

# Supplement to The New Heavens and Earth

by John Formsma

## Peter's Jewish Understanding

The Psalmist David describes God coming to his aid when he called for help. How would Peter have understood the kind of language he used?

In my distress I called upon the Lord;  
to my God I cried for help.  
From his temple he heard my voice,  
and my cry to him reached his ears.  
Then the earth reeled and rocked;  
the foundations also of the mountains trembled  
and quaked, because he was angry.  
Smoke went up from his nostrils,  
and devouring fire from his mouth;  
glowing coals flamed forth from him.  
He bowed the heavens and came down;  
thick darkness was under his feet.  
He rode on a cherub and flew;  
he came swiftly on the wings of the wind.  
He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him,  
thick clouds dark with water.  
Out of the brightness before him  
hailstones and coals of fire broke through his clouds.  
The Lord also thundered in the heavens,  
and the Most High uttered his voice,  
hailstones and coals of fire.  
And he sent out his arrows and scattered them;  
he flashed forth lightnings and routed them.  
Then the channels of the sea were seen,  
and the foundations of the world were laid bare  
at your rebuke, O Lord,  
at the blast of the breath of your nostrils. (Ps 18:6-15<sup>1</sup>)

Peter would have understood this language to mean God had come most powerfully to help David in his battles. He would not have interpreted this by the literal words, so that:

- David's prayer went into God's literal ears

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

- The literal earth shook
- Literal smoke and fire belched from God’s literal nostrils and mouth
- God was actually riding on a literal cherub
- God was shooting literal arrows from heaven, or that literal breath streamed from His nostrils.

When Peter read Psalm 2, he would not have believed that God’s Son would be sitting on the literal throne of David, holding an actual ferrous rod of iron as He governs the nations (Ps 2:9). When Peter read Isaiah 9, he would have believed the prophecy taught the birth of a literal child and the giving of a literal Son. However, he would not have thought that the government of the nations would rest upon His literal physical shoulders.

In both Psalm 2 and Isaiah 9, it is evident that the writers used figurative language to communicate spiritual realities. Like Peter, we should not think that the earth was actually quaking when God “came” to help David or that the Son given is now somehow supporting the government of nations on his actual shoulders. The language is figurative, but the thing communicated is spiritually real and easily understood by the spiritual mind.

Many other Old Testament passages use figurative language to illustrate great spiritual realities, but these two should be sufficient to demonstrate the point. We will misunderstand Peter’s words if we take them *precisely as they stand*, in their most literal sense. Peter did not think this way.

## Peter’s Jewish Understanding In His Letters

Peter’s two letters are remarkably Jewish! The following examples do not comprise an exhaustive list, but they are obvious.

Observe how he begins by directing attention to *God’s revelation through the prophets*.

“Concerning this salvation, *the prophets who prophesied* about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.”

1 Pet 1:10-12

“...*since it is written*, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

1 Pet 1:16

“...knowing that you were ransomed from *the futile ways inherited from your forefathers*, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of *a lamb without blemish or spot.*”

1 Pet 1:18

(Refers to the sacrificial system established in the OT, and fulfilled by Jesus as “THE Lamb”)

“...since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for

‘All flesh is like grass  
and all its glory like the flower of grass.  
The grass withers,  
and the flower falls,  
but the word of the Lord remains forever.’

And this word is the good news that was preached to you.”

1 Pet 1:23-25

(Refers to Isaiah [40:1-8](#))

“...if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.”

1 Pet 2:3

(Refers to Ps [34:8](#))

“For it stands in Scripture:

“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,  
a cornerstone chosen and precious,  
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe,

“The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone,”

and

“A stone of stumbling,  
and a rock of offense.”

1 Pet 2:6-8

(Refers to Ps [118:22](#) and Is [8:14](#))

“Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.”

1 Pet 2:10  
(Refers to Hosea [1:9, 10](#))

“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.”

1 Pet 2:24  
(Refers to the following chapters: Psalms [22](#), [69](#), and [Isaiah 53](#). Specific verses linked.)

“For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.”

1 Pet 3:5, 6  
(Refers to well-known OT characters)

“And ‘If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?’”

1 Pet 4:18  
(Refers to [Prov 11:31](#))

“And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.”

1 Pet 5:4  
(Refers to the unrighteous shepherds of [Ezek 34](#), and the rescue of the sheep by the Great Shepherd)

“And we have *the prophetic word more fully confirmed*, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

2 Pet 1:19-21  
(Ties the things in 2 Peter to the prophets of old)

“But false prophets also arose *among the people*...”

2 Pet 2:1.  
(In the context, the “people” can only mean the Jewish people.)

“...even *denying the Master who bought them*, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.”

2 Pet 2:1  
(Refers directly to Deut 32:6, see KJV and NASB)

“Their *condemnation from long ago* is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.”

2 Pet 2:3  
(The condemnation is from *long ago* as if sleeping but is now awake. This statement refers to the many prophecies of Israel’s final judgment, beginning in Deut 32:29-43 and mentioned many times in the prophets.)

Peter uses the following illustrations from the Old Testament: the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, Balaam, and the proverb of the dog returning to its vomit and the sow returning to wallow in the mire.

2 Pet 2:5–22  
(Cf. Prov 26:11)

“that you should remember *the predictions of the holy prophets* and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles.”

2 Pet 3:2  
(Calling attention to the predictions of the Old Testament prophets, which will be important below)

“For ever since *the fathers* fell asleep....”

2 Pet 3:4  
(Can only refer to the fathers in Israel)

Had Peter not mentioned a coming judgment in his first letter? He gives clues in both letters that the destruction of the Jewish nation was at hand (e.g., 1 Pet 4:17).

Glories would come after the suffering of Christ. The ways of Judaism were futile, and the sacrificed Lamb was the reality the Old Testament only pictured. But as there were subsequent glories for the believer, there were also punishments for the unbeliever. Peter uses this truth to conclude the first epistle and as a reminder in the second. The Lamb slain would also take vengeance.

Israel was spiritually dead in Peter’s day, but God had given the new birth to some of them through His word. The prophet Isaiah had foretold this development, beginning in chapter 40.

The Cornerstone (1 Pet 2:6–8) indicates a new building built upon a new foundation. That Stone is Christ, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:11. Those who do not believe will be “put to shame,” the subsequent punishment mentioned above. The physical temple was now a worn out building; the Presence of God no longer inhabited it, and, as Jesus predicted, it would soon fall. But there was a new temple under construction, the one Christ was building (cf. Eph 2:18-22) with “living stones” (cf. 1 Pet 2:5). God was inhabiting *this* temple!

There was a fearful judgment looming over the heads of corrupt Judaism. Peter mentions this in 1 Peter 4:17:

“For *it is time* [not later—Peter says it is *now* time] for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?”

The household of God could be related to the physical Jewish temple and its worship. Notice that those who obey the gospel will escape this judgment, and therefore it does not seem to refer to the church, except perhaps for professed believers who did not truly belong to the Lord. (See also Matthew 23:38, in which Jesus says “*your* house is left to you desolate.”)

## The Teaching of Jesus and Paul

Jesus and Paul taught this looming and soon judgment, but it was not a new judgment. Indeed, it was the same judgment Peter mentions as being predicted long ago. Jesus at the end of his ministry leading up to the Olivet Discourse, and Paul in 1 Thessalonians:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, saying, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. *Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers.* You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, *so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth*, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly, I say to you, *all these things will come upon this generation.*”

Matt 23:29-36

“Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

Matt 24:34, 35

(Note the agreement with the “dissolution” of heaven and earth per Peter.)

“For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved—*so as always to fill up the measure of their sins*. But *wrath has come upon them at last!*”

1 Thess 2:14-16

## Isaiah’s Language of Non-Literal Heavens and Earth

When God foretold that He would reestablish Israel after the Babylonian captivity, He inspired Isaiah to use the following allegorical language:

“Shower, O heavens, from above,  
and let the clouds rain down righteousness;  
let the earth open, that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit;  
let the earth cause them both to sprout;  
I the Lord have created it.”

“I have stirred him up in righteousness,  
and I will make all his ways level;  
he shall build my city  
and set my exiles free,  
not for price or reward,”  
says the Lord of hosts. (Isa 45:8, 13)

“Listen to me, O Jacob,  
and Israel, whom I called!  
I am he; I am the first,  
and I am the last.  
My hand laid the foundation of the earth,  
and my right hand spread out the heavens;  
when I call to them,  
they stand forth together.  
Assemble, all of you, and listen!  
Who among them has declared these things?  
The Lord loves him;

he shall perform his purpose on Babylon,  
 and his arm shall be against the Chaldeans.  
 I, even I, have spoken and called him;  
 I have brought him, and he will prosper in his way.  
 Draw near to me, hear this:  
 from the beginning I have not spoken in secret,  
 from the time it came to be I have been there.”  
 And now the Lord God has sent me, and his Spirit.  
 Thus says the Lord,  
 your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:  
 “I am the Lord your God,  
 who teaches you to profit,  
 who leads you in the way you should go.  
 Oh that you had paid attention to my commandments!  
 Then your peace would have been like a river,  
 and your righteousness like the waves of the sea;  
 your offspring would have been like the sand,  
 and your descendants like its grains;  
 their name would never be cut off  
 or destroyed from before me.”  
 Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea,  
 declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it,  
 send it out to the end of the earth;  
 say, “The Lord has redeemed his servant Jacob!”  
 They did not thirst when he led them through the deserts;  
 he made water flow for them from the rock;  
 he split the rock and the water gushed out.  
 “There is no peace,” says the Lord, “for the wicked.” (Isa 48:12–22)

## The Word “Elements” in 2 Peter 3

The Greek word translated “elements” in 2 Peter 3:10, 12 means basic spiritual things, not the physical elements of the cosmos. This is its consistent usage in the five other times it<sup>2</sup> appears in the New Testament, all by Paul.<sup>3</sup> There, it never refers to material things. So, if Peter uses it in 2 Peter 3 to refer to physical things, this is *the first and only time* it has this meaning. Since Peter refers to things Paul wrote (2 Pet 3:15), he likely used the word “elements” as that Apostle did.

The most consistent interpretation of Peter’s word “elements” is that it refers to things in Judaism, not the physical elements of the universe.

That this is the correct interpretation is clear from Paul’s use of the same Greek word in Galatians 4:3, 9. There, he uses this word for spiritual rather than material things, and primarily Judaic things. He was describing enslavement to religious things rather than physical things.

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<sup>2</sup> Galatians 4:3, 9; Colossians 2:8, 20; Hebrews 5:12.

<sup>3</sup> Assuming Paul wrote Hebrews.



In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the *elementary principles* (i.e., “the elements”) of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless *elementary principles* (i.e., “the elements”) of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain. (Gal 4:3–11)

In Colossians, the meaning is clearly religious rather than physical:

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the *elemental spirits* (i.e., “the elements”) of the world, and not according to Christ.

If with Christ you died to the *elemental spirits* (i.e., “the elements”) of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”(referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. (Col 2:8, 20–23)

The same is true in Hebrews:

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again *the basic principles* (i.e., “the elements”) of the oracles of God. (Heb 5:12)

And that leaves Peter’s two uses of it:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and *the heavenly bodies* (i.e., “the elements”) will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the *heavenly bodies* (i.e., “the elements”) will melt as they burn! (2 Pet 3:10–12)

Though admittedly strange to our modern ears, the spiritual understanding of “elements” is the most consistent. Once the Jewish understanding of the heavens and earth is clear and joined with Jesus’ time constraint—they would pass away within a generation—this is the most valid option. Forcing “elements” to mean the physical sub-particles of the cosmos injects a foreign understanding into Peter’s Jewish prophecy.

Additionally, the delay to which the scoffers referred makes more sense if it relates to a near judgment. Otherwise, Peter would have told his readers *to teach others* of the *distant* judgment. He would have told his audience something like: “Do not be alarmed, but understand that God will judge these scoffers in the general judgment.” But, rather than indicating a distant event, he speaks to them as if it were very near, in *their* future:

This is now the second letter that I am writing to *you*, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up *your* sincere mind by way of reminder, that *you* should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, “Where is the promise of his coming?...

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought *you* to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise *we* are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since *you* are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.

You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, *take care that you* are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. (2 Pet 3:1–4, 11–14, 17–18)

## Conclusion

We should adopt Peter’s Jewish understanding of the figures he uses: the de-creation of heaven and earth, the burning of the elements, etc. He used them to describe God’s judgment of Israel at the close of the Mosaic age. Forcing our modern literal concepts on these images leads to us misunderstanding the Apostle’s meaning.