

A New Heaven and A New Earth

Exegetical Study 2 Peter 3:13

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There are four passages in Scripture that explicitly speak of "a new heaven(s) and a new earth." They read as follows:

- **Isaiah 65:17:**
For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; And the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. (NASB)
- **Isaiah 66:22:**
"For just as the new heavens and the new earth Which I make will endure before Me," declares the LORD, "So your offspring and your name will endure. (NASB)
- **2 Peter 3:13:**
But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. (NASB)
- **Revelation 21:1:**
And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. (NASB)

Lutheran dogmaticians have, for the most part, refrained from commenting on the passages in Scripture that speak of "a new heaven and a new earth." The Confessions are silent on the subject. So also are Pieper, Koehler, and Heinrich Schmid. The *Abiding Word* (3 volumes), likewise, does not deal with the subject. Only J. T. Mueller mentions the subject at all. When treating the subject of "The End of the World," the last paragraph reads:

It is not advisable to take the passages speaking of a new heaven and a new earth (Is. 65,17; 66,22; 2 Pet. 3,13; Rev. 21,1) in a literal sense, since the "new heaven and the new earth" are "symbols of the heavenly mansions and eternal life." Buechner (*Handkonkordanz*) remarks concerning these passages: "Just as this earth now offers man a comfortable home, so the children of God receive the most comfortable homes, full of all manner of blessedness, in heaven." (John 14:1-4.)¹

Luther, however, seems to take 2 Peter 3:13 literally. In his exposition of 1 Corinthians 15:27-28, we find a rare case where he describes the new world. He writes:

Since it is very apparent here [i.e., in this life] that bodily food and drink do not suffice if God does not give His blessing, what will happen there [i.e., in the final state after the parousia] when God reveals Himself? There we will not look at bread and wine; we will neither need nor desire apothecary or medication, but we will have sufficient solely from viewing and looking at God. This will make the whole body so beautiful, vigorous, and healthy, indeed, so light and agile, that we will soar along like a little spark, yes, just like the sun which runs its course in the heavens. In a moment we will be down here on earth or up above in the heavens. Indeed, I believe that everything will become much more beautiful, water, trees, and grass, and that there will be a new earth, as St. Peter says (2 Peter 3:13), which will be a delight to behold. But the preservation of body and soul will be accomplished solely by God, who alone is to be "everything to everyone." The sight of Him will afford more life, joy, and delight than all creatures are able to accord, and you will have to say, "I would not exchange one moment in heaven for all the world's goods and pleasures, even though the latter endured thousands and thousands of years."²

Of the four passages, 2 Peter 3:13 is the clearest. The context treats the subject of Judgment Day. We read in verses 10-12:

[10] 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. [11] Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, [12] looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, on account of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! (NASB)

The language, here, is not figurative. It is a literal narrative that is primarily didactic. Lutheran dogmaticians uniformly teach the destruction of the earth. They cite especially Hebrews 1:10-12 and also 1 Corinthians 7:31, which read:

[10] And, "Thou, Lord, in the beginning didst lay the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the works of thy hands; [11] they will perish, but thou remainest; and they all will become old as a garment, [12] and as a mantle thou wilt roll them up; as a garment they will also be changed. But thou art the same, and thy years will not come to an end." (Heb. 1:10-12)

. . . and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away. (1 Cor. 7:31)

Mueller and Koehler also cite 2 Peter 3:10. The latter expressly says, "The first world perished in water; this world will perish in fire."³ It is noteworthy that our dogmatists accept a literal reading of the earth's destruction on the basis of 2nd Peter, but they either ignore or take figuratively the 'new heaven/new earth' text that immediately follows. This seems inconsistent. If it is argued that 2nd Peter is an antilegomenon, we wonder why they accept Hebrews (also an antilegomenon) as a proof text for the world's destruction.

Exegetical Considerations

In the original, the text reads:

Καινοὺς δὲ οὐρανοὺς καὶ γῆν καινὴν κατὰ τὸ ἐπάγγελμα αὐτοῦ προσδοκῶμεν, ἐν οἷς δικαιοσύνη κατοικεῖ.

A literal, word-order translation would be as follows:

And [but] a new heavens and a new earth, according to His promise, we are looking forward to, in which righteousness dwells.

The masculine, plural relative pronoun οἷς has as its referent the first noun in the sentence, namely, οὐρανοὺς. But οἷς must also include as a referent the feminine γῆν since, syntactically they are joined as one idea. The grammars indicate that dual referents of different genders are controlled by the first noun of the grouping. This become more evident when the chiasm of the sentence is taken into consideration. It is to that consideration that we now turn.

Chiasm and the Significance of Καινός

One is struck by the position of καινός both with regard to οὐρανόσ and γῆ. We also note that καινός is structured chiastically in this text as shown below.

| | |
|---------------------|---------------------------|
| Καινοὺς δὲ οὐρανοὺς | <u>New</u> and heavens |
| καὶ γῆν καινὴν | And (an) earth <u>new</u> |

The chiastic structure draws "heaven and earth" together in the sense that they belong together. We might say that Peter cannot conceive of the one without the other. They form a unit. Indeed, in each of the four texts in question, the two are always found together.

Καινός is, of course, an important word. The newness denoted by καινός is one of kind and not merely of degree (νεός). Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich (BAG) note

that *καλινός* in this text means new "in the sense that what is old has become obsolete, and should be replaced by what is new. In such a case the new is, as a rule, superior in kind to the old."⁴ In comparing *καλινός* and *νέος*, Richard C. Trench notes:

Neos refers to something new in time, to something that recently has come into existence. . . . *Kainos* refers to something new in quality and is contrasted with that which has seen service—the outworn, the exhausted, or that which is marred through age. . . . The *kainon mnemeion* in which Joseph of Arimathea laid the body of Jesus (Matt. 27:60; John 19:41) was not a tomb that recently had been hewn from rock but one that never had been used at all, one where no dead person had lain to make the place ceremonially unclean (Matt. 23:27; Num. 11:16; Ezek. 39:12, 16). This tomb might have been created a hundred years before and therefore not be *neon*, but if it had never been used before, it would still be *kainon*.

. . . The *kainon* is the *heteron*, the qualitatively other; the *neon* is the *allo*, the numerically distinct.⁵

This distinction is corroborated in Kittel (TDNT) where we read: "Of the two most common words for 'new' since the classical period, namely, *νέος* and *καλινός*, the former signifies 'what was not there before,' 'what has only just arisen or appeared,' the latter 'what is new and distinctive,' as compared with other things. *νέος* is new in time or origin, i.e., young, with a suggestion of immaturity or of lack of respect for the old . . . *καλινός* is what is new in nature, different from the usual, impressive, better than the old, superior in value or attraction . . ."⁶ In discussing the theological implications of *καλινός*, the TDNT goes on to say,

Καλινός is the epitome of the wholly different and miraculous thing which is brought by the time of salvation. Hence, "new" is a leading teleological term in apocalyptic promise: a new heaven and a new earth, Rev. 21:1; 2 Pt. 3:13 (Is 65:17); . . . New creation is the glorious end of the revelation of God's salvation. It is the supreme goal of early Christian hope, and it is reflected from the future salvation in the present existence of Christians on the old earth because it has become present salvation in Christ, 2C. 5:17 . . .⁷

The "never-before" aspect of the newness of the heavens/earth can be seen by looking at a few passages of the New Testament in which *καλινός* is used. Consider the following:

- **Luke 22:20**

And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new [*καλινός*] covenant in My blood.

- **John 13:34**

"A new [καίνος] commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.

- **2 Corinthians 5:17**

Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new [καίνος] creature; the old things passed away; behold, new [καίνος] things have come.

- **Galatians 6:15**

For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new [καίνος] creation.

- **Hebrews 8:8**

For finding fault with them, He says, "Behold, days are coming, says the Lord, when I will effect a new [καίνος] covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah."

It is clear that καίνος denotes something out of the ordinary. Καίνος is used 42 times in the New Testament and, in each case, it is connected to the work of Christ. The question before us is whether the usage in 2nd Peter 3:13 is to be taken literally or figuratively.

New Heaven/New Earth: Figurative or Literal Usage?

But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. 2 Peter 3:13

As we have seen, the context deals with the eschatological destruction of the present earth and heavens by fire. In 2 Peter 3:12b, we read, ". . . the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat." This is uniformly understood in a literal sense. We need to comprehend the enormous significance of this event. All that God created in the beginning will pass away as a final purging of the infection of sin. But, I pose a question: If Peter had closed his epistle at this point without mentioning the "new heavens and a new earth," what impact would this have on Lutheran eschatology? Probably little, if any, for, as it now stands, it does not impact our Confessions or our generally accepted works on dogmatics. Is J. T. Mueller correct, then, in saying that the "new heaven and a new earth are symbols of the heavenly mansions and eternal life?"⁸

Let us consider the larger context. The 3rd chapter of this epistle divides itself into two sections. The first, verses 1-13 treats the 'last days' in which the world will mock

the promise of Christ's parousia. But Peter warns his readers that, just as the old earth, specifically, ὁ τότε κόσμος (literally, 'the then world') perished by water (v. 6), so οἱ δὲ νῦν οὐρανοὶ καὶ ἡ γῆ (literally, 'the now heavens and earth') have been stored up for fire (v. 7). Notice the parallelism of verses 6 and 7.

| | | | |
|----|------|--------|------------------|
| ὁ | τότε | κόσμος | verse 6 |
| | | /\ | |
| οἱ | δὲ | νῦν | οὐρανοὶ καὶ ἡ γῆ |
| | | | verse 7 |

Clearly, what happened to the old (τότε) world is about to happen to the present (νῦν) 'heavens and earth,' namely, destruction. Note that the present 'heavens and earth' are an exegetical (i.e., explanatory) expansion of what the present 'world' is—even though Peter does not use the word *kosmos* with reference to the present state! In Peter's thought, whether old or present, the phrase 'the heavens and earth' explicates what the 'world' consists of. This is an important observation, for it clears away any possible confusion between the place Scripture calls 'heaven' (where the church triumphant now dwells) and the present (and new) 'heavens' which is best conceived of as the universe or, in a narrow sense, earth's atmosphere. 'Heavens' is used in the wide sense in Genesis 1:1; it is used in the narrow sense in a Matthew 3:16-17 (in the account of Christ's baptism). But Peter does not stop there. He tells us that, when this present 'heaven and earth' or 'world' passes away, God will make a new 'heavens and earth,' that is, a new world.

But is this new world ('heavens and earth') a literal world upon which the saved will walk? That is to say, is it a material abode upon which the saints—in material bodies—dwell? The language of this text (and context) suggests that we cannot dismiss this possibility. The commentators seem to want it both ways. On one hand they seem to speak of a material world. On the other, they speak figuratively. Michael Green seems to write of a material world when he says:

Once more Peter returns to the Old Testament for his description of the Christian hope. He is true to his own teaching that the 'word of prophecy' is more sure than anything else (1:19) and looks forward to the fulfilment of God's ancient promises. Sin, which has marred God's world, will not be permitted to have the final word. In a renewed universe the ravages of the fall will be repaired by the glory of the restoration. Paradise Lost will become Paradise Regained, and God's will shall eventually be done alike in earth and heaven. Isaiah 65:17; 66:22, which Peter quotes, formed the basis for the eschatological hopes of Judaism and were widespread. They 'emphasise the radical discontinuity between the old and the new, but it is nevertheless clear that they intend to describe a renewal, not an abolition of creation' (Bauckham).⁹

But what he grants, he seems to take away. He quickly adds in the paragraph immediately following:

Peter knew no more than did the Old Testament prophets about the way this would be accomplished. Nor are we any wiser today. We have no means whatever of conceiving what a resurrection body or what a restored universe will be like. Those who think they can map out a detailed programme of what will happen at the second coming should remember that, despite the prophecies of Scripture, nobody got the details of the first coming right! The language of this passage is figurative. It is an attempt to convey in the language of this world something of the wonder of the next.

Lenski walks a tightrope between the two. He says:

The old universe was spoiled by the fall. Sin permeated it with its effects. That includes all of nature, animate and inanimate, the heavenly bodies, and the heavens also. All shall become new. On that day fire shall make them new so that in them "righteousness dwells," even every trace of unrighteousness being forever removed. We may call this a sort of personification of this quality (righteousness) on which the approval of the Lord's eternal verdict rests. . . .

The question is raised as to whether this universe shall be annihilated, and a new heaven and earth shall be created *ex nihilo*. In order to answer it one should not stop with passages like Ps. 102:26; Isa. 51 :6; Jer. 34:4; Matt. 24:35; Mark 13:31; Heb. 1:11; Rev. 20:11. One should include also Rom. 8:19-22; I Cor. 7:31; Rev. 21:1-5. The heavens and the earth shall be renovated, renewed, purified, made perfect. There shall be no further separation between earth and the abode of God; they shall be one at last.¹⁰

Kretzmann in his popular commentary appears to take the new heavens and a new earth in a literal, material sense. He sees it as the fulfillment of the two Isaianic passages. He says:

. . . But new heavens and a new earth we expect according to His promises, in which righteousness will have its abode. After this old earth has passed away according to the apostle's description, there will be new heavens and a new earth. That is not a vain hope, a mere day-dream on the part of the Christians, but our faith is based upon God's promises, Is. 65, 17; 66, 22. Since our expectation is founded on the Word of God, therefore we shall not be ashamed. This old earth is filled with sin and unrighteousness, the very creatures, the dumb animals groaning with the pain of the curse of sin, Rom. 8, 22. But after the last day there will be no more sin; in the new earth there will live only righteousness and joy and peace. That is our hope, our comfort and consolation. We know that the sufferings of this present time are not

worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us and to us, Rom. 8, 18.¹¹

Significantly, Johannes Huther (in the 19th Century Meyer's Commentary series) sees the new heavens and new earth as specifically being the abode of saints. He writes, "Προσδοκῶμεν [looking for], which looks back to προσδοκῶντας [looking for], ver. 12, significantly designates the new heaven and the new earth as the aim of the certain hope of believers- ἐν οἷς δικαιοσύνη κατοικεῖ [in which righteousness dwells].¹²

Conclusions

Space does not permit additional citations from the commentators. So we simply come to the question once again: Is the phrase "new heavens and a new earth" in 2 Peter 3:13 to be taken figuratively or literally? We cannot say with certainty. From the text and immediate context, a strong case can be made for a literal, material new world upon which the saints dwell. We might see it as the restoration of the Paradise lost after the Fall. This would also do justice to the groaning creation of Romans 8 finally be liberated to its original state. Certainly, the commentators do not reject the idea. In fact, they seem almost to be persuaded that such is the case, but some seem unwilling to stretch themselves to a risky conclusion. Huther and Kretzmann seem willing to adopt a literal view. Lenski and Green are not willing to go that far.

As one who has pondered this verse (as well as the other three), I do not feel the literal, material conclusion is going too far. I find the Paradise lost/Paradise regained idea very intriguing-maybe even compelling. Is it not interesting to find out that many of the lost things of the Garden of Eden reappear in the last vision of the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation? Some examples. The first words in Genesis: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Nearly the last words of Revelation: "I saw a new heaven and a new earth." In Genesis, we read, "I will greatly multiply your pain;" and in Revelation, "There shall be no more pain." In Genesis: "Cursed is the ground for your sake;" yet in Revelation, behold, "There shall be no more curse." In Genesis, man is banished from the Garden and from the presence of God; in Revelation, the faithful see God's face. In Genesis the tree of life disappears; in Revelation it reappears. In Genesis man's primeval home was by a river; in Revelation man's eternal home is beside a river.

In Isaiah 11:6-8 we read about wolves living peacefully with lambs, lions with calves, cattle with bears, and lions eating straw like the ox.. Moreover, little children play harmlessly with cobras. Isaiah 11:1-7 treats Christ's first coming followed by Christ's second coming. Immediately thereafter we find domestic tranquillity of the animals. Could it be that this tranquillity is the state of the new world? Comments that this

tranquillity is a figurative description of the peace the Messiah will bring when he establishes his Gospel kingdom, though popular, leave me unsatisfied.

Having said this, I admit to the problems that such a view brings. How shall we understand the resurrection body: "sown a natural body, raised a spiritual body? Is the "new heavens/new earth" the abode of the resurrected saints or do they live forever in a spiritual heaven? Since God is spirit, how shall we conceive of God in/on a new physical world. There are many questions. We shall never answer them all or even in part this side of eternity.

Soli Deo Gloria!

David A. Grassley

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