# Christian Studies

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# All Things New

Allan J. McNicol

If we have been found faithful . . .
In the after-while . . .
Give us a home with thee . . .

The golden evening brightens in the west;
Soon, soon to faithful warriors cometh rest,
Sweet is the calm of Paradise the blest:
Alleluia, Alleluia!

Whether the words are a prayer in a twentieth-century rural church or a Victorian English hymn, the sentiments are strikingly familiar. Harbored deep within our breasts as we contemplate the eternal world are intimations of "going home." We know that time will come for all of us. We often wonder what it will be like. When the traveler visits Jerusalem the sights and smells of the Old City fascinate; equally impressive are the massive number of tombs encircling the area. Seeking to be the first at the door of God's new world on resurrection day, countless pilgrims have made Jerusalem their final resting place! When we live within the story of the Bible, questions about death and the afterlife are never far away.

But as central as hope for an afterlife in God's new world is for Christians, today such talk frequently exudes an aura of quaintness. Let us face the facts. In Western culture the power of the Christian story to compel

allegiance on the basis of its promise of an eternal home continues to weaken. This Christian legacy faces widespread opposition and has been branded a "literalistic, doctrinal, moralistic, exclusivistic, and afterlife-oriented" version of the faith.[1] Other visions of Christianity are put forward in its place. Massive numbers of our fellow urban dwellers presuppose that all religions are human creations. While many continue to claim interest in what all great world religions share in common, few are willing to commit their lives to a particular tradition for support and guidance. Given this worldview, the Dalai Lama counts as much, if not more, than Billy Graham or Benedict XVI. Moreover, since different religions send different signals about the soul and the afterlife, beliefs in this area are considered surplus baggage and are tossed overboard.

**The Impact of Science**

The view that science must be given the last word on any truth claim is also widespread. This is another reality that Christianity must confront. In the past, Christians and scientists have clashed over views of creation. But since the advent of the Big Bang Theory, it is generally accepted that nuanced theological views of the origins of the universe can be compatible with science.

But it is another matter on questions about the future of the creation.[2] Here there is no sign of a truce. Science offers three options for the future of the cosmos: stasis (the universe remains in a steady state), collapse, or eternal expansion. Among scientists the latter options appear more viable than

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[1]This is Marcus Borg's pejorative description of traditional Christianity in Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2000), 231.

[2] Philip Clayton, "The Theology-Science Debate's Last Frontier," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 30, no. 4 (2002): 33.

the first—the universe will move either to a fiery implosion or gradually disperse into a frigid twilight. While some theologians engage physicists to discuss these matters, it is fair to say that theologians usually end up with reductionist conclusions that are hardly compatible with any traditional view of the resurrection of the dead and the life to come.[3] Weighing the evidence, a philosopher of science judiciously concludes:

> The truth is that [the traditional Christian] eschatological hope is not made probable by science, nor is it consistent with current scientific knowledge.[4]

This is intended as a cautionary comment. Modern science has a record of great achievements. Quite rightly it has won both respect and financial support among the most influential segments of our society. But Christians are obliged to say that it is not in the halls and laboratories of scientists that God chose to reveal himself definitively. At the end of the day, valuable and persuasive as it is, science is only representative of the accumulated human wisdom of modernity.[5] As it develops, that body of wisdom will change. We have other sources of knowledge and ways of viewing the world that have stood the test of time and nourish conviction. Our contention is that the revelation of the Eternal is found decisively in the story of the people of God in history, which culminates in the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is in this story that we find an entirely different vision of the future.

**Biblical Story as Revelation**

Along with many others over the years, I have been impressed with

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[3]See John Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope and the End of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, eds., *The End of the World and the Ends of God* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000).

[4]Clayton, "The Theology-Science Debate's Last Frontier," 34.

[5]Clayton, "The Theology-Science Debate's Last Frontier," 34.

the insights of Eric Auerbach.[6] He was able to discern that certain stories have a marvelously persuasive capacity for those who live within their parameters. We need not go far to see this. On almost a banal level, consider the attraction of our children to the Simpsons or Harry Potter! Auerbach argued that the great literary works impose upon us a consistent and sometimes dominant view of reality. By submitting to them we acknowledge the claim of the reality they articulate. We are compelled to fit our vision of life into their reality. Such was the power of Homer for the Greeks and the Bible for much of the West in the long march of Christian history. The story of creation, fall, divine rescue and ultimate redemption through resurrection in a new world constitutes the dominant narrative for Christians. Quite appropriately, to the believer, this story, received as divine revelation, gives formal structure to our lives, both for the present and the future.

**The Christian Hope**

Our focus in this essay is the Christian hope for the future. Formally, the biblical story has the power and function of a great literary work. Materially, various features of that story (i.e., the Christian hope) are grounded in the fortunes and destinies of God's people in history. With respect to our hope for a new world, it begins centuries before the birth of Jesus when the people of God were in exile in Babylon. There God raises a prophet who announces that God will create a "new thing" in the future (Isa 43:19; cf. 51:6, 65:17).

Although the immediate concern in Isaiah was the return of the peo-

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[6]See my article, "The Akedah: A Root Experience as Authority for the People of God," *Institute for Christian Studies Faculty Bulletin* 2 (April 1981): 15–17. Auerbach's great work is titled, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (trans. Willard Trask; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).

ple of God to Jerusalem, this act is housed in the language of a new creation. Worthy of note is that the resurrection of God's people begins to be envisioned (Isa 26:19; cf. Dan 12:1–2). From Zion the Lord will rule his people and the nations (Isa 52:7). Although most of this did not come to pass in Old Testament times, the hope for this outcome persists among the people of God.

With the mission of Jesus the hope deepens. Jesus' followers understood themselves to be the ones commissioned to gather and prepare the people of God to be ready for this new world. No one held this conviction more tenaciously than the apostle Paul. As Peter Stuhlmacher has pointed out, Paul places the Christ-event into a grand scenario of three stages (cf. 1 Cor 15:23–28).[7] The first is the resurrection of Christ, where God declares decisively that Jesus is the Messiah. On the basis of the resurrection he is designated as the one initiating the process of the rectification of the creation (Rom 1:3–4). Then comes the second stage (the return or *parousia* of Christ), when the faithful will be raised and the people of God will participate in the rule of Christ (1 Thess 4:13–18; 1 Cor 6:2; Rev 1:6; 5:10). Finally, in the stage Paul calls the end (Greek *telos*), God's purposes will be brought to complete fruition in the fully renewed creation including the final righteous judgment of the wicked (Rom 8:18–39; Phil 2:10–11). Inherent in this vision is a central idea: God will complete his redemption of the world with a new creation. This is the essence of the Christian hope. Contrary to the common opinion that hope is always intermingled with some skepticism, one can cultivate this hope with full assurance,[8] for hope is based on the honor and rectitude of God. To accept less is to credit God with less than he can do.

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[7]Peter Stuhlmacher, "Eschatology and Hope in Paul," *EQ* 72 (2000): 319.
[8]Stuhlmacher, "Eschatology and Hope in Paul," 327.

## A Proposal

Nevertheless, we cannot escape the fact that the acids of contemporary culture continue to eat away this hope held by the faithful. Curiously, in Churches of Christ, there is another factor contributing to its erosion. Partly in reaction to bygone arguments over eschatological expectations, many have given up reflecting on these matters. What is even more startling is that, unlike the Father above, they appear to have given up on this creation altogether. The view is widespread that this world will be burned up after the return of Christ. The destiny of the faithful is reckoned to be a place called heaven. All that matters is getting to heaven. Heaven is imagined as the ultimate destination of the soul with only the loosest of connections to any concept of a future resurrection in space and time.

This essay examines this belief. We focus on two key texts: Revelation 21:1–8 and 2 Peter 3:4–13. The latter is often used as the basic evidence for the idea of the complete annihilation of the physical universe, while the former is regularly used in funeral services as a description of the place of the final rest for the soul. We believe clarification is in order.

Based on an analysis of these two texts, we wish to argue that a key element of biblical faith is the claim that God has not given up on his creation. A vital part of biblical teaching is that the capstone of God's redeeming activity will be the establishment of a new heaven and earth (Rev 21:1–5; 2 Pet 3:13). The present world, burdened with the consequences of sin, will be renovated and transformed. Integrated into this hope is the expectation that the final destiny of the people of God, transformed like the resurrected Jesus, is life in this restored creation.

Since God has begun his active work of restoration of the world with the resurrection of Christ, as co-workers with him, we can claim that stew-

ardship in enhancing this present creation is worthwhile. God created humanity to care for his creation (Gen 2:5, 15). Consistent with this observation, we understand that the new creation involves not only the church, but also has implications for the creation itself. Such a belief can provide a rationale for loving stewardship of creation in full keeping with biblical revelation.

**The New Heaven and the New Earth**

**Revelation 21:1–8**

These verses come at a critical stage in John's message as he moves to bring the narration of his heavenly visions to a grand finale. Since Revelation 17:1, John has concentrated on the fate of the evil woman/city, Babylon. In his sphere of vision, this is a reference to Rome and her allies. Today, by extension, we see this as an image for all idolatrous powers that set themselves as sources of ultimacy in opposition to the Son of God. Now, in counterpoint, John introduces another woman/city, the New Jerusalem.

The New Jerusalem coming down from heaven (Rev 21:9; cf. 21:1–2) clearly refers to the ultimate presence of God resting with his people.[9] In any ordinary reading of the text, "coming down from heaven" implies that the city will be situated on a new earth (Rev 21:1). Revelation 21:1–8 is a transitional passage indicating that the old order, where Babylon dominates, is finished. Something new, at its center, the New Jerusalem, will replace it.

While it is evident that the New Jerusalem will be on earth, it is clear

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[9]Notice especially the article by Robert H. Gundry, "The New Jerusalem: People as Place, Not Place for People," *Novum Testamentum* 29 (1987): 254-64. In the words of Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Proclamation Commentaries, ed. G. Krodel; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 111, "John dreams of the New Jerusalem as the anti-image of the great city Babylon/Rome."

that John envisions a different order for this earth than what we experience at present. Already in Revelation 20:11 we learn about the disappearance of the (old) earth and sky. In 21:1 John adds, after the passing of the first heaven and earth, that the sea is no more. Afterward, in 21:5, for the first time since the beginning of the book, God speaks directly: "Behold, I make all things new."

Countless readers have failed to appreciate the literary context in which these words occur. To many, this brings to mind the complete disintegration of this universe. God has finished with this world. Only heaven remains. But we need to probe deeper into the thought-world that houses this terminology.

The fact that the divine words of Revelation 21:5 echo Isaiah 43:19 and 65:17 should govern the conclusions of every careful reader. The words from Isaiah occur in the framework and thought of Jewish prophetic thinking that predicts a coming period when the creation will work in keeping with the original intent of the Creator. Noteworthy is that the main objects of Isaiah's vision of the renewed order (heaven, earth, Jerusalem, and the nations) all reappear in the new creation in Revelation 21.[10] In both Isaiah and Revelation the new creation has a strong correlation with the old.

From the time of the Babylonian exile, future salvation was very much on the minds of the people of God (Isa 43:16–21). Sometimes the rhetoric soared to heights that stretched the imagination to its limits. To describe "the new," the prophets mined the language of creation (Isa 51:6; 65:17–18; 66:22); and the writings of intertestamental Judaism as well as some early Christian literature describe "the new" in terms of cosmic destruction and

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[10]See Isaiah 65–66. Cf. Roy A. Harrisville, *The Concept of Newness in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1960), 100.

renewal.[11] Nevertheless, what a careful interpreter must keep in mind is the function of this language. The bottom line in Judaism with respect to the future can be found in Isaiah 52:7–10; the people yearn for Zion to be redeemed and all the earth to see the salvation of God. That is what they mean by new!

The torch of hope for a new creation was kindled in the exile. With the coming of Jesus it finally bursts into flame.[12] This is especially true with respect to the raising of the dead—an emphasis that comes rather late in Judaism. In principle, the destiny of Israel is embodied in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Believers like Paul ventured to speak of Jesus' resurrection as a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). From this time, those rising from the watery grave of baptism drew from the power of Jesus' resurrection and saw themselves living in a new order (Rom 6:1–6). It was equally evident that the created order still awaited full redemption (Rom 8:18–25). Still, death had not lost its sting. Through the testing of occasional persecution and regular cultural marginalization the flame sometimes flickered. But the hope for our bodily transformation and renewal of the creation remained firm.

This is the context in which we should understand Revelation 21:1–8. Thus, when John sees the new heaven and new earth, this, like the earlier images of the woman clothed with the sun (12:1), or the beast with seven heads (17:3), should not be read as a literal statement. The vision of the

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[11]Such texts may be found in the tradition commencing as early as the Jewish Enoch Literature: 1 Enoch 10:2 and especially 91:16. See David Aune, *Revelation 17–22* (Word Biblical Commentary; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 1117-1119 for a comprehensive account. It is well to keep in mind that an impressive list could also be assembled of ancient writers arguing that the destiny of the creation is renewable.

[12] I am indebted to Peter Stuhlmacher for the image, in "Behold, I Make All Things New," *Lutheran World* 15 (1968): 4.

new heaven and new earth is not meant to be a cosmological prediction of total replacement of the cosmos. In 20:11, at the time of the last judgment, earth and heaven flee away. Yet, in 20:13 the sea gives up its dead—something impossible to comprehend if one is reading the text in a literal, chronological sequence.[13] It is clear that the emphasis in Revelation 21:1 is not on giving up on earth, but on the qualitative difference between the regimen of this age and that of the age to come.[14] In terms of our discussion the emphasis is on a renovated creation, not something totally new after the complete destruction of the universe.

This interpretation is reinforced by the reference to the disappearance of the sea (Rev 21:1b; cf. 20:11). The sea is often a figure for chaos or the abyss (Rev 11:7; 13:1).[15] With Satan defeated, this old order of the dominion of sin in the creation will be no more.

The visionary aspect of this unit comes to a climax when the New Jerusalem comes into view (Rev 21:2). Once again the reference is clearly symbolic. Echoing Isaiah 65:17–20, ideal Jerusalem emerges in the new heavens and new earth. While some have argued that John distinguishes between the people and the city (Rev 21:7, 24–26), it is probable that the image is multivalent and refers to the glorification and vindication of the people of God. This is confirmed by Revelation 3:12, where, in the promise of the New Jerusalem, people and place are intermingled. After passing through the fires of persecution the people of God are now at rest. Not only are they

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[13]Pierre Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of John* (trans. Wendy Parcels; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 591.

[14]G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 1040, probably goes too far in differentiating between *kainos* as "newness in quality" and *neos* as "newness in time." Harrisville, *The Concept of Newness in the New Testament*, 107–108 is an appropriate corrective.

[15] Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, 1119–1120.

at rest, as the bride of Christ they participate in the end-time banquet (Rev 19:7–9; 21:2, 9).

An auditory dimension in 21:3–4 corresponds to John's vision in 21:1–2. John hears a loud voice coming from the throne of God (Rev 21:3–4; cf. 19:5). While the voice echoes terminology widespread in scripture (cf. Isa 25:6–8), the organizing image is the Feast of Tabernacles. John used this image, in an anticipatory sense, in Revelation 7:15–17 to describe the vindication of the faithful. Now, in the narrative sequence of the book, the real time of rest has come. The voice announces that God now "tents" or dwells with his peoples in his renewed world (Lev 26:11).[16] It is a time of absolute bliss. Death, tears, and pain, signatures of the old order, are gone.

In Revelation 21:5 the auditory aspect of the text is deepened. It is no longer a voice from the area of the throne (Rev 19:5): God himself pronounces "all things new" (cf. Isa 43:18–19). In Revelation 16:17 a voice announced the end of the apostate woman-city, Babylon, "It is finished." Now in counterpoint, God announces that with the coming of the New Jerusalem his work of redemption is complete.[17] The old world (Babylon) has been replaced by the New Jerusalem. A great divide exists between the two (Rev 19:7–8). While the faithful enjoy the benefits of the redemption of this creation (21:6–7), those who gave allegiance to Babylon endure the sec-

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[16] Textual witnesses are divided in Rev 21:3 between the reading, "peoples" or "people." It is more likely that the singular *people* (= people of God) would enter into the text through scribal editing. We prefer the plural *peoples* as the correct reading. Presumably John is referring to the total complement of those from all nations who will share in the messianic banquet (Rev 5:9, 7:9; 15:3–4).

[17] In both cases the second perfect of *gignesthai* "to be finished" is used. Along with lengthy repetition of the same Greek phraseology in 17:1 and 21:9, this indicates clearly the importance of the contrast between the two woman-cities as a major structural feature of the book of Revelation.

ond death (21:8).

Perhaps, surprisingly, analysis shows that there is nothing in this text claiming that this present earth is marked for fiery destruction. (Indeed, even in the symbolic and impressionistic terminology of Revelation, such an idea is absent in the entire book.) Rather, in keeping with the tenor of the New Testament, this text anticipates the ultimate redemption of the people of God in a renewed creation. Heaven and earth are joined in this new creation when the Lord God and the Lamb make their abiding presence among the redeemed people of God (Rev 21:22; 22:3).

**2 Peter 3:3–13**

Likewise, in 2 Peter the author brings a lengthy argument to a climax by claiming a promise that righteousness will dwell in new heavens and a new earth (2 Pet 3:13). But unlike Revelation, where the dominant theme is the contrast between idolatrous Rome and the people of God, in 2 Peter the major concern is to offer a series of rebukes to skeptics and deceivers, some of whom appear to be in the church. We learn in 2 Peter 3:3–4 that, on the basis of the stable course of the universe, even in the first century, scoffers were questioning the idea of the return of Christ. The writer responds that they do not understand the operation of the word of God (2 Pet 3:5–7). The world was created by the word of God (3:5); yet, subsequently it perished with the flood (3:6). In keeping with this same word, the present world will suffer a similar destruction by fire.[18] The fact that this destruction has not already taken place is due to the forbearance of the Lord, who patiently waits for repentance (3:8–10). But the day of accounting will come. In light of this

[18]The parallelism between the two destructions by flood and fire is striking. The Greek text of 2 Peter uses the same word groups for the parallel references to "word (of God)" in 3:5, 7 and 3:6, 7. Although the parallels clearly indicate that the created order suffers, even here the parallel focuses on the destruction of evil men in

promise, based on the word of God, one should heed the challenge to live a godly life (3:4–13).

In the course of making his argument about the destruction of the wicked, the author of 2 Peter makes strong statements about the end of the present order. While the translation of the NIV of 3:10b "and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare," is perhaps preferable to earlier renderings of the Greek text into English, a liberal amount of conflagration terminology remains.[19] In 3:7 we learn that the heavens and earth are stored up for fire. In 3:10 we are told that the heavens will pass away with a loud hissing and the elements will be dissolved by fire (cf. 3:12). One may well inquire about the scope and force of these descriptions.

The Bible often uses the image of a raging fire to describe God's judgment. The idea that this consuming fire may affect the creation itself emerges in texts as old as Genesis 19:24–28. Deuteronomy 32:22 speaks

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the flood and in the last day (cf. 3:7). Tord Fornberg, *An Early Church in a Pluralistic Society: A Study of 2 Peter* (*ConBNT* 9; Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1977), 67, also notes a close parallel with 1 Clement 27:4. Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (*WBC* 50; Waco: Word Books, 1983), 284–285 thinks that both 1 and 2 Clement draw from the same Jewish apocalypse used as a source by the author of 2 Pet 3:4–13. But we need not go this far. As Carsten Thiede, "A Pagan Reader of 2 Peter: Cosmic Conflagration in 2 Peter 3 and the Octavius of Minucius Felix," *JSNT* 26 (1986): 93 shows, the order of dependence and literary borrowing remains a very open question. What is clear is that the idea of cosmic conflagration was a much-discussed topic both in apocalyptic and pagan philosophical sources.

[19] The latter part of 2 Pet 3:10 quoted from the NIV conceals a classic *crux interpretum* of textual criticism. At issue is whether the Greek word in some manuscripts, translated "burned up" in the RSV, is the correct reading. Even my old teacher J.W. Roberts, "A Note on the Meaning of II Peter 3:10d," *RestQ* 6 (1962): 32–33, felt obliged to take up this question. The reading of the NIV has the advantage of underscoring an ironical point. Many biblical texts highlight the attempts of the wicked to conceal themselves from wrath on the Day of the Lord (Hosea 10:8; Rev 6:15–16). However, with the dissolving of the heavens everything that is done on earth will be open and visible for all to see. Cf. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 316–321. There is no place to hide.

metaphorically of God's anger against the faithlessness of his people consuming the earth to its very foundations. Similar terminology in Isaiah 34:4, 66:15–16; Zephaniah 1:18, 3:8–13, and Malachi 4:1–3 extends the metaphor to a cosmic level. Nevertheless, it is clear that the language in these passages is poetic, and it is generally recognized that there is no clear Old Testament prophecy of the annihilation of the cosmos.[20] However, when we come to the era that roughly overlaps the time of the New Testament, many systems of thought ranging from Persian religion, Stoic philosophy, and Jewish apocalyptic incorporated some version of cosmic conflagration.[21]

The issue for us is whether 2 Peter adopts a similar perspective. Although there are some linguistic overlaps, we believe that it is more likely that the author views himself in continuity with the Old Testament prophets. The old order will be radically renovated (as if purged by fire), but the earth will not be annihilated. This is in keeping with other texts in the New Testament. Matthew 3:11, 5:18, Hebrews 1:10–12, 12:18–29, 1 Peter 1:7 and 1 John 2:17 speak metaphorically of a coming end to the present order, but never of an annihilation of the creation. The two texts coming closest to the idea of destruction of the creation by fire are 1 Corinthians 3:13–16 and 2 Thessalonians 1:7–8. However, the former text teaches that the works of some believers will be consumed as by a refiner's fire, while the latter reference to the coming of Christ "with flaming fire" seems to be primarily a metaphor for his revelatory presence at the *parousia*.[22] Our analysis of 2 Peter 3 also casts doubt as to whether, even here, the language of conflagra-

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[20]Anton Vögtle, *Das Neue Testament und die Zukunft des Kosmos* (Dusseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1970), 133.

[21]Vögtle, *Die Zukunft des Kosmos* 133; cf. Aune, *Revelation* 17–22, 1117–1119.

[22] Abraham Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (Anchor Bible; New

tion should be taken literally.

Interpretation of the opaque language of 2 Peter 3 requires us to keep in mind its transparent parallel. God interrupted his benevolent creative sustenance of the world in Noah's day and the scoffers were destroyed by water. The scoffers of this age will perish likewise, this time by fire. While not central to the argument of 2 Peter 3, it is noteworthy that the flood did not annihilate the planet. We suggest that similarly the coming destruction by fire is not a direct reference to annihilation, but a metaphor for judgment (cf. 2 Pet 3:7d). The rhetoric, couched in Old Testament images of judgment, is sweeping and lofty. Isaiah even envisions the disappearance of the old order in cosmic terms. He sees the host of heaven rotting away and skies "rolled up like a scroll" (Isa 34:4). In this same world of thought 2 Peter speaks of the "heavenly bodies," *stoicheia*, finally dissolving in fire (2 Pet 3:10, 12). When it is all over the earth is still there. Only, the created order is transformed and renovated into something new.[23] This is not a statement about the physics of cosmology. It is language about the difference between the old order of this age and what will transpire at the return of Christ.[24] When it is all said and done we believe that 2 Peter is consistent with Revelation 21 and Romans 8. It claims that God's kingdom will one day come to full fruition in a restored creation. Then the scoffers and enemies will be routed.

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York: Doubleday, 2000), 399–400. The Greek word *palingenesia,* "regeneration," in Matt 19:28 describes the restoration at the end of the age. It was used by the Stoics to describe the rebirth of the world following its conflagration in the cosmic cycle, but the Matthean context is strongly Jewish, focusing on the vindication of Israel.

[23]Gale Z. Heide. "What is New about the New Heaven and the New Earth? A Ttheology of Creation from Revelation and 2 Peter 3," *JETS* 40 (1997): 50–54.

[24]Irenaeus saw this point clearly. See his work, *Against Heresies* 1.71 and 5.35.2–6.36.1. Others, like Justin Martyr, for philosophical reasons were more wary. For a discussion sympathetic towards the acceptance of ancient philosophical views on the cosmos by these apologists, see Thiede, "A Pagan Reader of 2 Peter," 79–96.

**Refocusing Our View of Heaven**

Our study shows that the hope for the new creation, first nourished in Israel, comes to light in Jesus Christ and reaches its apex at the last day. A central element of the new creation—the raising of the dead ones—has already begun in Jesus' death and resurrection.[25] After tasting the first-fruits of this new creation, Christians, the people of God of the last days, wait in joyful expectation for the full realization of God's new world. As is often pointed out, one of the best proofs of this hope is in the transformed life of the believer.

For Christians today, living in expectation of the new creation may well invite us to reevaluate some well-entrenched concepts about the life to come. Nowhere is this so evident as in our language about heaven. Encouraged by popular hymns, many Christian believers conceive of heaven as a place to which our souls, in the form of some material-like essence, retreat after we die. In this world we are foreigners. Death is the "blessed event" allowing us to return to the homeland. N. T. Wright wistfully notes that the language of "going to heaven" is so much a part of our culture (read the obituaries in your local newspaper) that it can be a counsel of despair to entertain hope for theological correction.[26]

Although this is not the place for detailed exposition on the afterlife, it may be helpful to note that the biblical idea of heaven is closer to the notion of a dimension of reality now partly hidden, only to be revealed fully at the appropriate time. In a brilliant image, Wright likens heaven to a parent in the

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[25]Stuhlmacher, "Behold . . . All Things New," 7, correctly stresses that although Christian hope stands in continuity with Israel's hope, the resurrection of Jesus decisively changes that hope.

[26]N. T. Wright, *New Heavens, New Earth: The Biblical Picture of Christian Hope* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1999), 23.

days before Christmas assuring the child that his gift is in a safe place and it will come to light at the appropriate time.[27] Theologically speaking, heaven refers not to a sanctuary beyond the cosmos, but to God's present dimension of reality, which he will bring to full realization with the renewal of all things in the resurrection at the last day (1 Thess 4:13–18; 1 Cor 15:51–56; Phil 3:20). In the meanwhile, believers who die in the Lord, given the gift of immortality, are in a state of peace with Christ as co-present (Phil 1:20–24).[28] But this is only a stepping-stone on the way to our ultimate transformation on the last day (2 Cor 5:1–10).

Thus, we return to Revelation 21:5. Corresponding with Romans 8:18–34, this text reminds us that God is "one who makes all things new." While always realizing that we are still creatures, we take heart that we are graced with the dignity of being partners with the Creator in the preparation of the creation for the blessed day when the kingdom incorporates and transforms the best of the present creation.[29] As we await that day we visibly manifest our faith by honoring God in both bodily service and nurturing of the created order. Thus in concert with another stanza of the Victorian hymn noted at the outset, we proclaim:

> But lo! There breaks a yet more glorious day;
> The Saints triumphant rise in bright array
> The King of glory passes on his way. Alleluia.

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[27] Wright, *New Heavens*, 7. See 1 Peter 1:4.

[28] Some may wish to be dismissive and correlate this argument with claims of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Contrary to biblical teaching, Jehovah's Witnesses understand there are two groups to be saved. They claim that one group, the 144,000, will be taken up to a place called heaven and reign eternally with God.

[29] Ted Peters, "Eschatology Full Strength," *Dialog* 40 (2001): 130.

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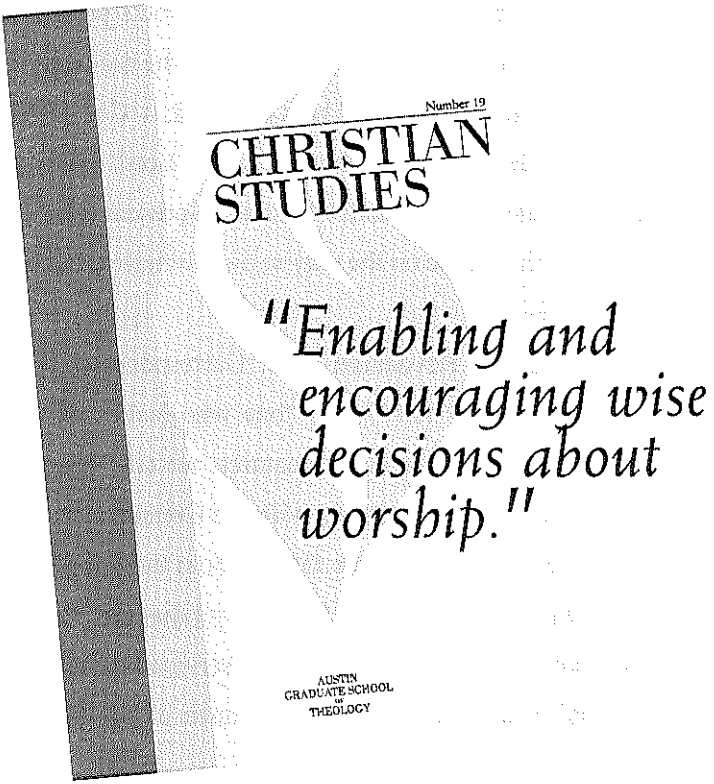
## *Christian Studies* 19




*"I believe that all of our denominational traditions are in deep crisis about the same issues. . . . I quite agree with the sympathy and tone of the articles in the issue (Christian Studies 19)."*

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