Burning up or Being Renewed?: An Exegetical Study of 2 Peter 3:10-13 and Revelation 21:1-5 from an Environmental/Ecological Perspective

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Introduction

‘But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.’ 2 Peter 3:10 [NASV]

The Christian faith is deeply eschatological yet there are myriad convictions held as to what will actually take place at the Parousia. Will the earth be destroyed in a final act of Godly wrath by Yahweh or does He have some other intention? Is heaven beyond Jupiter or will heaven be made here on earth? What seems absolutely clear is that our eschatological perspective will have profound implications on how we live and act now? The objective of this paper therefore is to ask how our biblical interpretations colour our praxis. The question might be asked ‘Would Jesus sign the Kyoto agreement?’ Whilst it has been argued that the American administration’s (under Bush) refusal to sign the Kyoto agreement was essentially political and economic, what scope is there for suggesting it is deeply theological too?

The religious right in the US make up a large voting block that simply cannot be ignored and with senators like James Inhofe [1] and fundamentalists like Jerry Falwell [2], a balanced theology of the environment seems some way off. Kuzmic (1999, p151) notes, ‘much of evangelical eschatology is very pessimistic about the world, thus marked by a withdrawal from the world.’ It emphasizes a radical break between the present earth and the awaited ‘new heaven and earth.’ Yet other Christian thinkers argue passionately that serious earth care is in fact a reflection of true worship. But the issue is not just contemporary politics; it reaches further back and unveils the development of the idea of heaven and where heaven is to be located spatially. It uncovers a doctrine of creation (whether creation was essentially good but has been corrupted beyond God’s redemption).

Perhaps, ultimately it uncovers a sense of what God’s judgement really looks like. As Heide (1997, p39) points out ‘if this earth on which we live is going to be completely destroyed, as many evangelicals believe it is, then we have little more responsibility to it than to act as good stewards of the resources God has given us. But if this world has a future in God’s plan, being renewed rather than re-created ex nihilo, then perhaps we have a much greater responsibility than to merely act as good managers’.

A study of 2 Peter 3:10-13, homing in on verses 10 and 13 especially, and Revelation 21:1-5 will be made. 2 Peter 3:10 seems, on the surface at least, to be in direct opposition to Revelation 21:1-4. Questions regarding the nature and genre of material will be made taking seriously contemporary evangelical scholarship on the issues of authorship, context and influence from extra-biblical sources.
2 Peter 3: Questions of authorship, textual criticism and context

Rossing (2008, p363) believes that, ‘for Christians seeking biblical counsel on the environment, 2 Peter 3 poses particular problems because it consigns the earth to burning up by fire.’ Indeed Kuzmic (1999, p151) suggests that much evangelical eschatology reads passages like 2 Peter 3:10 literally, ‘whilst ignoring the implications of Revelation 21:24.’ Should Peter’s seemingly stark words be read and interpreted literally or can we find some other way of re-imagining them? The problems in this particular passage of 2 Peter are manifold. Firstly, Peter seems not only to be advocating the discontinuity of the present world with destructive fire but that believers should be involved in the ‘hastening’ [3] of the project in some form.

Authorship of 2 Peter

Authorship issues surrounding 2 Peter are important since generally it is considered to be pseudepigraphic. Bowman (1962, p159) says it is, ‘almost universally held’ that the Apostle Peter was not the author of 2 Peter. Reese (2007, p116) notes, ‘most modern commentators have not been accepting of Petrine authorship as the early church fathers have offered various reasons for pseudepigraphical authorship for the letter.’ Eusebius (275-339) listed it as non-canonical or at least placed it among the contested epistles [4]. Bauckham (2008, p144) believes that the ‘pseudepigraphical character of 2 Peter is at least extremely likely’ and Green (1987, p13) states it was, ‘considered second class by Luther, rejected by Erasmus and regarded hesitantly by Calvin.’ Rossing (2008, p365) indirectly asserts that 2 Peter is pseudepigraphical and written perhaps as late as 130AD.

What is clear is that, despite perhaps its canonical ‘illegitimacy’, or because of it, no other New Testament imagery reveals total world-destroying fire. To be sure Peter has a fondness for fire (Green 1987, p151); 1 Peter 1:7 uses the image of fire as a refining process for the faith which is more precious than gold. There may be some good reasons for holding this in mind when interpreting the 2 Peter passage, as we shall see later.

Textual criticism of 2 Peter 3:10

A key word in 2 Peter 3:10 is katakaisetai, which is generally translated as ‘shall be burned up.’ Overstreet (1980, p356), Wolters (1987, p405), Bishop (1991, p20) and Heide (1997, p53) all note that whilst the Textus Receptus has the verb katakaisetai, critical editions of the New Testament since Tischendorf (including Westcott, and Hort and Nestle) have adopted the use of heurethesetai. Overstreet (1980, p354) confirms that 2 Peter 3:10 uses the future passive indicative of the word heurisko (‘shall be found out’). Whilst there seems to be strong support for the use of heurethesetai, both Overstreet (1980, p356) and Wolters (1987, p405) believe it is problematic because the word appears to make little sense in the context of the verse. How does one account for the idea of ‘being found out’ in this context?
Many modern translations are returning to the *katakaisetai* of the *Textus Receptus*, whilst critical editions of the Greek all print another (Wolters 1987, p406). The idea of ‘being found out’ or ‘being laid bare’ gives more options in interpretation. Indeed, Wolters (1987, p406) argues that taking into consideration Peter’s worldview about the Day of the Lord or the Day of Judgement, rather than reading verse 10 as cosmic destruction, it should be read, ‘as a smelting process from which the world will emerge purified.’ This idea of purification, of cleansing or renewal and recreation is, obviously, for the Christian deeply concerned with the environment, a pleasing outcome. Both Wolters (1987, p412) and Bishop (1991, p20) argue that *heurethisetai* is related to *heureskesthai* and might be a metallurgical term denoting smelting and refining, meaning that the world emerges purified (from the crucible). This is something akin to ‘showing ones mettle’ in English.

**Context of 2 Peter 3**

Green (1987, p143) asks the question, ‘does Peter teach that the whole world will be destroyed by fire?’ and replies that ‘there is no a priori reason why he should not.’ Certainly the whole idea of cosmic conflagration belongs to apocalyptic imagery and since apocalyptic genre should not always be interpreted literally but symbolically we would do well to read both Peter’s alarming picture of world destruction in the context of the rest of 2 Peter 3 and within the context of the whole of Scripture. Green (1987, p144) notes that ‘judgement by fire is one of the great Old Testament pictures of the Day of YAHWEH.’

The Day of the Lord in 2 Peter 3 uses a host of verbs, according to Wolters (1987, p408), to describe the coming conflagration of the world. It will dissolve (*lyomai* - v10, 11 and 12), melt (*tekomai* - v12), and burn (*kausoomai* - v10 &12, and *pyroomai* - v12). Obviously the ‘Day of the Lord’ was an important concept in the Old Testament that spoke of the final consummation of all things whereby God would judge the earth and the nations in it.

Overstreet (1980, p359) notes that Jews during Peter’s era would have ‘expected fire before the kingdom’ and ‘the new heavens and new earth would be preceded by fire’, but it is also useful to bear in mind that Jewish expectation of the coming Messiah was completely undone in the coming of Christ. Jewish expectation, whilst interesting and notable, should not shape our eschatological view too much.

Wolters (1987, p409) notes that Peter’s imagery is possibly based on Malachi’s fiery vision of the day of the Lord. Malachi 3:2-2 ‘For he is like a refiners fire and like a fullers soap. He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver’ (NASV). Green (1987, p150) suggests that Peter may have had in mind the words of Jesus from Matthew 24:35, ‘Heaven and earth will pass away but my words shall not pass away’ (NASV). Bishop (1991, p20) believes this could be rendered as ‘Heaven and earth will be transformed but my word never changes’, giving us a helpful slant on recreation and redemption.

Certainly the Old Testament paints various pictures of apocalyptic chaos [5] where fiery destruction is seemingly certain. What must be remembered is that, ‘Peter’s language is not entirely clear in detail. He is using the language of apocalyptic in an attempt to describe the indescribable’ (Green 1987, p150). ‘The point’, notes Green (1987, p152), ‘of it all is not that
the apocalyptic imagery, which may or may not be taken literally is fulfilled but the moral implications. Green, writing in 1987, saw the literal fulfilment of cosmic conflagration as possible due to the primeval destructive power of nuclear weapons in the Cold War era, but we face a very different political context.

If context of the Old Testament and Jewish apocalyptic paints a certain picture we may also ask how much Peter was influenced by ideas from contemporary Greek thought, most importantly the stoic idea of ekpyrosis. Rossing (2008, p366) suggests, ‘Peter may have transposed the Jewish notion of burning of evildoers into the more Stoic Greek notion of the burning of the whole created order in an attempt to persuade [the] Gentile audience that God is indeed involved in history.’ Green (1987, p143) suggests this is unlikely given the very real differences, ‘the Stoic programme is pantheistic, Peter’s monotheistic, the Stoics looked for a fresh world to emerge from conflagration...while the Christian hope was for a transformed world, the necessary complement to their belief in the resurrection of the body.’

What of the internal context of 2 Peter 3? Chapter 3 seems to be dealing with those ‘mockers’ following after their own lusts (probably a nod to the issue of the Gnostics) who were asking ‘where is the promise of his coming?’ Wolters (1987, p408) and Heide (1997, p50) help us by noting that Peter speaks of three worlds; firstly, a world before the flood (3:6), secondly, the present world between the flood and the Day of the Lord (3:7) and thirdly, a future world after that day, called ‘the new heavens and the new earth.’

Wolters says ‘in speaking of the future judgement, the Apostle is explicitly drawing a parallel with the earlier world judgement.’ We know that the flood was a purification of the world, a purging of evil. The Noahic covenant [6] should be born in mind at this point. The same destruction of the world caused in the flood may well be what Peter has in mind. The world after the flood continued to exist and the world after its final fiery purging will be renewed, recreated and re-imagined. Peter's imagery here may be his attempt at emphasising, ‘the radical discontinuity between old and new but it is never the less clear the intention to describe renewal not abolition of creation’ (Green 1987, p154). This passage will have the tendency to ‘let down’ those advocating a serious Christian environmental ethic, but it must be born in mind that apocalyptic material of this nature is not to be interpreted literally. Heide (1997, p50) notes that, ‘the total destruction viewpoint...takes the language of this passage in the narrowest sense.’ God’s judgement is ‘unavoidable and impending rather than merely destructive’ (Heide 1997, p51).

We now move on to consider the opening verses of Revelation 21, as a counter balance to 2 Peter 3, before drawing some conclusions and offering some missiological considerations.

Revelation 21:1-4

Again in Revelation we are dealing with apocalyptic material. The beginning of John’s vision in this section is the seeing of a new earth and a new heaven and the passing away of the first earth and heaven. Mounce (1977, p398), Kwame (1988, p32) and Heide (1997, p42) all remind us that John was drawing upon Isaiah’s own vision (Isaiah 65:17). But Heide (1997, p43) queries, ‘what does John mean when he describes the first heaven and earth passing
away?’ Kwame (1988, p32) notes that any reading must be understood in the light of the rest of passage. Verse 5 stating ‘behold I am making all things new’ might suggest the remaking of what already exists.

Heide (1997, p43) suggests the usage of ‘passed away’ is commonly used to express the death of a person [7]. The verb here is *aperchomai* meaning ‘to depart, go away.’ Juxtaposed with 2 Peter 3, John makes no attempt to say exactly how the first earth and heaven are to pass away. What Heide (1997, p43) feels is clearly important is, ‘John is not saying that God has simply wiped everything away to begin again with nothing’. As Blanchard (1997, p17) points out, ‘if God were to annihilate the first cosmos and start again, it would at least suggest that Satan had ruined the first beyond remedy.’

Mounce (1977, p369) seems uncomfortable with an over-preoccupation as to what will take place physically at the *Parousia*, ‘probably the new order of things is not to be thought of primarily as a physical transformation.’ Kwame (1988, p32) too doesn’t seem particularly bothered about the ‘how’, but this may simply be a reflection of the shift in focus in mission studies since the late 1980s [8]. The word for ‘new’ here is the same word used in the 2 Peter passage, *kainos*, which Mounce (1977, p369) suggests can be understood as ‘fresh life rising from the decay and wreck of the old world’.

Phillips (1987, p247) adds that, ‘the word *new* means not merely new as yo time, but also to kind.’ Kwame (1988, p33) does note that the new heavens and new earth are the context for the New Jerusalem, *coming down* out of heaven. The New Jerusalem is to be seen as the ideal of perfect community (Mounce 1977, p370), where God himself comes to live amongst his people [9]. Ladd (1975, p275) has emphasised that, ‘the ultimate destiny of God’s people is an earthly destiny.’ Button (2009, p9) concurs with this idea reminding us, ‘we are made from earth for earth yet we are spiritual beings and our resurrected bodies will be different.’

The language of the new earth is analogous to that used in Scripture of the resurrection of bodies. Paul’s attempt to describe this is found in 1 Corinthians 15:42-52. Blanchard (1997, p19) says, ‘the new body is not identical but will be *identifiable* with it.’ The resurrection, the physical resurrection of the body of Christ, then has enormous significance in the new heavens and new earth, as Button (2009, p4) believes, ‘the resurrection of Christ lays the blueprint for the future of humanity and humanity’s future is intrinsically earthbound.’

Continuity and discontinuity seemingly stand in tension, yet there is much to suggest that this is indeed a biblical view of what will take place; what Guthrie (1984, p43) calls ‘continuity and discontinuity merging with each other.’ An interesting point may be made here; the ‘now’ and ‘not yet’ of the Kingdom is a useful idea to keep in mind. New heavens and new earth are, ‘not new as such but that which stands in continuity to what previously existed’ (Blanchard 1997, p17). Button (2009, p10) believes it is ‘crucial to see the continuity between the present age and the age to come’, with Wright (1999, p197) confirming this idea by saying, ‘God intends to create new heavens and new earth, married together in dynamic and perhaps material continuity with the present creation.’

**Missiological consequences - the need to abandon a dualistic view of the cosmos**
Kwame (1988, p36), Heide (1997, p47), Wright (1999, p199) and Button (2009, p9) all acknowledge that a primary misreading of passages like 2 Peter 3 and Revelation 21 take place because of what Heide calls, ‘the consequence of Platonic overtones in our hermeneutical presuppositions’. Essentially, ‘the dualist supposes that, to escape evil, one must escape the created, physical universe’ (Wright 1999, p199). Certain groupings within Evangelicalism seem to favour a highly dualistic approach and one also wonders how much the reformed thinking of Calvin’s TULIP invades the understanding of the total depravity of not only the human agent but the physical world.

A hopeless physical world in terminal decline is best destroyed with a start-again philosophy. Wright (2007, p222) insists that, ‘matter is to be redeemed’, a point emphasised by Button (2009, p3) that ‘matter matters to God.’ God as ‘renewer’ and ‘restorer’ rings true. He does not consign the physical earth to the rubbish tip but is always looking to redeem, to regenerate, to reclaim, to make new that which was once tarnished, even damaged beyond recognition; it is essentially a reflection of God’s overflowing self-giving character.

Where is heaven?

Related to our first point is the need to re-orientate ourselves with regards to heaven. Blanchard (1997, p20) proposes, ‘believers banking on spending eternity on the other side of Jupiter should revise their expectations.’ A vital key to understanding what the Bible says about the location of heaven is to grasp what it says about the future state of the earth. Wright (2007) and Button (2009) make it clear that, ‘the terminal point of human life is not death, nor is it spiritual existence in Heaven; rather the terminus is resurrection.’ It is both the prevailing dualistic worldview and, perhaps, a medieval notion of ghostly spiritual existence of Heaven that has drawn us away from a concrete and earthly understanding of real resurrection. C.S. Lewis (1945) writes beautifully and movingly about the very real physicality of Heaven in his Great Divorce. A concrete understanding of Heaven ‘down here’ could mean a greater desire to engage environmental concerns for the future of the planet.

Taking redemption, repentance and hope seriously

‘The problem with secular environmentalism is that when the tipping point is reached, when it seems we can no longer make a difference, political will and therefore funding is lost’ (Button 2009, p11). ‘If the earth is to be destroyed at the Parousia then environmental action is at best patching up a dying man’s coat and a waste of time’ (Bishop 1991, p19). ‘God does not consign the creation to destruction’ (Rossing 2008, p365).

Some of Rossings (2008) reflections are helpful at this point as we close. Rossing (2008, p368) suggests that the apocalyptic nature of both 2 Peter and Revelation need to be understood in slightly different ways. Following the work of Schussler Fiorenza, Rossing (p366) notes that apocalyptic language can function in two ways, ‘either to control the behaviour of individuals or to provide an alternative vision and encouragement of new community structures in the face of oppression.’
Rossing feels the 2 Peter 3 material falls into the first more moralist category yet one might argue that both should be considered [10]. Rossing believes that essentially Revelation is a clarion call to the church to come out of ‘Empire’. She has great difficulty in finding any other reading of 2 Peter 3, other than a literalistic interpretation of world-destroying fire, but senses that ‘Revelation teaches a logic that invites readers to embrace life on earth.’ Indeed, it seems that Revelation 21 offers us a picture of hope, a source of comfort and both 2 Peter 3 and Revelation 21 invite us to consider our actions in the immediate future.

God’s judgement is not to be taken lightly and judgement is not just excluded to personal moral acts but to our inconsideration of the world at large. Judgement is meant not to cause paralysis but to bring repentance and, ultimately, renewed commitment to action. This is what Rossing (p370) calls, ‘the Bible’s counter-imperial message of repentance and hope.’ ‘We should believe that this world has a future in God’s plan of redemption’ (Heide 1997, p40).

If indeed the world has a future, what are some practical steps we might consider in the light of 2 Peter 3 and Revelation 21? The future hope of resurrection will surely penetrate into our concrete situations, for our vision of the future enables several things. Whilst we strive to participate in earth care, in eco-justice and serious reflection on these issues, Revelation 21 reminds us of the missio dei (Kwame 1988, p36). Mission finds its source in Him and flows from Him. Whilst thinkers like Button (2009, p8) remind us of ‘the idea that we might actually be partially responsible for fashioning and constructing the New Heaven and New Earth [it] is not a widely-held view in Christian theology.’ A helpful reminder is that the ultimate work of renewing of creation is in His hands. In tension with this, Button’s notion forces our hand that we must work alongside Him.

Conclusion

Environmental action, then, is not futile in the light of a balanced reading of 2 Peter 3. In fact, the idea that our efforts to preserve, restore and, at times, nurse our fragile ecosystems actually reflect a deeper understanding of mission from a holistic perspective. If we continue our lust after non-renewable energy sources, if we continue a blatant disregard for the suffering of our brothers and sisters in susceptible locations to destructive environmental forces, then we reveal our true eschatological understandings.

The early church sought to form communities thoroughly committed to living counter-culturally and resisting the pull of being serfs of the Empire. The church in the West must begin to seriously re-examine its allegiances. It must reject an ‘I-spy’ approach to ‘spotting’ the events in the Final Days in the style of Hal Lindsey and thinkers of his ilk have managed to do; instead we need to reject a Neo-Gnostic view of the physical world. The challenge is enormous, especially if some scientific predictions are correct in asserting that we may well be coming significantly closer to the tipping-point.

The hope of the resurrection and redemption of the physical world, including our physical bodies, means we can look forward to His return knowing ‘he will make all things new.’
References


Rossing, B.R. (2008) "Hastening the day" when the earth will burn?: global warming, Revelation and 2 Peter 3’ Currents in theology and mission, 35(5), pp. 363-373 <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/%22Hastening+the+day%22+when+the+earth+will+burn%3f+Global+warming%2c+-a0186594230> [Accessed 24.01.2011]


Notes

[1] ‘James Inhofe might be an environmentalist's worst nightmare. The Oklahoma senator makes major policy decisions based on heavy corporate and theological influences, flawed science, and probably an apocalyptic worldview, and he chairs the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee’ (Scherer 2004, p1)
[2] 'I believe that global warming is an unproven phenomenon and may actually just be junk science being passed off as fact' (Falwell 2006, p1). This seems (unsurprisingly) a bold and fairly arrogant statement

[3] Rossing seems especially concerned with the idea of ‘hastening’ but this need not be the case. The NRSV suggests ‘earnestly desiring’ and Peterson’s The Message uses ‘eager for its arrival’ which places the emphasis on expectation rather than intervention (Rossing 2008, p363)

[4] Heide notes that, ‘Justin (AD 100-165) was quite willing to accept a view of cosmic conflagration for apologetic purposes’ (Heide 1997, p48)

[5] Isaiah 34:4; ‘The heavens above will melt away and disappear like a rolled up scroll. The stars will fall from the sky. Isaiah 66:16 ‘The Lord will punish the world by fire and by his sword’ (NLT)


[7] ‘Passed on’ is more common in South African English, denoting death as a move to some other destination

[8] Here again, it matters little whether the new universe is a renovation of what already exists, or is newly-created’ (Kwame 1988, p36)

[9] Revelation 21:3b; ‘Look God’s home is now amongst his people!’

[10] See Piper, J. (1982), What sort of persons ought you to be? 2 Peter 3:10-14, for a moralist perspective

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