

World on Fire: Environmental Ethics and the Eschatology of 2 Peter

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When one thinks of the end of the world, the text that first comes to mind is Revelation—the Apocalypse of John. Far less known to everyday audiences is the end of the world depiction from 2 Peter, a short letter near the end of the New Testament. The author of this letter writes in part to answer those in his day who mocked the idea that one day Jesus would return to earth and initiate a day of judgment (2 Pet 3:3–4). According to the author, on that day “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 Pet 3:10 KJV).¹ This is the only cataclysmic depiction of the end of the world in biblical literature, but it has become a central part of the classic take on the destruction of the world that persists in modern Western consciousness and imagination. For example, Thomas Burnet’s 1681 early modern cosmogenic treatise *Telluris Theoria Sacra* was influential in arguing that the current age was merely a passing stage on the way to total destruction, judgment and a renewed paradise.² Later, in art, Ludwig Meidner’s “Apocalyptic City” (1913) would reflect a similar idea. Even generative AI ‘understands’ this apocalyptic motif; below is an apocalyptic scene created through generative AI (Midjourney)³ based on the text of 2 Peter in the style of Meidner:

¹ A similar apocalyptic vision occurs in Luther’s translation: “die Himmel zergehen werden mit großem Krachen, die Elemente aber werden vor Hitze schmelzen, und die Erde und die Werke, die drinnen sind, werden verbrennen,” as well as Jerome’s: “adveniet autem dies Domini ut fur in qua caeli magno impetu transient elementa vero calore solventur.” Further, 2 Peter’s depiction may relate to the end of the world scenarios described in the Sibylline Oracles and the Apocalypse of Peter.

² For discussion, see HELGE S. KRAGH, *Conceptions of Cosmos: From Myths to the Accelerating Universe: A History of Cosmology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 72.

³ The image was generated by D. Estes on the AT *Midjourney* (15.12.2023).



From this perspective, it seems the Earth will one day be destroyed no matter what humanity does or does not do in the meantime. The consequence of this “hell in a handbasket” mentality is that the world around us is of little value since it will soon be destroyed in epic fashion. Thus, when modern readers encounter 2 Peter 3 they may be quick to assume that this is “one of the least eco-friendly texts in the New Testament.”⁴ After all, if the Earth is to face total destruction, why should humanity care about the Earth? Recent English translations attempt to mitigate what otherwise seems to be “Hiroshima images” of the future of the world,⁵ stressing disclosure more than destruction,⁶ but readers cannot escape the dramatic eschatology in 2 Peter that points to the destruction of the universe in a fiery cataclysm reminiscent of scenes from a science fiction movie.⁷ However, this modern perception about 2 Peter and its relation

⁴ EDWARD ADAMS, “Retrieving the Earth from the Conflagration: 2 Peter 3.5–13 and the Environment,” in *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives* (ed. DAVID G. HORRELL, CHERRYLL HUNT, CHRISTOPHER SOUTHGATE, and FRANCESCA STAVRAKOPOULOU; London: T&T Clark, 2010), 108. DAVID G. HORRELL adds that 2 Peter 3 is “what is widely regarded as the most ‘difficult’ eschatological text in relation to environmental issues,” see his introduction to *Ecological Hermeneutics*, 4. See also similar sentiments in BARBARA R. ROSSING, “‘Hastening the Day’ When the Earth Will Burn?” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 35 (2008): 363–73.

⁵ JÜRGEN MOLTMANN, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1996), 201.

⁶ For example, the NRSV lowers the eschatological intensity and translates it as “the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.”

⁷ Edward Adams observes that this has led to recent attempts in studies of 2 Peter to downplay the destructive aspect. With Adams, I agree that “none of these arguments for a non-destructionist interpretation of the passage holds up”; see ADAMS, “Retrieving the Earth,” 112; see also BIRGER A. PEARSON, “Indo-European Eschatology in 2 Peter 3,” in *Kontinuitäten und Brüche in der Religionsgeschichte: Festschrift für Anders Hultgård*, ed. MICHAEL STAUSBERG, *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 31 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001), 539.

to a Christian view of environmental ethics omits the backstory of the author's argument, which creates a strawman argument out of this nihilistic reading of the text.

2 Peter is one of the least referenced and probably least familiar texts of the New Testament. Recently, however, scholars have revived interest in the text,⁸ the latest round of which is in large part due to the work of Jörg Frey and his “new perspective.”⁹ One challenge in the interpretation of 2 Peter is establishing the particulars of the text; notably, who wrote it and to whom it was written. From the depiction of the end of the world in 2 Peter 3, we can say with some confidence that the author was aware of the Stoic view of the end of the world that existed in the first or second century CE. The Stoic view of the end was a “future destruction of heaven and earth by fire” in a universal conflagration—an *ekpyrosis*.¹⁰ Although 2 Peter's depiction of the conflagration seems to echo Stoic ideas,¹¹ it is more likely a criticism or correction of Stoic (or possibly Epicurean) ideas about the end of the world, while acknowledging some similarities—or possibly building an apologetic bridge to a slightly more accepted cosmological position than the Hebraic one. However, this recognition obscures the purpose of 2 Peter's argument: The author intends to combat ἐμπαίκτης (“mockers”) who, in following their own desires, deride the idea that Jesus will return because the world continues on as it always has. In this we glimpse a side door into one of the great philosophical debates in the ancient world, one that continues through today: the eternality of the universe. In *Timaeus*, Plato recognizes the “fundamental question” facing our understanding of our world is whether the universe has an origin or not.¹²

There are essentially two orientations to our understanding of the universe; the first is that the universe is unending and the second is that the universe has a beginning and an end.¹³ Over the ages, these two positions have struggled for dominance with each position picking up unlikely allies along the way. Although many people today accept the idea that the universe has a beginning and an end (largely due to the modern cosmic origins theory, the “Big Bang”), this has not always been the case. Even today, there are those who reject the Big Bang theory and prefer a static model for the universe. In the ancient world, Plato and Aristotle maintained that the universe did not have a beginning or end,¹⁴ and this became the standard view until the twentieth century. Against this was a variety of arguments put forward by atomists, certain

⁸ DAVID G. HORRELL, *The Epistles of Peter and Jude*, Epworth Commentaries (Peterborough: Epworth, 1998), 135.

⁹ See for example, *2 Peter and the Apocalypse of Peter: Towards a New Perspective: Radboud Prestige Lectures by Jörg Frey*, ed. JÖRG FREY, MATTHIJS DE DULK, and JAN G. VAN DER WATT, BIS 174 (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

¹⁰ Cicero, *Div.* 1.111. For extended discussion, see MARCIA L. COLISH, *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, Studies in the History of Christian Thought 34 (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 1:22–27.

¹¹ The classic argument for this is FRANK OLIVIER, “Une Correction au Texte du Nouveau Testament: II Pierre III 10,” *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 8 (1920): 255; plus, the best recent discussion, JÖRG FREY, “Fire and Water? Apocalyptic Imagination and Hellenistic Worldview in 2 Peter,” in *Sibyls, Scriptures, and Scrolls: John Collins at Seventy*, ed. JOEL BADEN, HINDY NAJMAN, and EIBERT TIGCHELAAR, JSJSup 175/1 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 1:454, 470.

¹² Plato, *Tim.* 28b2–7; plus see PHILLIP SIDNEY HORKY, Introduction to *Cosmos in the Ancient World*, ed. PHILLIP SIDNEY HORKY (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 4.

¹³ A corollary to this debate is whether the universe is infinite or bounded by space; see for example, DIRK L. COUPRIE, *Heaven and Earth in Ancient Greek Cosmology: From Thales to Heraclides Ponticus*, Astrophysics and Space Science Library (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 223.

¹⁴ E.g., Plato, *Tim.* 37d, 39d; and Aristotle, *Mete.* 353.1, 356.2.

philosophies like Stoicism, and certain religious traditions such as those found in the ANE (most notably Israelite theology) as well as early Christianity. Returning again to 2 Peter, we note that the argument in the mind of the author from the mockers is a cosmological one: The world will carry on as it always has.¹⁵ Against this, the author of 2 Peter reminds those who hold this position that not only did the world have a beginning (2 Pet 3:5), it will also have an end, both a prefiguring end (with water, 3:6) and a final one (with fire, 3:7). In many ways, 2 Peter's argument is hardly surprising, as many Roman citizens in the first and second centuries with minimal education would be vaguely aware of the debate over the eternality of the world, and many would hold the default Platonic view—unless they were part of a philosophical or religious sect that took the contrary view. Therefore, 2 Peter's depiction on the end of the world is predicated on the debate over whether or not the world has a beginning. The author loosely appeals to the creation story in Genesis (Gen 1) and perhaps poetic comments in the Psalms (Ps 24:2, 136:6) to argue that if the world has an origin, then it can certainly have an end.¹⁶

1. From Beginnings to Endings

Whether or not the universe is ending depends, generally speaking, on whether or not the universe has a beginning. Today, our understanding of astrophysics makes humans aware that the universe will end in a fiery fashion with the death of our planet's star and the eventual gravitational collapse of our solar system. Due to the work of twentieth-century physicists, including Hermann Minkowski, Albert Einstein, Georges Lemaître, and George Gamow, we also are confident that the universe has a beginning. During the same timeframe, the world at large embraced a renewed interest in ecology and the environment in ways never dreamed of generations ago.

The point: There is nothing in 2 Peter or Christian apocalyptic thought that entails a dismissive attitude toward the environment.¹⁷ A person holding to an eternal universe model, such as Plato, may be motivated to care for the environment because it is 'the only world we have,' but they may also be equally disinclined to care for the environment since the world is eternal and nothing humans can do can change that.¹⁸ After all, one of the consequences of Plato's defense of an eternal world is his argument that the world cannot suffer "sickness or decay" from any of the elements that make up the world.¹⁹ In contrast, a person holding to a fleeting world, such as the author of 2 Peter, may be disinclined to care for the environment

¹⁵ PIETER W. VAN DER HORST, "'The Elements Will Be Dissolved with Fire': The Idea of Cosmic Conflagration in Hellenism, Ancient Judaism, and Early Christianity," in *Hellenism – Judaism – Christianity: Essays on Their Interaction*, CBET 8 (Kampen: Pharos, 1994), 246.

¹⁶ Justin Martyr (ca. 100–165 CE) notes that Christians' cosmology and eschatology overlapped in some ways with both Platonism and Stoicism; or, that both of these human systems were partially correct; Justin, *1 Apol.* 20.

¹⁷ GLENN R. KREIDER, "The Flood Is as Bad as It Gets: Never Again Will God Destroy the Earth," *BSac* 171 (2014): 437–39.

¹⁸ For example, Aristotle, convinced of the invincibility of the world, is dismissive of Democritus, who believed that the sea could one day diminish and die; see Aristotle, *Mete.* 356.2.

¹⁹ DIMITRI EL MURR, "Platonic 'Desmology' and the Body of the World Animal (*Tim.* 30c–34a)," in *Cosmology and Biology in Ancient Philosophy: From Thales to Avicenna*, ed. RICARDO SALLES (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 65; or, as VAN DER HORT puts it, "both of whom had always argued that the universe is indestructible"; in his "Elements," 229.

since this world is merely temporary, and not worth holding on to, but they may also be equally motivated to care for the world out of its fragility, especially if that fragility is perceived to ultimately be of divine origin. After all, one of the consequences of 2 Peter's notice of the coming day of the Lord is that those who follow Jesus must act in ways of holiness and godliness (2 Pet 3:11) and that in looking for Jesus' return, must be zealous in pursuing peace and living spotless lives (2 Pet 3:14).²⁰ Therefore, to argue that Christian apocalyptic texts such as 2 Peter are not eco-friendly does not take into account the underlying debate in 2 Peter and is based on an imputed fallacy—that the duration of the world directs us in how we should treat it.

In summation, the particular cosmological model to which one ascribes has little or no bearing on how one *should* treat the environment. Both models have reasons for ecological engagement, and both models have unintended consequences that could give reason to discourage engagement. Edward Adams states that 2 Peter 3 “cannot be considered a pro-environmental text,” but it cannot be considered an anti-environmental text, either.²¹ Situated within its historical context, 2 Peter's brief eschatological claims place it within range of useful ecocritical literature.²² No matter the model, humans are called to live a life of stewardship of the Earth as the best way forward for themselves and their community. For those who ascribe to Christian ethics, disavowing or despoiling the creation that God created as part of his good work moves us dangerously close to those mockers 2 Peter warns about who follow their own self-interests and desires and reject the truth that God is the sovereign creator (2 Pet 3:3–4).

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²⁰ Likewise, the discovery and affirmation of unidirectional physical processes in the modern era is a regular reminder that the Earth is both transitory in its nature as well as its resources; see KRAGH, *Conceptions of Cosmos*, 24.

²¹ ADAMS, “Retrieving the Earth,” 116.

²² Cf. HELEN VAN NOORDEN, “The Ecology of the Sibylline Oracles,” in *Ecology and Theology in the Ancient World: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives*, ed. AILSA HUNT and HILARY MARLOW, Bloomsbury Classical Studies Monographies (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 38.

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