
Biblical Eschatology and Modern Science

Part IV

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The Promise of His Coming

The fourth and concluding category of Biblical cosmology is necessarily that of Biblical eschatology, the study of the future cosmos. As the first cosmos was destroyed by water (2 Pet 3:6), so the present cosmos will be destroyed by fire (2 Pet 3:10). The cosmos, of course, includes both the earth and the (atmosphere) heavens—the geosphere, the atmosphere and the biosphere—all considered as an ordered system. The materials were not annihilated at the Flood, and neither will they be in the future fiery destruction, but the cosmos—that is, the ordered system of the earth and its inhabitants—will be destroyed.

“Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness” (2 Pet 3:13). God has not forgotten this “promise of his coming” as suggested by the latter-day scoffers (2 Pet 3:3); His seeming delay in its fulfillment is only because of His “long-suffering to usward” (2 Pet 3:9).

This promise of a new heavens and a new earth is first mentioned explicitly by Isaiah. In Isaiah 65:17, God says He will “create new heavens and a new earth,” and in Isaiah 66:22, He speaks of the “new heavens and new earth which I will make.” Just as God “created and made” the heavens and the earth of the first cosmos (Gen 2:3), so He will “create and make” the final cosmos, “which shall remain.” Aspects of both His creative power and His organizing and ordering wisdom are thus again to be employed in that day.

The actual emplacement of the new cosmos is, of course, gloriously described in Revelation 21:1, where John sees it as having displaced “the first heaven and the first earth.” This seems at first a slight contradiction of Peter, who had said the first cosmos perished in the Flood. Perhaps, as we shall see, this “first atmosphere and land system” will have been substantially restored prior to its final purgation at this time.

In any case, the “passing away” of that cosmos (Matt 24:35; Rev 20:11) is to be, according to Revelation 20:2–11, preceded by the millennium, the thousand-year reign of Christ over the earth. But the millennium will be preceded by the great tribulation (Matt 24:21, 29–30; Rev 19:16), which is to be climaxed by the glorious return of the Lord Jesus to establish His kingdom. And the great tribulation is to be preceded by the Lord’s promised coming for His own (John 14:3; 1 Thess 4:13–5:10; Rev 3:10), to “catch them up” to meet Him in the air.

And our anticipated rapture need be preceded by nothing. Despite the scoffers who deride His promise, we most surely do “look for such things” (2 Pet 3:14). All of this must be included in the “day of the Lord,” which shortly will arrive as a thief in the night” (2 Pet 3:10).

The Millennium and the Antediluvian World

There are many wonderful descriptions in the Bible of conditions in the millennial earth, and these often are hard to distinguish from conditions promised for the new earth (note, especially, the prophetic intermingling of the two in Isaiah 65:17–25). This is a well-known characteristic of prophecy, which often unites the near and far fulfillment in one grand vision, with the first a type of the second. The millennium, glorious though it will be, is yet only a type, a precursive fulfillment, of the grand and eternal reality in the distance.

God will not fail of accomplishing His purpose in creation, though the promise seem long delayed. The cosmos was created to last forever (Ps 148:1–6; 104:5, etc), and thus even the global destruction by the historic Flood and the future fire must be merely agents of preparation, renovation, and purgation, rather than

instruments of annihilation. The Fall of man and God's resulting curse on his dominion in the long view merely enable God to be revealed as Redeemer as well as Creator. And He, "by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began," has been promising the "times of restoration of all things" (Luke 1:70; Acts 3:21). The "creation itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of decay" (Rom 8:21).

Since "all things" are to be "restored" and "made new" (Rev 21:5), the perfect conditions which God originally provided for life on the earth must be restored, at least. These were only gradually and partially dissipated, following the curse, throughout the antediluvian period, with then a very sharp and catastrophic further decline during the Flood.

It is remarkable, therefore, to note the many similarities of the cosmic order in the antediluvian period to those anticipated in the millennium. It seems plausible, at least as a preliminary approach to the study of the future cosmos, to suggest that God will restore Edenic conditions to the earth, partially during the thousand years (which therefore will have many of the physical characteristics of the world before the Flood), and then fully in the new (or renewed) earth.

We have previously noted the most pleasant environmental conditions of the antediluvian epoch, due largely to the vapor canopy, the vast expanse of waters above the firmament." These served to prevent radiative and other damage to living tissue and thus contributed to longevity and physical vigor. The "greenhouse effect" maintained a generally uniform mild temperature everywhere. The much more nearly uniform distribution of land and water areas, with only low mountains and shallow seas, combined with only small seasonal and latitudinal temperature differentials, sufficed to produce rich vegetation and abundant life forms all over the world, with no storms or other physical disturbances anywhere.

Now these same effects are described in the millennium. Longevity is to be restored (Isa 65:20) and evidently many who enter the millennial period will survive through the full thousand years. The topography will be evened out (Isa 40:4; Zech 14:10) and even the wilderness will again support abundant plant life (Isa 35:1, 6-7; 51:3). Somehow even man's divinely appointed relationship to the animal kingdom will be restored in measure (Isa 11:6-9).

Whether this will be brought about largely by natural processes or by miraculous power, we are not able to determine fully from Scripture. There do seem to be indications that, to some degree, natural forces operating in unusual ways ("Grade B" miracles, perhaps) contribute to the re-establishment of antediluvian conditions.

It is interesting that Psalm 148:4-6 speaks of the "waters above the heavens" as "established for ever and ever." There are none such now, and if they are to last forever, then somehow they must be reinstated, as they were before the Flood. Their presence would contribute significantly to the millennial conditions as described.

Geophysical Changes During the Tribulation

Now it is remarkable that phenomena described during the tribulation period could lead to just such an effect. There are to be 3½ years of drought over all the world (Rev 11:3, 6), and the winds are to be restrained (Rev 7:1). At the same time, solar radiation is to be drastically increased (Isa 30:26; Mal 4:1; Rev 16:8, 12). Thus, vast quantities of water will be evaporated into the air; many rivers will dry up. With no winds, the vapor will simply continue rising, and no rain will restore it to the earth. Still more water will boil away into the atmosphere as great meteors or comets plunge into the ocean (Rev 8:8-11).

A peripheral effect of these phenomena will be an accelerated melting of the great ice caps of the polar regions; these also must be cleared for millennial cultivation. Perhaps the somewhat enigmatic reference in Job 38:22-23; 29:30, and Amos 9:5-6 refer to God's sudden military use of the stored up "treasuries of the snow," when they "shall melt" and it "shall rise up wholly like a flood." It is calculated that melting of the ice caps would raise sea level perhaps one hundred feet, and this would mean that most of the world's great cities, situated near the sea as they are, would be quickly destroyed.

As the canopy is being restored, the earth's topography will also be undergoing renovation. Great earthquakes will increase in frequency and intensity (Matt 24:7; Ezek 38:19-20; Rev 6:12, 16:18; Hag 2:6, etc.). These, together with meteoritic impacts and shifts in crustal isostasy due to melting ice and evaporating oceans,

will eventually so disturb the earth's equilibrium that the entire crust will begin to slip and deform. To people on the earth, it will seem that the sky is moving—"departing like a scroll" (Isa 24:18–20; 34:4; Amos 8:9; Rev 6:14; 16:20). The mountains will all be moved, and immense turbidity flows and submarine landslides will convey sediments into the ocean deeps.

By the end of the seven years of tribulation judgments on the earth, the topographic and atmospheric conditions could well have been restored substantially to their antediluvian conditions, preparing a suitable physical environment for earth's great kingdom age.

But what a contrast in antediluvian and millennial spiritual conditions! Before the Flood, "the earth was filled with violence" (Gen 6:13), but in the age to come, it shall be "filled with the knowledge of the LORD" (Isa 11:9) and all incipient evil and violence will be absolutely restrained (Rev 2:26–27). Man will finally be able in large measure to exercise the dominion over the earth for which God made him. His science and technology will be fully harnessed in ways that will glorify God and benefit mankind, and an almost perfect social order will be established, a true theocracy, centered in Jerusalem and the great millennial temple. Man's resources will no more be devoted to war and armaments, to alcohol and drugs, and to the pursuit of ungodliness in countless ways, but to true art, science, medicine, music, education, agriculture, construction, research, and other beneficial ends.

Though the persecutions and catastrophes of the tribulation period may leave relatively few believing Jews and Gentiles, still in natural human flesh, to enter the millennial age (Matt 25:34), conditions will favor a high birth rate and low death rate, so that the population will rapidly expand to the "four quarters of the earth" (Rev 20:8). And these will in some way all be instructed and ruled by the "saints," those of the previous ages who trusted God in Christ under far more adverse circumstances and, now resurrected and perfected in Him, have been prepared for such ministries (Dan 7:27; Luke 19:17; 1 Cor 6:2; Rev 20:6).

Restoration of Edenic Conditions in the New Earth

During the millennial age, idyllic though it may be, the earth will still be under the effects of the curse. Though decay processes may be decelerated, because of improved environmental conditions and advances in technology, the principle of decay will still be operative and there still will be sorrow, pain, and death in the world.

And that which brought on the curse in the first place—sin—will still be resident in the natural human heart. The great multitudes born during the millennium will all have ample opportunity to hear the gospel, and under the most favorable circumstances, but salvation still requires personal faith in Christ. Though open rebellion and sin will be prohibited, there will be great numbers who will remain unconverted and rebellious in heart. Therefore, "the devil must be loosed a little season" (Rev 20:3) to "deceive the nations" yet once more.

Then it is, finally, that the earth will undergo its last great catastrophe, the fiery holocaust of which Peter speaks (2 Pet 3:10; cf. Heb 12:26–29; Rev 3:9–11). As believers were preserved through the Flood in the ark, it would seem that earthly believers at the time shall be preserved through the fire, perhaps by translation to the holy city, New Jerusalem, which shall then come down from the outer heavens to the new earth (Rev 21:1).

Note that though this is the *new* earth, it is the *earth*, this very planet on which we now reside. The basic materials of the earth's structure will not be annihilated, but will undergo tremendous processes of disintegration, probably even atomic disintegration, as Peter's language implies. All the age-long evidences of decay wrought into the earth's crust—especially the fossils and other monuments of the reign of death—will completely disappear. The earth's remaining waters will either disintegrate or instantaneously boil away toward the partial vapor canopy already restored above the firmament just before the millennium.

Then, as the atoms of the former earth begin to fall together again after the holocaust, God will once more exercise His primeval creative power, and will "create" and "make" the new heavens and the new earth (Isa 65:17; 66:22).

And it will be new again (Rev 21:5) much like the cosmos He had made in the beginning. "There shall be no more curse" (Rev 22:3). The second law of thermodynamics will have been repealed, and perhaps even the first

law also, as God's creative power will undoubtedly be freely manifest wherever needed thenceforth. There will be no more tears, or sorrow, or crying, or pain, and no more death (Rev 21:4). The sea will be no more (Rev 21:1), although there will be a great river (Rev 22:1, 17) proceeding eternally from God's throne and perhaps dividing into many streams coursing through the entire world to provide water and fruit from the tree of life along the banks of the "health of the nations" everywhere (Rev 22:2).

Thus the hydrologic cycle of the present cosmos will no longer be necessary, even in the more efficient form in which it functioned before the Flood. The entire earth will be habitable, without vast regions devoted to deserts and ice caps and oceans as at present.

Whether or not the earth's sun will be included in the destruction of the heavens is not stated explicitly. However, in the new earth there will be no need of the sun. "The Lamb is the light thereof" (Rev 21:23). As the sun provides the energy for the maintenance of the processes of the present cosmos (though, ultimately, this energy also comes from Christ—Heb 1:3), so the processes of the new cosmos will be sustained directly by the Lord Jesus. Even the original earth was maintained by some such source of light (Gen 1:3) prior to the making of two great light-bearers on the fourth day of the creation period (Gen 1:14–19). "There shall be no night there" (Rev 21:25; 22:5) and no need for rest and sleep because of the continual outpouring of power of God to meet all needs.

And there is the "city that lieth foursquare," 1362 miles in each dimension, "whose builder and maker is God." The size of the city is such that the structure of the present earth could hardly support it. On the other hand, the new earth is by no means limited to its present size, or even its present shape. It need no longer rotate on its axis, nor orbit about the sun. Transportation vertically through the streets of the city will be no more difficult than horizontally, since the same power which could once instantly rapture the quick and the dead into the air to meet the Lord is the source of energy for all needs in the new Jerusalem, and further, our "vile bodies" will have been transformed like unto "his glorious body" (Phil 3:21).

The Hell of Fire

Outside the city, and undoubtedly far outside the new earth itself, but somewhere in the universe, will be the lake of fire, prepared for the devil and his angels (Matt 25:41), but serving also as the eternal prison of all who must be judged according to their works (Rev 20:12–15).

There are, of course, stars without number and of almost infinite variety in the universe, any one of which might fittingly be described as a vast "lake of fire." Angels are occasionally called *stars* in Scripture (Job 38:7; Judges 5:20; Rev 9:1; 12:4); even Satan himself is the "day star," Lucifer (Isa 14:12). The ancients worshipped the stars, because they constituted the "host of heaven." The most plausible explanation for this apparent identification of the angelic hosts with the stars is that the latter constitute the residences of the former. But a great number have "kept not their first estate" and have "left their own habitation" (Jude 6), and are now clustered about the planet earth, the "powers of the air."

For these rebellious angels, God has reserved a special lake of fire, "ordained of old" (Isa 30:33). The resurrected bodies, even of the unsaved, are to be as "the angels of God" (Matt 22:30) in that they will not be consumed by fire (Mark 9:43–44) and will thus exist forever after once being consigned there (Matt 25:41, 46; Rev 14:10; 20:14–15; 21:8; 22:15).

The flames of the fiery lake will burn without light, as hell is to be a place of utter darkness (Jude 13; 2 Pet 2:17). The awful environment will sear the soul as well as the body (Matt 20:28), in the midst of unending corruption and sin (Jas 3:6; Rev 22:11). Every least token of the love and grace and power of God will be forever removed as its inhabitants are to be "punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power" (2 Thess 1:9). All who have preferred to be independent of God, walking in their own ways and neglecting His great salvation, will thus eternally be granted that freedom from God which they desire. They must be removed from the earth, since it will thenceforth be where God will dwell (Rev 21:3), and transported to some far-distant body of flaming darkness, forever.

But all of this, together with the agelong reign of sin and death in the present cosmos which produced it, will soon be forgotten by those in the new heaven and the new earth (Isa 65:17). In the new cosmos, bright with the glory and beauty of the Lamb, throughout all the “ages to come” (Eph 2:7), our God of all grace will be showing “the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus.”

Bibliotheca Sacra 125, no. 500 (1968): 299.