Corinthians (AD 58), he says that “the fulfillment of the age has come” (10:11), which is to say, the end of the Old Covenant Jewish system and age. The Greek text reads: “the ends of the ages have arrived” (τὰ τέλη τῶν αἰώνων κατήντηκεν, *ta telē tōn aiōnōn katēntēken*). Paul says, “This world in its present form is passing away,” but, on the other hand, Peter expresses it this way:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.<sup>a</sup> (2 Peter 3:10)

Once more, John Owen’s observations are exceptionally valuable in comprehending the force of Peter’s words:

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<sup>a</sup> Some manuscripts *be burned up*

I shall only observe, by the way, not to look into the difficulties of these verses, that I be not too long detained from my principal intendment,—that the apostle makes a distribution of the world into heaven and earth, and saith, they “were destroyed with water, and perished.” We know that neither the fabric or substance of the one or other was destroyed, but only men that lived on the earth; and the apostle tells us, verse 5, of *the heavens and earth that were then*, and were destroyed by water, distinct from the heavens and were destroyed by water, distinct from *the heavens and the earth that were now*, and were to be consumed by fire: and yet, as to the visible fabric of heaven and earth, they were the same both before the flood and in the apostle’s time, and continue so to this day; when yet it is certain that the heavens and earth whereof he speaks were to be destroyed and consumed by fire in that generation. We must, then, for the clearing our foundation a little, consider what the apostle intends by “the heavens and the earth” in these two places.<sup>14</sup> (Emphasis mine)

In this paragraph, Owen calls attention to the metaphorical, or figurative, use of the words *heavens* and *earth* to denote the inhabitants, not the literal solar system. Just as the world (“men that lived on the earth”) in Noah’s day was destroyed, so, in Peter’s own generation, the world (Judaism with its Temple and its rituals and its government of political power) will “melt in the heat.” It is also in this identical frame of mind that Jesus, in His Olivet Discourse, addresses the ruin of Jerusalem with figurative, or apocalyptic, language to portray the downfall of the old heavens and earth of Judaism:

So if anyone tells you, ‘There he is, out in the desert,’ do not go out; or, ‘Here he is, in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it.<sup>27</sup> For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.<sup>28</sup> Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.<sup>29</sup> Immediately after the distress of those days ‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’<sup>c 30</sup> At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.<sup>31</sup> And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.<sup>32</sup> Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near.<sup>33</sup> Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it<sup>d</sup> is near, right at the door.<sup>34</sup> I tell you the truth, this generation<sup>e</sup> will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.<sup>35</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. (Matthew 24:26-35)

Jesus gives a picture of the fall of Jerusalem with very graphic apocalyptic language about the luminaries in the solar system:

Immediately after the distress of those days ‘**the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.**’<sup>c</sup> (24:29)

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<sup>14</sup>John Owen, “Providential Changes, An Argument for Universal Holiness,” *Sermons to the Church*, 9:133.

<sup>c</sup> Isaiah 13:10; 34:4

<sup>d</sup> Or *he*

<sup>e</sup> Or *race*

<sup>c</sup> Isaiah 13:10; 34:4

On the other hand, Peter, too, captures the utter desolation of this system that God had previously ordained to be in force until the Messiah should come and until the complete fulfillment of all that the prophets had foretold, which promise included the absolute obliteration of the political power of Judah. Peter, in response to his critics, writes about the “day of the Lord,” a day of judgment against apostate Israel:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements (στοιχεῖα, *stoicheia*) will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.<sup>a</sup> <sup>11</sup> Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives <sup>12</sup> as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.<sup>b</sup> That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements (στοιχεῖα, *stoicheia*) will melt in the heat. <sup>13</sup> But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. (2 Peter 3:10-13)

Before analyzing the word *elements* (στοιχεῖα, *stoicheia*) as employed by Peter in verse 10, I believe that the commentary on these verses by Owen are well worth citing. Owen continues to develop his thoughts about the new heavens and the new earth with the following comments which clear away the underbrush of tradition—the tradition that the new heavens and new earth represent a refurbishing of the literal solar system:

1. It is certain, that what the apostle intends by the “world,” with its heavens and earth, verses 5, 6, which was destroyed by water; the same, or somewhat of that kind, he intends by “the heavens and the earth” that were to be consumed and destroyed by fire, verse 7. Otherwise there would be no coherence in the apostle’s discourse, nor any kind of argument, but a mere fallacy of words.
2. It is certain, that by the flood, the world, or the fabric of heaven and earth, was not destroyed, but only the inhabitants of the world; and therefore the destruction intimated to succeed by fire, is not of the substance of the heavens and the earth, which shall not be consumed until the last day, but of persons or men living in the world.
3. Then we must consider in what sense men living in the world are said to be the “world,” and the “heavens and earth” of it. I shall only insist on one instance to this purpose, among many that may be produced, Isa. li. 15, 16 [51:15-16]. The time when the work here mentioned, of planting the heavens, and laying the foundation of the earth, was performed by God, was when he “divided the sea,” verse 15, and gave the law, verse 16, and said to Zion, “Thou art my people;”—that is, when he took the children of Israel out of Egypt, and formed them in the wilderness into a church and state. Then he planted the heavens, and laid the foundation of the earth,—made the new world; that is, brought forth order, and government, and beauty, from the confusion wherein before they were. This is the planting of the heavens and laying the foundation of the earth in the world. And hence it is, that when mention is made of the destruction of a state and government, it is in that language that seems to set forth the end of the world. So Isa. xxiv. 4 [24:4]; which is yet but the destruction of the state of Edom. The like also is affirmed of the Roman empire, Rev. vi. 14 [6:14]; which the Jews constantly

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<sup>a</sup> Some manuscripts *be burned up*

<sup>b</sup> Or *as you wait eagerly for the day of God to come*

affirm to be intended by Edom in the prophets. And in our Saviour Christ's prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem, Matt. xxiv [24], he sets it out by the expression of the same importance. It is evident, then, that, in the prophetic idiom and manner of speech, by "heaven" and "earth," the civil and religious state and combination of men in the world, and the men of them, are often understood. So were the heavens and earth that world which then was destroyed by the flood.

4. 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.<sup>15</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Before enumerating his reasons for the above statements (four), it is necessary to make a comment about one of his statements in number 3. He identified Revelation 6:14 with the Roman Empire, but in this interpretation, he is incorrect, so it seems to me. Revelation 6:14 is found within the sixth seal. This seal is about the downfall of apostate Israel, not the Roman Empire. Unfortunately, the reformers identified the beast of Revelation and its number 666 as referring to the Roman Catholic Church. Since Owen lived during the 1600s, he, too, saw the Catholic Church as the beast in the Book of Revelation. Even though he was mistaken on this point, nevertheless, he was still on target in identifying the old heaven and earth and the new heavens and earth as related to people, not the solar system. In fact, the language in Revelation 6:14 is very similar to the language of Jesus about the destruction of Jerusalem in Matthew 24. Observe the similarity of apocalyptic language in the Revelation text by John:

I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red,<sup>13</sup> and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind.<sup>14</sup> The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.<sup>15</sup> Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains.<sup>16</sup> They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!" (Revelation 6:12-16)

This is a description of the last days of Israel, not the end of the solar system. If this text depicts the end of the solar system, the following question arises: what good would it do individuals to call upon the mountains and rocks to fall upon them and to hide them from the wrath of the Lamb? This language is similar to the language found in the Old Testament that speaks of the downfall of other nations, which will be taken up in more detail later in this chapter. For the time being, the following chart is a parallel of the apocalyptic statements concerning the last days of Israel as found in both the Gospel of Matthew and the Book of Revelation:

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<sup>15</sup>John Owens, "Providential Changes, An Argument for Universal Holiness," in *The Works of John Owen: Sermons to the Church*, 9:133, 134.

Immediately after the distress of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.

The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red,<sup>13</sup> and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind.<sup>14</sup> The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place

Even though the citations by John Owen are lengthy, they are, nevertheless, extremely helpful in grasping the totality of Peter's graphic description of the fall of Jerusalem and the coming of the new heaven and new earth that John sees in the final stages of Jesus' revelation to John about the last days of Israel and the completion of the New Covenant, which is described as new heavens and a new earth. Listen to John as he writes about the victorious church (new heavens and new earth) over Israel (first heaven and first earth):

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.<sup>2</sup> I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. (Revelation 21:1-2)

In Owen's statement four, listed above, he sets forth two reasons as to why he considered the elements (*στοιχεῖα*, *stoicheia*) melting with fervent heat as representing the Jewish system. He asserts:

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 of 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, Isa. lxxv. 17 [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. lxxvi. 21, 22 [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, Heb. xii. 26-28 [12:26-28].<sup>16</sup> (emphasis mine)

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 9:134, 135.

In Owen’s concluding remarks, he seeks to summarize all of his previous statements with the following summary:

There is the foundation of the apostle’s inference and exhortation, **Τούτων οὕτως πάντων λυομένων** [*Toutōn houtōs pantōn lyomenōn*, these things thus all being dissolved]—“Seeing that I have evinced that all these things, however precious they seem, or what value soever any put upon them, shall be dissolved,—that is, destroyed; and that in that dreadful and fearful manner before mentioned,—in a way of judgment, wrath, and vengeance, by fire and sword,—let others mock at the threats of Christ’s coming,—he will come, he will not tarry; and then the heavens and earth that God himself planted,—the sun, moon, and stars of the Judaical polity and church,—the whole old world of worship and worshippers, that stand out in their obstinacy against the Lord Christ,—shall be the end of these things, and that shortly.”<sup>17</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Hopefully, the reader will tolerate one more lengthy quote from Owen, a citation that is to the point in identifying the meaning of the “coming” of Christ Himself:

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 fulfill 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 v. 7-9 [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 xxi. 27 [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. So, in the ruin and destruction of the Roman empire, on the account of their persecution, it is said that “the day of the wrath of the Lamb was come,” Rev. vi. 16, 17 [6:16-17].<sup>18</sup> (Emphasis mine)

When Peter writes about the “elements” (**στοιχεῖα**, *stoicheia*) being “destroyed by fire,” he employed apocalyptic language to depict the world of Judaism with its rules and regulations, not the literal disintegration of the physical heavens and earth. The KJV translates this part of the verse:

The heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. (2 Peter 3:10)

The heavens melting with “fervent heat” represents Israel. It is in this similar outlook of expression that the psalmist says, “Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, **the earth melts**” (Psalm 46:6). “The earth melts” is a figurative way of expressing the falling of a

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 9:135.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 9:138, 139. Again, he incorrectly identifies the ruin and destruction as the Roman Empire, not the ruin and destruction of Jerusalem.

kingdom. Both Asaph and Peter employ apocalyptic language to capture the intensity of one's rebellion against God. Again, Asaph writes about God's judgment in poetic style: "Our God comes and will not be silent; a **fire devours** before him, and **around him a tempest rages**" (Psalm 50:3). Another Psalm is equally forceful in apocalyptic language concerning God's wrath against His foes:

Fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side. <sup>4</sup> His lightning lights up the world; the earth sees and trembles. <sup>5</sup> The **mountains melt like wax** before the LORD, before the Lord of all the earth. <sup>6</sup> The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all the peoples see his glory. (Psalm 97:3-6)

Asaph composes a psalm in which he describes God's anger against the Israelites' complaints against Him after bringing them out of the land of bondage (Egypt):

When the LORD heard them, he was very angry; **his fire broke out against Jacob, and his wrath rose against Israel,** <sup>22</sup> for they did not believe in God or trust in his deliverance. (Psalm 78:21-22)

Isaiah, in his remarks about "obstinate children," writes with metaphorical language, which language Peter adopts in his pictorial description of Israel's demise:

See, the Name of the LORD comes from afar, with **burning anger and dense clouds of smoke;** his **lips are full of wrath,** and **his tongue is a consuming fire.** <sup>28</sup> **His breath is like a rushing torrent,** rising up to the neck. **He shakes the nations in the sieve of destruction;** he places in the jaws of the peoples a bit that leads them astray. <sup>29</sup> And you will sing as on the night you celebrate a holy festival; your hearts will rejoice as when people go up with flutes to the mountain of the LORD, to the Rock of Israel. <sup>30</sup> The LORD will cause men to hear his majestic voice and **will make them see his arm coming down with raging anger and consuming fire, with cloudburst, thunderstorm and hail.** <sup>31</sup> **The voice of the LORD will shatter Assyria;** with his scepter he will strike them down. <sup>32</sup> Every stroke the LORD lays on them with his punishing rod will be to the music of tambourines and harps, as he fights them in battle with the blows of his arm. <sup>33</sup> Topheth has long been prepared; it has been made ready for the king. Its fire pit has been made deep and wide, with an abundance of fire and wood; the breath of the LORD, like a stream of burning sulfur, sets it ablaze. (Isaiah 30:27-33)

The Christians to whom Peter wrote understood the use of apocalyptic language and its application of judgment against nations. Peter's words must be interpreted within the biblical context of their historical setting. The word *elements* (**στοιχεῖα**, *stoicheia*) in 2 Peter 3:10 is also employed by Paul to the Colossians (AD 62) as he writes about the rudiments of Judaism—the old Jewish religion. Paul in this Epistle warns the Colossians about human regulations. In Colossians 2:8, he writes:

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles (**στοιχεῖα**, *stoicheia*) of this world rather than on Christ.

The KJV translates the Greek word as "rudiments." Following this admonition, Paul labors the point about Judaism with all of its rituals (2:14-17). In fact, he says in verse 16, Chapter 2: "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a

religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.” Then in 2:20, he again uses the word *principles* (στοιχεῖα, *stoicheia*) as he seeks to change behavior. Listen another time to Paul:

Since you died with Christ to the basic principles (στοιχεῖα, *stoicheia*) of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules. (2:20)

We also observe Paul’s discussion of these same rules and regulations to the churches located in the province of Galatia. He speaks of their lives before conversion as lives under bondage (slavery) to the basic principles of the world, which principles enveloped the Mosaic Code. Keep your mind on Paul as he zeros in on the problem:

So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles (στοιχεῖα, *stoicheia*) of the world. <sup>4</sup> But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, <sup>5</sup> to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. <sup>6</sup> Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “*Abba*,<sup>a</sup> Father.” <sup>7</sup> So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir. (Galatians 4:3-7)

Paul employs the Greek word **στοιχεῖα** (*stoicheia*, “elements”) twice in this fourth chapter (4:3; 4:9). In this second occurrence, he asked the following question: “How is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles (στοιχεῖα, *stoicheia*, elements)” [4:9]? He follows this question up with another question: “Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again” (4:9)? What is he writing about? Hear once more as Paul explains: “You are observing special days and months and seasons and years” (4:10)! From the above Scriptures (Colossians 2:8, 20 and Galatians 4:3, 9), we see more clearly the employment of the word **στοιχεῖα** (*stoicheia*, elements) in 2 Peter 3:10. The average reader will read 3:10 with wooden literalness concerning the physical heavens and earth. The word *fire* also throws off many interpreters in their analysis of this most often misapplied Scripture. Peter writes down:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be **destroyed by fire** (καυσούμενα λυθήσεται, *kausoumena lythēsetai*, “burning will be dissolved”), and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.<sup>a</sup> (3:10)

The word *fire* is not necessarily interpreted literally in every text. For instance, Jesus speaks to a crowd of many thousands when he says,

I have come to bring **fire** on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! <sup>50</sup> But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed! <sup>51</sup> Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. (Luke 12:49-51)

Jeremiah, too, uses figurative language as he describes God’s anger against Israel:

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<sup>a</sup> Aramaic for *Father*

<sup>a</sup> Some manuscripts *be burned up*

In fierce anger he has cut off every horn<sup>f</sup> of Israel. He has withdrawn his right hand at the approach of the enemy. He has burned in Jacob like a flaming fire that consumes everything around it. (Lamentations 2:3)

After the dissolution of the old heavens and old earth, Peter puts in writing: “But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (2 Peter 3:13). In “keeping with his promise” calls to mind the words of Isaiah concerning the promise of new heavens and a new earth. These two Scriptures are cited again, even though listed above:

Isaiah 65:17

Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.

Isaiah 66:22

“As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me,” declares the LORD, “so will your name and descendants endure.”

These two Scriptures are the only two places in the Old Testament that this promise is made and neither of these Scripture citations speaks of literal heavens and earth. The comments of **Charles Spurgeon** (1832-1892), British Particular Baptist preacher, are informative concerning these two Scriptures. On July 5, 1891, Charles Spurgeon delivered a sermon on “God Rejoicing in the New Creation.” He took his text from Isaiah 65:17-18. Even though Spurgeon advanced the notion of something yet to come in his own day, or beyond, nevertheless, his comments about “the old heavens and earth” are significant, which he associated with Jewish rituals and which the Jewish believers understood as “the old heavens and earth.” The new heavens and the new earth (the kingdom of God prophesied by Daniel 2:44) replaced the old heavens and the old earth (the world of Judaism). Spurgeon captures the significance of the old heavens and earth:

Did you ever regret the absence of the burnt-offering, or the red heifer, or any one of the sacrifices and rites of the Jews? Did you ever pine for the feast of tabernacles, or the dedication? No, because, though those were like the old heavens and earth to the Jewish believers, they have passed away, and we now live under new heavens and a new earth, so far as the dispensation of divine teaching is concerned. The substance is come, and the shadow has gone; and we do not remember it.<sup>19</sup> (Emphasis mine)

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<sup>f</sup> Or / *all the strength*; or *every king*; *horn* here symbolizes strength.

<sup>19</sup>**Charles H. Spurgeon**, “God Rejoicing in the New Creation,” (July 5, 1891), *Spurgeon's Sermons: Volume 37* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1998, electronic ed. Logos Library System; Spurgeon's Sermons, Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998). See also, Charles Spurgeon, “God Rejoicing in the New Creation,” in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Year 1891, Volume 37—Sermons 2182-2236*, Original and Completely Unabridged (Pasadena, Texas: Pilgrim Publications, 1891, 1975, 1993), 354. I recommend this Sermon (349-360) to every believer. We cannot read this powerful message without an appreciation for what God accomplished for His people “in” and “through” Jesus. This message develops the necessity of holiness in our lives—lives that should manifest thankfulness for God’s new creation “in” and “through” Jesus the Savior of the world.

**Edward J Young's** (1907-1968), Reformed theologian and an Old Testament scholar, comments on Isaiah 65:17 are also informative and on target as to the thrust of Isaiah's words concerning the new heavens and a new earth as figurative expressions to denote renovation:

Again God creates heaven and earth, and they are new. In that they are new, they will so fully show forth the glory of God their creator, and so completely fulfill every need and desire of man the creature that the former heavens and earth will no longer be remembered, nor will they even enter upon the heart of man.

Strictly speaking, the words *former things* refer to former heaven and earth. But heaven and earth are employed as figures to indicate a complete renovation or revolution in the existing course of affairs. With the advent of the Messiah the blessing to be revealed will in every sense be so great that it can be described only as the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. The reference, however, is not to be restricted to the first advent but includes the entire reign of Christ, including the second advent and the eternal state. Christ renews the world, and Hebrews speaks of it as the world to come (2:5). In the passages such as 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 6:15, Paul shows how the new creation applies to believers; and Peter sets forth the hope of believers to receive this new heaven and earth (2 Pet. 3:15). In the concept of the prophet, time and eternity, the age of the New Testament and the eternal heaven, are not sharply distinguished; and believers are already in the heavenlies. Prominent in the prophecies of blessing to come in the idea of forgetfulness of the past (cf. Rev. 21).<sup>20</sup> (Emphasis mine)

To return to Isaiah 65, we perceive that Isaiah uses figurative language to describe the passing away of the old heaven and earth. This chapter by Isaiah sets forth invading armies under the following expression—fire and sword. The context of this verse (65:17) begins earlier with the overthrow of apostate Israel. God is very plain in His remarks concerning the old heaven and earth (Israel) with the new heaven and earth (the church). Isaiah pens:

You will leave your name to my chosen ones as a curse; the Sovereign LORD will put you to death, but to his servants he will give another name. <sup>16</sup>Whoever invokes a blessing in the land will do so by the God of truth; he who takes an oath in the land will swear by the God of truth. For the past troubles will be forgotten and hidden from my eyes. <sup>17</sup>Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. (Isaiah 65:15-17)

In Chapter 66, Isaiah speaks of judgment and hope. I observed the negative then the positive. God's execution of judgment upon the nation of Israel is quite revealing. Before God announces "the new heavens and the new earth" (66:22), he details a graphic scenario of judgment against Israel:

See, the LORD is coming with fire, and his chariots are like a whirlwind; he will bring down his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. <sup>16</sup>For with fire and with his sword the LORD will execute judgment upon all men, and many will be those slain by the LORD. (66:15-16)

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<sup>20</sup>Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 3 Volumes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972): 3: 513, 514.

After God's announcement of judgment, He then proceeds to give hope to the nation with the proclamation of new heavens and a new earth: "As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me," declares the LORD, "so will your name and descendants endure" (65:22). Young's commentary on Isaiah 66:22 clarifies still further the employment of new heavens and a new earth in context:

With this verse the prophet makes known the foundation for the entire preceding line of thought. By your seed and your name he has in mind the spiritual Israel of which he has been speaking. Seed refers to the descendants of the people of God, who form the subject of this address. Their perpetuity is to be assured. Name indicates reputation; forever the Church will be recognized as the people whom God has chosen to be His own. To assure God's people of this perpetuity and constant recognition, God institutes a comparison with the new heavens and the new earth. As God originally created the heavens and the earth, so now He is going to make (the participle suggests near futurity) new heavens and a new earth, which will stand before Him (i.e. under His constant care and protection: cf. 48:19; 53:2). The old Israel will pass away; but from it there will spring the remnant that has survived the judgment, and together with it will be a great influx of Gentiles, all of which will form the true Israel of God under the new dispensation. In the old dispensation this Israel of God (the Church) had been practically identical with the literal nation, but in the new the Gentiles "should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel, ... to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God ..." (Eph. 3: 6, 10). The promise is strengthened by saith the Lord.<sup>21</sup> (Emphasis mine)

**John Calvin** (1509-1564), prominent theologian during the Protestant Reformation, too, writes with insight as to the poetical nature of the new heavens and new earth. His comments are valuable of citation:

17. *For, lo, I will create new heavens and a new earth.* **By these metaphors he promises a remarkable change of affairs;** as if God had said that he has both the inclination and the power not only to restore his Church, but to restore it in such a manner that it shall appear to gain new life and to dwell in a new world. **These are exaggerated modes of expression;** but the greatness of such a blessing, which was to be manifested at the coming of Christ, could not be described in any other way. Nor does he mean only the first coming, but the whole reign, which must be extended as far as to the last coming, as we have already said in expounding other passages.<sup>22</sup> (Emphasis mine)

**John Lightfoot's** (1602-1675), English churchman, rabbinical scholar, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge and Master of St. Catharine's College, Cambridge, observations on the new heavens and the new earth are also discerning:

**That the destruction of Jerusalem is very frequently expressed in Scripture as if it were the destruction of the whole world.** Deut. xxii. 22; "A fire is kindled in mine anger, and shall burn unto the lowest hell" (the discourse there is about the wrath of God consuming that people; see ver. 20, 21), "and shall consume the earth with her increase, and set on fire the foundations of the mountains."

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<sup>21</sup>Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 3 Volumes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972): 2: 335-336.

<sup>22</sup>John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, Vol., 3, Calvin's Commentaries, 23 volumes, Vol., 8 (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprinted 1979), 397-398.

Jer. iv. 23; “I beheld the earth, and lo, it was without form and void; and the heavens, and they had no light,” &c. The discourse there also is concerning the destruction of that nation, Isa. lxxv. 17; “Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered,” &c. And more passages of this sort among the prophets. According to this sense, Christ speaks in this place (Matthew 24:28-29--RDB); and Peter speaks in his Second Epistle, third chapter; and John, in the sixth of the Revelation; and Paul, 2 Cor. v.17, &c.<sup>23</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Also, Lightfoot’s comments on his “Exercitations upon St. John” also convey the same thoughts about the meaning of new heavens and a new earth as his previous comments on “Exercitations upon St. Matthew.” In this section, he comments upon Peter’s words to Jesus concerning John’s death. As we stand outside the Gospel of John, John lets his readers get a glimpse of Jesus’ response to Peter concerning the death of John, which is quite revealing. Jesus says to Peter: “If I want him to remain alive **until I return**, what is that to you? You must follow me” (John 21:22). The phrase “Until I return” by Jesus deserves an explanation.

This “until I return” refers to Christ’s earlier words “I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man **coming in his kingdom**” (Matthew 16:28). In Lightfoot’s explanation of “until I return,” he explains a number of Scriptures dealing with the “coming” of the “Son of Man coming in his kingdom,” which coming deals with the new heavens and the new earth. Even though his remarks are very similar, nevertheless, the following observations are much fuller in his development of this misunderstood subject. Once more, Lightfoot’s observations are worth citing:

**I.** That the destruction of Jerusalem and the whole Jewish state is described as if the whole frame of this world were to be dissolved. Nor is it strange, when God destroyed his habitation and city, places once so dear to him with so direful and sad an overthrow; his own people, whom he accounted of as much or more than the whole world beside, by so dreadful and amazing plagues. Matt. xxiv. 29, 30 [24:29-30], “The sun shall be darkened, &c; which yet are said to fall out within that generation, ver. 34. 2 Pet. iii. 10 [3:10], “The heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat,” &c. Compare with this Deut. xxxii. 22 [32:22], Heb. xii. 26 [12:26]: and observe that by *elements* are understood the Mosaic elements, Gal. iv. 9 [4:9], Coloss. ii. 20 [2:20]: and you will not doubt that St. Peter speaks only of the conflagration of Jerusalem, the destruction of the nation, and the abolishing the dispensation of Moses.

**II.** With reference to this, and under this notion, the times immediately preceding this ruin are called ‘*the last days*,’ and *the last times*, אַתְּרֵית הַיָּמִים; that is, the *last times* of the Jewish city, nation, economy. This manner of speaking frequently occurs: which let our St. John himself interpret, 1 John ii. 18 [2:18]; “There are many antichrist; whereby we know that it is the last time:’ and that this nation is upon the very verge of destruction, when as it hast already arrived at the utmost pitch of infidelity, apostasy, and wickedness.”

**III.** With the same reference it is, that the times and state of things immediately following the destruction of Jerusalem are called “a new creation,” ‘new heavens,’ and ‘a new earth,’ Isa. lxxv. 17 [65:17]: “Behold, I create a new heaven and a new earth.” When should that be? Read the whole chapter; and you will find the Jews rejected and cut off; and from that time is that new creation of the evangelical world among the Gentiles.

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<sup>23</sup>John Lightfoot, “Exercitations Upon the Gospel of St. Matthew,” in *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica: Matthew—1 Corinthians*, 4 Vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1859, 1979), 2:318-319.

Compare 2 Cor. v. 17 [5:17] and Rev. xxi. 1, 2 [21:1-2]; where, the old Jerusalem being cut off and destroyed, a new one succeeds; and new heavens and a new earth are created.

2 Pet. iii.13 [3:13]: “We, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth.” The heavens and the earth of the Jewish church and commonwealth must be all on fire, and the Mosaic elements burnt up: but we, according to the promise made to us by Isaiah the prophet, when all these are consumed, look for the new creation of the evangelical state.<sup>24</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Since many Christians misinterpret the subject of the “new heavens” and the “new earth,” the citations from earlier Christian commentators will shed more light on this misread subject. One other such scholar is **John Brown** (1784-1858). His remarks concerning Matthew 5:18 are extremely informative concerning the meaning of the “until heaven and earth disappear.” We should observe the negative (solar system) and the positive (Judaism) statements about this phrase:

If the words, however, are carefully examined, they will be found to contain in them, not an indefinite declaration of the inviolable authority of the law, but a declaration of its inviolable authority till a certain period, till certain events had taken place,—“till heaven and earth passing away,” understood literally, is the dissolution of the present system of the universe; and the period when that is to take place, is called the “end of the world.” **But a person at all familiar with the phraseology of the Old Testament Scriptures knows that the dissolution of the Mosaic economy, and the establishment of the Christian, is often spoken of as the removing of the old earth and heaven, and the creation of a new earth and new heavens.** For example—“For, behold, I create new heavens, and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind.” “For as the new heavens, and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, saith the Lord, so shall your seed and your name remain” (Isa 65:17; 66:22). **The period of the close of the one dispensation, and the commencement of the other, is spoken of as “the last days,” and “the end of the world”; and is described as such a shaking of the earth and heavens, as should lead to the removal of the things which were shaken** (Haggai 2:6; Hebrews 12:26-27). The phrase in the end of the verse, “till all things be fulfilled,” seems to refer to the typically prophetic character of the law, and to be equivalent to ‘till all the things figured in it be—take place, really exist,—till the true priest, and the true altar, and the true sacrifice, come.’<sup>25</sup> (Emphasis mine)

A proper grasp of Matthew 5:18 and 2 Peter 3:10-13 clarifies the muddled thinking of so many Christians in the study of the Book of Revelation. Roderick Campbell’s comments on 2 Peter 3 is filled with insight. Pay attention as he seeks to set forth the true interpretation of this often-misunderstood Scripture about the new heavens and the new earth:

Peter is preparing his hearers for the “fiery trial” which he sees looming in the days ahead—a trial which is certain to test their faith. His hearers have not yet fully grasped the significance of the great change introduced by the advent of Christ. The external fabric of the Old Covenant still stands, in outward appearance seemingly as secure and glorious as it was before (except for the rending of the temple veil). **Some of the Christians are still clinging tenaciously to the ancient symbolic rites**

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<sup>24</sup>John Lightfoot, “Exercitations Upon the St. John,” in *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica: Matthew—John 4:22*, 4 Vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1859, 1979), 3:452, 453.

<sup>25</sup>John Brown, “The Sermon on the Mount,” in *Discourses and sayings of our Lord*, Vols. 3 (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth, 1850, 1990): 1:171-172.

**and ceremonies.** From our vantage point it is easy to accuse them of lack of vision. But we should bear in mind that Peter and his audience were living in the midst of a persecuting world. Moreover, the destruction of their sacred city and temple was then imminent. Peter had heard the doom of their magnificent temple pronounced by the lips of Jesus—a doom which, Jesus said, some of the generation then living would witness with their natural eyes. **In the midst of that crumbling world, Peter calls to mind Isaiah’s promise of “new heavens and a new earth.”** By the eye of faith, he sees this new creation emerging from the dust and debris of that once glorious order of things which was so dear to every loyal Hebrew heart (cf. 2 Cor. 3:7). He and his hearers are standing within the threshold of the new age, an age which, although potentially and actually present, has not yet been made fully manifest to his hearers, who are no doubt still, for the most part, babes in Christ.<sup>26</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Another Scripture (Matthew 28:20), at first glance, is not usually associated with AD 70. But on closer examination, we discover that Jesus emphasizes the consummation of the age of Judaism, which consummation inaugurates the Kingdom of God:

Teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the **very end of the age** (συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος, *synteleias tou aiōnos*, completion of the age).

**Russell Stuart’s** (1816-1895) remarks about “the end of the world” as translated in the King James Version are also quite revealing. Listen to him as he unfolds the meaning of the Greek:

‘Lo, I am with you always [all the days], even to the close of the age’ (συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος, *synteleias tou aiōnos*). Nothing can be more misleading to the English reader than the rendering ‘the end of the world;’ which inevitably suggests the close of human history, the end of time, and the destruction of the earth,—a meaning which the words will not bear. **Lange, though far from apprehending the true significance of the phrase, rightly gives the sense, ‘the consummation of the secular aeon, or the period of time which comes to an end with the Parousia.’** What can be more evident than that the promise of Christ to be with His disciples to the close of the age, implies that they were to live to the close of the age? That great consummation was not far off; the Lord had often spoken of it, and always as an approaching event, one which some of them would live to see. It was the winding up of the Mosaic dispensation; the end of the long probation of the Theocratic nation; when the whole frame and fabric of the Jewish polity were to be swept away, and ‘the kingdom of God to come with power.’ **This great event, our Lord had declared, was to fall within the limit of the existing generation.** The ‘close of the age’ coincided with the Parousia, and the outward and visible sign by which it is distinguished in the destruction of Jerusalem. This is the *terminus* by which in the New Testament the field is bounded. **To Israel it was ‘the end,’ ‘the end of all things,’ ‘the passing away of heaven and earth,’ the abrogation of the old order, the inauguration of the new.’**<sup>27</sup> (Emphasis mine)

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<sup>26</sup>Roderick Campbell, *Israel and the New Covenant* (Philadelphia, PA: Geneva Divinity School Press, 1954), 115.

<sup>27</sup>James Stuart Russell, *The Parousia: A Critical Inquiry into the New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord’s Second Coming* (Bradford, PA: Kingdom Publications, 1878, 1887, 1996), 121.

## CONCLUSION

With the passing away of the old heaven and earth (**Judaism**), we witness the inauguration of the new heavens and earth—the new Israel of God based upon better promises. In concluding this subject, a few further comments about the new heavens and new earth in 2 Peter 3:10-13 are appropriate to wrap up this in-depth study. For instance, another citation from **Stuart Russell** is appropriate to help clarify this much-misunderstood subject. His observations about the annihilation (shaking) of the heavens and earth are exceptionally advantageous in our assessment of this most challenging study. He creates the following assessment of Christ’s comments (Matthew 24:35) and the Hebrews writer’s comments (Hebrews 10:26-28), which explanation also illuminates Peter’s remarks. Russell writes with clear insight as to the meaning of the word *earth*:

What, then, is the great catastrophe symbolically represented as the shaking of the earth and heavens? No doubt it is the overthrow and abolition of the Mosaic dispensation, or old covenant; the destruction of the Jewish church and state, together with all the institutions and ordinances connected therewith. There were ‘heavenly things’ belonging to that dispensation: the laws, and statutes, and ordinances, which were divine in their origin, and might be properly called the ‘*spiritualia*’ of Judaism—these were the *heavens*, which were to be shaken and removed. **There were also ‘earthly things:’ the literal Jerusalem, the material temple, the land of Canaan—these were the earth, which was in like manner to be shaken and removed.** The symbols are, in fact, equivalent to those employed by our Lord when predicting the doom of Israel. ‘Immediately after the tribulation of those days [the horrors of the siege of Jerusalem] shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the powers of the *heavens shall be shaken*’ (Matt. xxiv. 20 [24:20]). Both passages refer to the same catastrophe and employ very similar figures; besides which we have the authority of our Lord for fixing the event and the period of which He speaks within the limits of the generation then in existence: that is to say, the reference can only be to the judgment of the Jewish nation and the abrogation of the Mosaic economy at the Parousia.<sup>28</sup> (Emphasis mine)

One of the great tragedies within the Christian community is the practice of citing Scripture in isolation from its context. In addition to this practice, we discover literal interpretations placed upon hyperbolic, or overstatement, language. Yet, this type of language should never be interpreted literally. Hyperbolic language is employed in order to draw attention to the seriousness of the subject under discussion. The traditional reading of 2 Peter 3:10-13, as discussed above, is one such example. **Many sincere Christians have failed to examine the multitude of Scriptures that deal with the “last days” of the Jewish age.**

The events described by Peter in this text are frequently interpreted in a literalistic sense—the literal destruction of planet earth. Yet, many Christians read Luke 3:5 without a wooden literalness. Luke writes about the mission of John the Baptist—the Elijah of Malachi: “Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.” This citation is from Isaiah 40:3-5, but no one reads

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<sup>28</sup>James Stuart Russell, *The Parousia: A Critical Inquiry into the New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord’s Second Coming*, 289-290.

this as literal language. We are mindful that this is poetic, or lyrical, language designed to capture the imagination.

As stated above, 2 Peter 3:3 speaks of the impending catastrophe as the “last days” (ἐσχάτων τῶν ἡμερῶν, *eschatwn twn Jhmerwn*, last of the days). Many were, no doubt, questioning Peter’s remarks in his First Epistle (1 Peter 4:7, 17). “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised” (2 Peter 3:4)? Peter then declares, “The day of the Lord will come like a thief” (3:10a). Earlier, Jesus had spoken of this day of destruction, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Matthew 24:36). Peter describes this destruction of Israel’s theocracy in highly symbolic, or apocalyptic, language in order to capture the finality of the holy people:

The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements (στοιχεῖα, *stoicheia*) will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. (2 Peter 3:10b)

We cannot read Peter’s statement about the heavens without recalling Jesus’ remarks about the “last days” of Israel theocracy in His Olivet Discourse:

Immediately after the distress of those days **‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’**<sup>c 30</sup> At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. **They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.**<sup>31</sup> And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.<sup>32</sup> Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near.<sup>33</sup> Even so, **when you see all these things, you know that it<sup>d</sup> is near, right at the door.**<sup>34</sup> I tell you the truth, this generation<sup>e</sup> will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.<sup>35</sup> **Heaven and earth will pass away,** but my words will never pass away. (Matthew 24:29-35)

Remember, Peter states, “The elements (στοιχεῖα, *stoicheia*) will be destroyed by fire” (2 Peter 3:10). **It is not uncommon for Christians to read this statement with a wooden literalness of the physical heavens.** But is this what Peter is referring to? No! **He employs poetic language, as Jesus also did, to describe the total disintegration of the Jewish system with its Temple and with its rules and with its regulations.** The word *stoicheia* signifies the “elements” of Judaism, that is to say, the old covenant world of the Jewish religion. His statements must be interpreted within the total biblical, covenantal, and historical setting. The new heaven and new earth of 2 Peter 3 represent the kingdom of God that both John the Baptist and Jesus announced during their ministries. Peter speaks of the very thing that John witnessed:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. (Revelation 21:2-2)

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<sup>c</sup> Isaiah 13:10; 34:4

<sup>d</sup> Or *he*

<sup>e</sup> Or *race*

The next chapter (Chapter 19) examines the phrase “last days” as it is employed in both the Old and New Testament writings. Unfortunately, many Christians have not researched this phrase in light of its use in both testaments. The commonly held view today is that this phrase speaks of the “end of time” for planet earth. Some sincere Christians even refer the “last days” to the Battle of Armageddon in Revelation 16:16. The following chapter (Chapter 20) will explore this phrase in its intended meaning, namely, the final destruction of the nation of Judah in AD 70—“the time of the end” (Daniel 12:4).