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Rethinking II Peter Three

Toward a More Expansive Understanding of the Eschaton

By

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Introduction

In this article we examine II Peter 3:7-13 and decide that the heavens and earth that were marked for destruction involved considerably more than merely Old Testament Judaism, Jerusalem, and the temple.

Early Preterist Perceptions

The modern preterist movement is very young; although we have learned much, we still have much to learn. We are still mining the depths of the language and imagery of the prophets and gaining a fuller comprehension of the meaning and significance of the eschaton. It is natural that we adjust our position as we learn it is imperfect or incorrect. One example of an area in need of correction is the tendency among early writers and expositors in the movement to explain everything about the eschaton in terms of Judaism and the Mosaic law. For example, at one time Max King spoke in terms of mankind's universal bondage to death finding its source in the Mosaic law, and the eschatological resurrection consisting in raising the "corporate body" of believers out of the dead body of Judaism. In retrospect, many now see that that these views were mistaken. Mankind's universal bondage to death had and *still has* its source in the law of sin and death, not the Mosaic law. The law of Moses was

merely superadded to the universal law of sin and death. The law of Moses bound only Jews; the law of sin and death tyrannizes all mankind. Removal of the Mosaic law did not destroy death. The law of sin and death still reigns over every man that obeys not the gospel of Christ. The "handwriting of ordinances which was against us" (Col. 2:14) and which Christ triumphed over in his cross was not the law of Moses, but the *debt* incurred by the law of sin and death; Christ redeemed us from the bond and debt of sin by his substitutionary death and atoning blood. Similarly, the eschatological resurrection was not the liberation of believers from the "dead body of Judaism," but the resurrection of the spirit or soul from Hades. (I Cor. 15:55; Rev. 20:11-15; cf. Matt. 16:18)

A humorous example of this tendency to explain everything in terms of Judaism and the destruction of Jerusalem occurred at a recent conference at which I was a speaker. A young man who obviously had come under the influence of King was passing out an article in which he attempted to explain casting death and hades into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:15) as the destruction of Judaism. Apparently, in his mind, to destroy Judaism was to destroy death and hades! I do not say this to pick on this promising young man or Max King. Not by any means. In forging a path through a wilderness, it is inevitable that we

sometimes err and have to retrace our steps. King was among the earliest writers on preterism; it was inevitable he make the mistakes pioneers make. But the point remains: there was a tendency among early writers to focus exclusively upon the Jewish aspect of the eschaton; to zero in on passing the Mosaic law and destruction of Jerusalem to the exclusion of all else. And this tendency was not limited to the source of death and the nature of the resurrection. It is also extant in notions about the interpretation of II Peter 3:7-13.

The Early Interpretation of II Pet. 3:7-13

II Pet. Three is one of the more difficult passages of scripture for many Christians to accept was fulfilled in the events culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Unfamiliar with the *usus loquendi* (manner of speaking) of the Old Testament prophets, there is a natural tendency to interpret Peter's language literally, as if the earth and its atomic elements are to be burned up.

But the day of the Lord shall come as a thief in the night; in the which 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. II Pet. 3:10

Recognizing the figurative nature of identical language in the Old Testament, preterists conclude that Peter must be understood in the identical way. (Cf. Isa. 13:6-13; 34:1-15; Jer. 4:23-26; Zeph. 1:2-4) The New Testament did not occur in a vacuum; the established method of speaking and prophesying did not suddenly cease and a new hermeneutic spring into existence at the cross; the same Spirit that spoke through the Old Testament prophets spoke through the apostles. This, coupled with passages which speak of Christ's second coming in the events marking the destruction of Jerusalem, caused early preterist writers to interpret the eschaton exclusively in terms of the dissolution of the Jewish state. Accordingly, the "elements" of II Pet. 3:7-13 became the precepts of the Mosaic law and the "heavens and earth," the world of Judaism, particularly the temple and city of Jerusalem. Similarly, the new heavens and earth were interpreted in terms exclusively of the New Testament kingdom and gospel. After all, didn't Paul refer to the Mosaic law and its calendar of feasts as the "elements of the world"? (Gal. 4:8-10; cf. Col. 2:16, 17, 20; Heb. 5:12; 6:1) Moreover, didn't the Jews see in the temple a type of heaven in the Most Holy place and the earth in its outer courts? And did not Jesus, sitting on the Mount of Olives overlooking the temple, say "heaven and earth shall

pass away, but my word shall not pass away"? And what about Matt. 5:18, didn't Jesus say "Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled," thus tying the passage of heaven and earth to the fulfillment and passing of the law? And finally, didn't God state that when he established the covenant at Sinai that he "planted the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth?" (Isa. 51:16) Isn't this proof that the heavens and earth must be construed covenantally, and II Peter interpreted exclusively in terms of the dissolution of Jerusalem and the Mosaic law? Well, maybe.

Critical Examination of the Proof Texts

A critical review of the above texts will show that they have sometimes been misused. Let us begin with Matt. 5:18. When I first became a preterist 25 years ago, I interpreted this passage much as described above. I thought Christ was tying the passage of the law to the passage of the "heavens and earth" and these, in turn, to the destruction of Jerusalem. This is pretty much the standard preterist interpretation today. However, I have come to view it differently. Hopefully, my present understanding is correct.

In saying "till heaven and earth pass away," Jesus was not employing a metaphor or engaging in veiled speech indicating that the passing of the old law would mark the passing of the heavens and earth. Rather, he is employing a figure of speech to show the impossibility that the law should pass before it was fulfilled. If we substitute a vulgar expression, which we are all familiar with, but which hopefully the Christian himself does not use, it will be easily seen that Jesus did not intend the language to be pressed too literally: "Till hell freezes over, one jot or tittle shall in no wise pass from the law till all be fulfilled." I think it is clear that in this sentence we do not intend to suggest that the fulfillment of the law would indicate hell had actually or figuratively frozen. Rather, we are employing a figure of speech to show that it is *easier* for hell to freeze than the law should fail. And this is precisely how Jesus uses the expression. In effect, Jesus says it is *easier* for heaven and earth to pass than for one jot or tittle of the law to fail except it *first* be fulfilled. And, in fact, he uses this exact phrase in Lk. 16:16, 17: "The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it. And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the law to fail." To press the literalness of Jesus' statement is to miss its meaning.

Matt. 5:18 has nothing to lend to the interpretation of II Pet. 3:7-13.

The same is true of Matt. 24:35. In the language of scripture, the sun, moon, earth and sky are synonymous with *permanence*. They are ordinances of God that cannot be removed. Consider the prophet Jeremiah:

“Thus saith the Lord, which giveth the sun for a light by day, and the ordinances of the moon and of the stars for a light by night, which divideth the sea when the waves thereof roar; the Lord of hosts is his name: If those ordinances depart from before me, saith the Lord, then the seed of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before me for ever. Thus saith the Lord; if the heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off all the seed of Israel for all that they have done, saith the Lord.” Jer. 31:35-37

In this passage the Lord compares the permanence of the heavenly bodies to his irrevocable purpose to bring back a remnant from captivity and so bring Christ into the world. And, indeed, he never has cast off *all* the seed of Israel. Even in destroying the nation in A.D. 70, a remnant was preserved, just as he foretold. (Rom. 9:29; 11:5) Another example of evoking the heavens to show the certainty of God’s word is Ps. 89:36, 37, where the writer says that the throne of David and his seed shall “endure for ever, and his throne as the sun before me. It shall be established for ever as the moon, and as a faithful witness in heaven.” Hence, in saying, “heaven and earth shall pass away, but my word shall not pass away,” Christ is not making an enigmatic reference to the temple. He is simply saying that it is easier for earth to vanish than his predictions to fail. He wanted his disciples to understand that he spoke with the perfect authority of the word of God; that his word was established in heaven and did not rest upon the fickle fortune and changing winds of human earth and sky. To search for hidden meanings is to miss the point.

What about reference to the ordinances of the Mosaic law as the “elements of the world;” doesn’t this accord with Peter saying the “elements” would be dissolved with fervent heat? We think not.

In Galatians, Paul refers to the time of man’s tutelage under the law as being in bondage under the elements of the world.

“Now I say, That the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all; but is under tutors and governors until the

time appointed of the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.” (Gal. 4:1-5)

It is almost universally assumed that the bondage Paul avers to is the bondage of tutelage under the law, and that the tutors and governors are equated with the elements of the world. However, this seems plainly mistaken. Paul also speaks of the Gentiles being in bondage to the elements of the world in worshipping celestial bodies, philosophy, and assorted commandments of men. (Gal. 4:8-10; Col. 2:8-22) Unless we are prepared to say that Paul somehow equated the Mosaic law with idolatry, philosophy, and commandments of men, the elements to which Paul refers *must* be understood in reference to something other than the Mosaic law. In other words, if $A = B$ and $C = B$ then $A = C$. If the law equals the elements, and worship of idols and celestial bodies equals the elements, then the law equals worship of idols, *etc.* Since it is very unlikely Paul would equate the law with idolatry, the only alternative is that he did not intend to equate the Mosaic law with elements of the world. Hence, we submit that the ordinances of the law were the tutors and governors assigned to teach men while they were under the elements, but were not the elements themselves.

In this section of Galatians, Paul treats of two groups: servants and heirs. The Jews were deemed heirs, the Gentiles servants. The Gentiles had no inheritance in the Father’s house, the Jews did. The Jews were putative heirs by virtue of the promise to Abraham. (Gal. 4:14-18; *cf.* Rom. 4:13) However, the promised inheritance would come through Christ, not the law. The period from Abraham to Christ is likened by Paul to childhood or minority. During this period, the law was appointed as tutor and governor of the Jews to lead them to Christ. (Gal.3:24) The Gentiles, being servants, were in bondage under the elements of the world and the law of sin and death; the Jews were also under bondage as putative heirs as long as they continued in their minority. Paul indicated as much when he said “the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant.” Israel’s condition of bondage is pursued further by Paul in the allegory about Hagar and Sarah. (Gal. 4:24-34) The point of both analogies is that the Jews had no better standing in right of law than a servant, whether considered from the point of view of their minority or their fleshly descent. Either way, they were under

bondage together with the Gentiles. Now, although the law was appointed as tutor during the Jews' infancy and bondage, it did not make them such. Rather, the Jews were infants, equal in right of law to bond-servants, *by nature*. Gentiles were also under bondage *by nature*. Man obtained his carnal nature by inheritance from Adam. Unregenerate man - whether Jew or Gentile - is in bondage to the law of sin and death through the *elemental forces* of his fallen nature. Although divinely ordained, the Mosaic law was powerless to deliver from these because it was impossible that the blood of bulls and goat take away sins. (Heb. 10:4) Since it could not save from sin, to keep the law was to be in bondage under the weak and beggarly elements of our own fallenness; "weak and beggarly" not in terms of their dominion over man (for to the sons of Adam their power was complete and their bondage unbreakable), but in comparison with the redeeming blood of Christ, the second Adam (over whom they had no power at all). Thus, Paul reproaches the Galatians, saying,

"Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods. But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire to be in bondage? Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years." Gal. 4:8-10

The phrase "turn again" is very important. Paul is writing to Gentiles that *had never been under the law*. This proves conclusively that the elements of the world are not a reference to the ordinance of the law. Rather, it was in serving idols and celestial bodies ("them which by nature are not gods") that the Galatians had been under the elements of the world. Man's bondage to the elemental forces of his fallenness made him obey the passions of sin in his flesh; this in turn brought him into bondage under the law of sin and death. Having been freed from that bondage by obedience to the gospel, Paul asks how the Galatians could return to their former servitude. Not by returning to worship of idols or celestial bodies, but by keeping the law ("ye observe days, and months, and times, and years"), rather than relying upon grace and obedience to Christ. Thus, it may be seen that the elements of the world refers not to the Mosaic law, but to the rudimentary forces of man's carnality and fallenness; the natural laws operating upon his flesh and mind, bringing him into captivity to the law of sin which is in his members. (Rom. 7:23) Paul's letter to the Ephesians is to the same effect:

"And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others." Eph. 2:1-3

"Prince of the power of the air" (*Gk. - ton arxontes exousias tou aeros*) is not a demonic being, but the invisible forces of the natural world, the elemental forces of nature and natural law that govern physical bodies and natural man. The "course of this world" (*Gk. - ton aiona tou kosmou toutou*) refers to the patterns of human life and conduct determined by mankind's fallenness, his "conversation in the lusts of the flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind." The "present evil age" (Gal. 1:4) was not the Mosaic law, but the whole epoch marked by the dominion of sin and death, beginning from mankind's fall unto the eschaton. Death reigned from Adam to Moses. (Rom. 5:14) During that period, all men were subject to the course and elements of the world; the whole creation - both Jew and Gentile - groaned and travailed in pain under the bondage of corruption, waiting for the redemption that would accrue to believers' benefit at the eschaton. (Rom. 8:19-23) To receive the adoption of sonship, believers had to remain faithful to Christ, and not look to other systems that could not deliver. Thus, Paul warned the Colossians:

"Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ." Col. 2:8

The term "rudiments" here is from the Greek *stoicheia*; the same word is rendered "elements" in Galatians. Paul's mention of philosophy is a plain reference to the Greek and Roman philosophical schools and traditions. This is further proof that elements are not a reference to the law. Philosophy is not after the law of Moses, but the rudiments of the world and tradition of men. The world's systems of religious error find their source in the elemental forces of man's fallen nature - the motions of sin in his flesh - not the law. Paul admonishes the Colossians to beware not to look outside of Christ for soteriological perfection. Believers are complete in Christ and lack nothing to make them acceptable before God. (Col. 2:10) Christ spoiled the principalities and powers (elemental forces) in his cross by canceling the debt of sin. (Col. 2:14, 15)

Hence, believers are not to allow themselves to be brought back into bondage by obedience to other systems, whether the law *or* pagan philosophies:

“Let no therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days: which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ...Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (touch not; taste not; handle not; which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men?” (Col. 2:16-22)

Paul’s reference to the law in new moons and Sabbath days is clear enough; the other ordinances Paul describes are forms of false asceticism common to sects among both Jews and Gentiles, self imposed rules of abstinence and self-abnegation from things indifferent in themselves; rules which sprang from man’s own fallenness, which can not deliver from sin, and whose observance therefore can only bring enslavement again to sin. The believer’s true self-denial was to rest in Christ and abstain from sin and worldly lusts, not food and drink. Christians were to flee these vain deceits because all such things would be consumed at the eschaton, even though found in the church:

“For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stone, wood, hay, stubble; every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is. If any man’s work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man’s works shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.” I Cor. 3:11-15

Paul states that the work of men laboring in the gospel would be tested by the fiery persecutions and calamitous events of the eschatological day; the stuff that men were made of – the type and quality of material they were instructed with and built upon – would be made apparent; either men would be purified and refined like gold and silver, or they would be consumed like wood, hay, and stubble; these latter belonging to the “elements of the world,” the former to the hidden treasures of God in Christ. (Col. 2:3; Rev. 3:18) Peter, whose discourse on the eschaton we are discussing, alludes to the fiery trial of the eschatological day in exactly the same terms: “That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.” (I Pet. 1:7; cf.

4:12) Were the fires that would try the church different from the fires that would cause the elements to melt and the heavens to be dissolved? Not at all; they were the very same; both spoke to the historical events that would come upon the world at the eschaton. The difference lay only in the result: some would survive, some would perish. To survive one needed to be firmly rooted in Christ, not the soil of human tradition and commandments of men. (Cf. Matt. 13:21)

If the elements of the world do not speak to Jerusalem and the Mosaic law, what did Isaiah mean when he said God planted the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth at Sinai? The short answer is that the prophet did not refer to Sinai, but the return of the captivity from Babylon:

“For the Lord shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places; and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord...Therefore the redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy shall be upon their had: and they shall obtain gladness and joy; and sorrow and mourning shall flee away...The captive exile hasteneth that he may be loosed, and that he should not die in the pit, nor that his bread should fail. But I am the Lord thy God, that divided the sea, whose waves roared: The Lord of hosts is his name. And I have put my words in thy mouth, and I have covered thee in the shadow of mine hand, that I may plant the heavens, and lay the foundations of the earth, and say unto Zion, thou art my people.” Isa. 51:3, 11, 14-16

Reference to “dividing the waves” does not place this at Sinai; God refers to the exodus to show that, as he formerly delivered the nation from out of Egypt, so he would bring them from captivity in Babylon and Assyria. “Planting the heavens” is a poetic reference to repopulating the land by sowing it with the seed of men; “laying the foundations of the earth” describes the rebuilding of the waste and desolate places; the cities left uninhabited when their peoples were taken into captivity. This is easily seen by a simple comparison of similar passages. (Cf. Jer. 31:27; Ezek. 36:33, 36; Hos. 2:23)

We have now surveyed all the traditional proof texts. As we have seen, they have all have been misinterpreted and misapplied. To be sure, we apprehended their meaning in part (or, as the apostle would say, “through a glass darkly”), but not clearly or in whole. Hence, we construed II Peter three *wrongly*. The language is figurative, yes! But much more was involved than merely Judea, Jerusalem, and the law. These were at the center of the eschaton

because they were at the center of God's plan of redemption, but we would be very mistaken to so circumscribe Christ's second coming as to exclude the rest of the inhabitable world. As we shall see, the eschaton was universal in its meaning and affect. The elements that melted at Christ's coming entailed the fashion of the whole world.

The Universal Impact and Affect of the Eschaton

The Eschaton in Daniel

The universal nature of the eschaton is nowhere more apparent than in Nebuchadnezzar's dream:

Thou sawest till that a stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon his feet that were of iron and clay, and brake them to pieces. Then was the iron, the clay, the brass, the silver, and the gold, broken to pieces together, and became like the chaff of the summer threshingfloors; and the wind carried them away, that no place was found for them: and the stone that smote the image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth. Dan. 2:34, 35

Nebuchadnezzar's dream depicted Christ coming in his kingdom with power. The affect would be world-wide; except insofar as included incidentally as part of the fourth world empire, the Jews, the temple, and Jerusalem are not so much as alluded to. Daniel does speak to the destruction of the Jewish state in subsequent chapters, but in chapter two the inhabited world is in view. The import of the dream is that the world was on a collision course with the risen Savior; the whole edifice of human government, religion, and culture would be dashed to pieces by the iron scepter of the ruling Christ and forever swept away. A new world order would rise from the rubble; the gospel would become the standard against which every institution of man was measured. What Peter said would be consumed by fire, Nebuchadnezzar's dream portrayed as chaff that the wind carried away. The visions are the same; only the language and imagery are changed.

In chapter seven, Daniel spoke of the eschaton under other images and symbols. There, four successive world empires that would obtain until the time of the end are portrayed in the form of four beasts. The fourth beast is imperial Rome; its ten horns are the ten provinces of the Roman empire. The vision tells of another "little horn" that rose up in the midst of the provinces and persecuted the saints, who were delivered into its hand for a "time, times, and half a time;" viz., three and a half years. (Dan. 7:21-25) The little horn was defeated by the coming of the

Ancient of Days. (v. 22) The beast was destroyed and its body given to the burning; and the time came when the saints possessed the kingdom. (vv. 11, 27) The little horn is best interpreted as the three and half year persecution under Nero; the coming of the Ancient of Days is Christ's second coming. The burning of the beast answers to Christ consuming the Man of Sin with the breath of his mouth in II Thess. 2:18. In Revelation, the persecution of Nero is portrayed under the symbol of the invading army of Gog and Magog; the persecution ends when God sends fire from heaven and consumes Gog laying siege to the church. (Rev. 20:7-9; cf. 19:20, 21)

In all of these passages, the fire that destroyed the enemies of Christ answers to the eschatological fire of II Pet. 3:10. The fire is the same. The persecution under Nero was world wide: the false prophet (Jewish ecclesiastical powers) led the persecution in *Judea* and *Palestine*; the harlot (Jerusalem and Jewry) drove the persecution throughout *Asia* where she is portrayed riding a scarlet colored beast; and Nero waged war against the saints in *Rome*. The world wide nature of the eschatological war against Christ and the church is proof positive that the eschatological fire of II Pet. 3:10 was also world wide, and not limited to merely Judea. In Judea, Christ's coming would result in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple; Asia suffered earthquakes, famine and disease; Rome and Italy were ravaged by plague, famine and civil war. No part of the empire was untouched.

Other Old Testament prophets that spoke to the universal nature of the eschaton include Ezekiel, Joel, Micah, and Zechariah. (Ezek. 38, 39; Joel 3; Mic. 4:3, 11-13; Zech. 12:3; 14:12) The Psalmist makes express reference to the universal nature of the Messiah's coming when he states:

Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad; let the sea roar, and the fulness thereof. Let the field be joyful, and all that is therein: then shall all the trees of the wood rejoice before the Lord: for he cometh, for he cometh to judge the earth: he shall judge the world with righteousness, and the people with his truth." Ps. 96:11-13; cf. 98:9

New Testament Verses Showing the Universal Nature of the Eschaton

Matt. 25:31-41 – "When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall

he sit upon the throne of his glory: And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats.”

J. Stuart Russell attempted to explain this passage by saying that “all nations” meant all the tribes of Israel. But his argument was unconvincing. To make this apply only to Judea and the Jews is forced and artificial. The passage is much more consistent with a world-wide judgment at the eschaton than just the Jews.

Acts 17:31 - “Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.”

Paul was in Athens when he made this prediction. He is not here speaking about the judgment of the dead, nor of Palestine, but the world (*Grk. oikoumenen – inhabitable world; viz., the Roman empire*). The coming day of judgment would envelope the whole Roman empire, and not just Jerusalem, Judea, and Galilee. We might comment here that in discussing the “little apocalypse” of Isa. 24-29, preterists generally interpret the “earth” that is there made desolate and bare (Isa. 24:12) in terms only of Judah and Israel. However, the fact is often overlooked that in the nine preceding chapters the prophet described God’s judgment upon Moab (Isa. 15, 16), Syria and Israel (Isa. 17), Ethiopia (Isa. 18), Egypt (Isa. 19, 20), Babylon, Dumah and Arabia (Isa. 21), Judah (Isa. 22), and Tyre. (Isa. 23) Thus, the judgment spoken of in the little apocalypse was *world-wide*; chapter twenty-four merely summarizes the judgments that overtook the ancient world in the preceding chapters.¹

The ax in God’s hand and razor by which he would shave the world of its inhabitants was Assyria. (Isa. 7:20; 10:12, 15) Assyria was like a rending storm and overwhelming scourge that would pass through the land, leveling all in its path. The Jews thought they would escape; they thought they had a covenant with death (Assyria) and with hell were in agreement. (Isa. 28:15) Ahaz had taken the gold and silver found

in the temple and the treasures of the king’s house, and sent them for a present to the king of Assyria (II Kng. 16); Hezekiah paid the king of Assyria three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold; he even stripped off the gold from the doors of the temple, and from the pillars, to pay to the king of Assyria to conclude a treaty of peace. (II Kng. 18:13-16) The Jews thought that they would thus escape God’s judgment by the Assyrians. But God said he would annul their agreement with Assyria and they would be trodden down when the overwhelming scourge passed through the land; as in fact came to pass. (Isa. 28:18) Furthermore, what the Assyrians failed to accomplish, the Babylonians would complete.

God’s judgment in carrying the nation into captivity under the Assyrians and Babylonians was typical of the eschatological judgment under Rome when the nation would suffer ultimate and irrevocable destruction. Hence, prophecies of the coming salvation in Jesus are interwoven throughout the little apocalypse, showing it has another, plenary application that would be fulfilled in the days of the Messiah. (Isa. 25:8; 26:19; 28:16) But the point we want to make here is that, just as the judgment of the little apocalypse by Assyria brought within its sweep the whole world of ancient man, so the eschatological judgment would not be limited to Jerusalem and Palestine. All men would feel the rod of Christ’s correction.

Rom. 1:18 - “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness.”

Rom. 2:8, 9 - “But unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile.”

These verses make plain that the coming day of wrath was directed against *all men*; to the Jew first and *also the Gentile*. No nation was immune or would escape.

I Cor. 7:29, 31 – “But this I say, brethren, the time is short...for the fashion of this world passeth away.”

Here Paul indicates that the very form and fashion of the world (*kosmos*) was destined to “pass away” at the eschaton. It was not merely the Jew’s world that would vanish forever, but the world as it had been known to mankind from the time of the fall. No more would sin and death reign; Christ reigned and

¹ It is possible that the devastations described reach to the Persian empire inasmuch as the day of the Lord against Babylon by the Medes is spoken of in chapters 13 and 14, immediately preceding the catalogue of nations surveyed from chapters 15-23.

would henceforth bend the world to his word and his will.

II Thess. 2:8 – “And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming.”

The “Wicked” (man of sin and son of perdition) is a reference to Nero. This verse states that Christ would destroy Nero with the brightness of his coming. This means that Christ’s coming reached to Rome and was not limited to Palestine. It also shows that Christ came in the events of A.D. 67-70, and not A.D. 70 alone.

Rev. 1:7 – “Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen.”

This contemplates considerably more than just the judgment of Palestine and the Jews. *All kindreds* of the earth would witness the kingdom coming in power.

Space does not permit a fuller presentation, but these few should do. Can anyone seriously claim that the eschaton encompassed only Jerusalem, Judea, and Galilee?

The New Heavens and Earth

Those who see only the destruction of Jerusalem and old covenant Israel in II Pet. 3:10 tend to construe the new heavens and earth in the same overly narrow terms. Typically, the new heavens and earth are thought to represent the New Testament. However, this is mistaken. If the new heavens and earth are the New Testament, only those obeying the gospel would dwell there. But this is not the case. Revelation clearly depicts the lost dwelling in the new heavens and earth, outside the city. It is the city that represents the covenantal habitation of the saints; “without are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie.” (Rev. 22:15) The fact that unregenerate men inhabit the new heavens and earth proves conclusively that they are *not* symbols of the New Testament. But if they are not the New Testament, what are they?

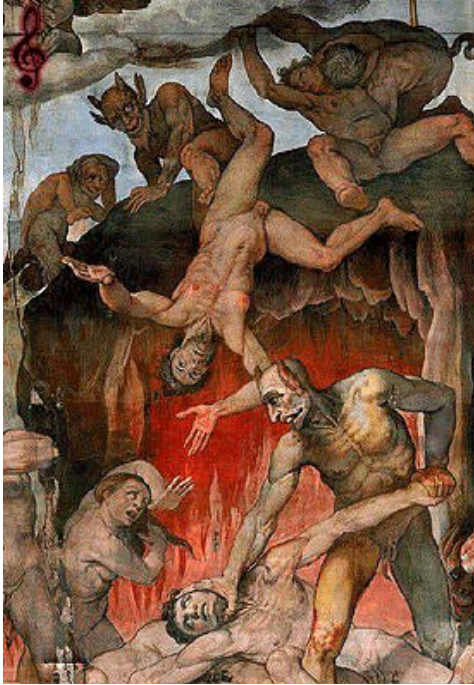
After the eschatological destruction wrought upon the heavens and earth of old, God did not leave it a ruin and desolation; he renewed and restored it. After the

flood, God made a new heavens and earth; after the destruction of the ancient world by the armies of Assyria and Babylon, God made a new heavens and earth; and now, after the eschatological destruction of the inhabitable world, God renewed it again. “And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new.” (Rev. 21:5) The promise that God shall wipe away every tear, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying “for the former things are passed away” (v. 4) is directed only to God’s people (v. 3), and then speaks only to a cessation of the calamities and persecutions that marked the eschaton. It is not a promise that all troubles would be swept away for all time. Common experience proves that this is true. Similar language occurred after the captivity in Babylon and carried similar import. (Isa. 35:10; 51:11; 65:19)

The only thing expressly stated to be different about the new heavens and earth from the old is that John saw no more sea, and the new Jerusalem, having come down out of heaven, reigned in its midst. The lack of the sea in the new earth is suggestive of free and unhampered access to the city of God. Seas are natural barriers and served to separate the nations of men. Moreover, in Revelation, the sea represents the Gentiles of the Mediterranean world; the land represented Judea. In the new earth, the distinction between Jew and Gentile is gone. All men are invited into the presence of God within the city (the church); all approach the throne of grace on equal terms. The gates of the city are always open, inviting all to enter and partake of living water and the tree of life – the word of God and gospel of Christ. The presence of God that had been lost through the fall of Adam is restored to man in the church. Language in Isaiah about the wolf and the lamb feeding together, the lion eating straw like the bullock, and the longevity of infants and old men speaks to the peaceable kingdom, the church – Zion and new Jerusalem - not the new heavens and earth. (Isa. 65:19-25)

Conclusion

Although correctly interpreting the language of II Pet. 3:7-15 symbolically and not predicting the literal destruction of all that exists, we have tended to interpret it in overly narrow terms. The eschaton involved more than the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple; it brought the entire inhabitable world within its sweep.



Christ Spoiled the Principalities and Powers of Sin and Death in His Cross

this term (Gen. 49:1 *et seq.*), Balaam foretold the destruction of “Heber” (the Hebrews) by ships from “Chittim” (Rome), placing it in the “latter days” (Num. 24:14 *et seq.*), and Daniel was told what would “befall thy people in the latter days.” (Dan. 10:14) Use of the term in the New Testament (*e.g.*, Tim. 4:1) must be read in the context of the impending destruction of the Jewish state and consummation of the ages when Jesus would come in power and glory as he foretold the Sanhedrin. (Mk. 14:62; *cf.* 9:1; Matt. 16:27, 28) There simply is no scriptural premise upon which to base application of the term “latter days” to the present era. Christians live in the new heavens and earth, the “age of ages” and a “world without end.” (Eph. 3:21) Milton Terry’s comments on the term are worth considering:

“The seventh trumpet, as we understand this book, is the symbolic signal of the end of the old dispensation and the consequent beginning of the new era of the kingdom of Christ on earth (comp. xi, 15). But the Old Testament prophets contemplated the appearance of the Messiah and the going forth of the new word of Jehovah as occurring “in the end of the days” – that is, the last days of the eon or dispensation under which they were living...This “end of the times” belongs, not to the era of the new dispensation, but to the concluding days of the old...It is a serious error, therefore, when learned exegetes persist in assuming that the phrase “the last days,” as employed in the Scriptures, means the period of the new Christian dispensation.” (Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Apocalypics*, p. 361)

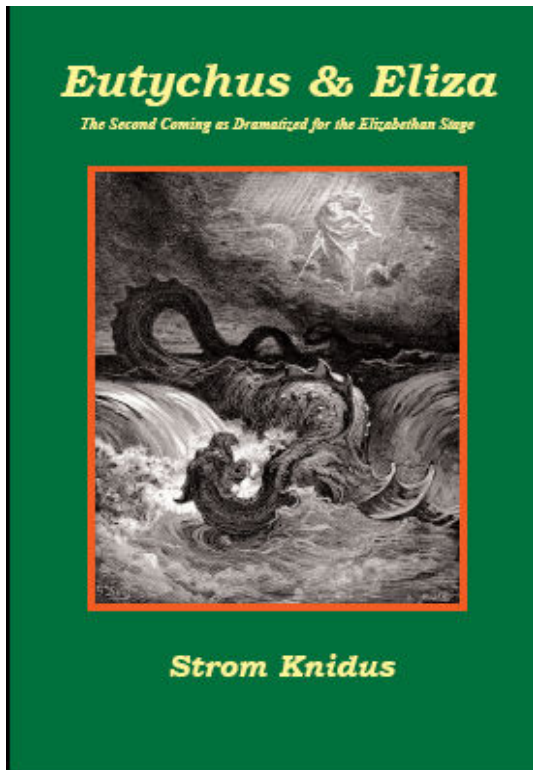
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Questions & Answers

Q: Are we living in the “latter days?”

A: No. The phrase “the latter days” is used exclusively of the period culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem, the Jewish state, and the Mosaic age in A.D. 70. This is easily demonstrated by resort to Old Testament usage of the term. Without fail, the “last days,” or “latter days” was used in reference to the destruction of national Israel. Thus, Jacob foretold the end of the 12 tribes using



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Cultural Pressures And the Role Of Women In The Church

Kurt Simmons

Today's woman is the legal, political and economic equal of man. The equality today's woman enjoys in many areas of life naturally tends to overflow into the home and church. The career woman who daily wields authority and influence in the work force is unlikely to find it easy to play the submissive wife at

home. Probably few American wives can say with honesty that they obey from the heart the commandment to be subject to their husbands as the church is unto Christ. (Eph. 5:22-24) Probably few American wives hold their husbands in the respect and reverence their counterparts did a hundred years or so ago. Likewise, the command for women to be silent in assemblies of the church is largely nonexistent. Today's woman participates equally in Bible discussion and offers her opinion without hesitation. The suggestion that she is to be under obedience and learn in silence (I Cor. 14:34; I Tim. 2:11,112) is met with astonishment and disbelief. In many places, the day of the "men's business meeting" is a thing of the past and the number of churches permitting women to give announcements, lead singing, and participate audibly in congregational prayer is on the rise. What is more, it is becoming increasingly common for women to be featured speakers in college lectureships and church related programs. This month's article will thus look at the biblical doctrines of male headship and the limitations scripture places upon women in church.

Male Headship And Creation

Churches attempting to expand the role of women in the church are immediately confronted with the principle of male headship in the home and

church. The position of teacher carries with it a certain amount of authority. A woman cannot be set over the man as a teacher or leader without being in authority over him, thereby subverting and annulling the principle of male headship. Most advocates of increased roles for women attempt to avoid this problem by arguing that male headship was merely a cultural anomaly of earlier times that has no basis in the Christian church. Yet, as we shall see, the headship of man began at the creation and has continued unbroken through every age and generation. It is not merely a culture preference; it is a divine command.

The headship of man began with Adam. Adam was given power or authority to name the other creatures in the garden: "and whatsoever Adam called every living creature that was the name thereof." (Gen. 2:19) It was by his process of naming the animals that God caused Adam to become aware of his lack of a suitable mate. God thus made Eve and brought her to Adam. "And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." (Gen. 2:23) Thus, just as it had been given unto Adam to name the other creatures of God, so it was given him to name Eve. The power to name another is generally held by one in authority over the person or thing to be named. For example, God changed the names of Abram and Jacob to Abraham and Israel, respectively. (Gen. 17:5; 32:28) God could do this because of his authority over Abraham and Jacob. In the same way, Adam's power to name Eve implies he had authority and was set over her. A similar implication arises from the fact that after the fall God "called unto Adam" (Gen. 3:9) and examined him regarding the circumstances of the couple's sin. God addressed Adam because Adam was responsible for the welfare of his home and wife, and was charged with the responsibility of teaching them God's law and seeing that it was obeyed. The authority and responsibility God placed in Adam is true of all men. Every man is charged to take leadership over the woman and the home.

In consequence of their sin, God told the woman "thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." (Gen. 3:16) This phrase occurs only twice in scripture. Here, and in Genesis 4:7 where it is used in reference to sin's desire to dominate man. When Cain saw that his offering was not respected, his countenance fell. (Gen. 4:5) God then said to Cain "If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. *And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over*

him." (v. 7, emphasis added) The obvious import of this passage is that the "desire" of sin was to rule over Cain, but Cain was charged to rule over sin. So it would seem to be with woman: Sin upset the established order of nature. Woman was made to complement man. He was aggressive, she was passive. By sin's entering in, she would no longer naturally be submissive to her husband but would become self-willed and desire to rule over him. However, God told Eve that His design for creation was to be preserved: The husband was to rule over the wife. Thus we see that from the very first male headship was the order established of God.

Male Headship And The Law

The principle of male headship also finds expression in numerous customs of national Israel and ordinances of the mosaic law. For example, women were not *sui juris* (of her own legal right), but were under the *coverture* of their fathers, husbands or other male guardian who had power over their legal affairs, including vows and choice of husband. A woman had no power to contract debts or other legal obligations but that they were subject to disallowance by her husband or father. Only if she was a widow or divorced was a woman *sui juris* and possessed of power to make vows, choose whom she would marry, etc. (Num. 30:3-9; Ruth 3:10) Other incidents of male headship are seen in the fact that the sign of the covenant (circumcision) was put in the man, not in the woman. Moreover the tribes of Israel were named for the sons, not daughters, of Israel, and the right of inheritance was reposed in sons. It is worthy also of note that the priesthood was exclusively male, and the women were even segregated from the males in worship of God. In the synagogues, women were also segregated from men, and were not permitted to speak or read aloud from the scriptures. Instances of women leading the nation (*i.e.*, Deborah) are characterized as a reproach upon the men for failing to fulfill their God given role. Thus the prophet Isaiah reproaches Israel saying "As for my people, children are their oppressors, and women rule over them." (Isa. 3:12)

Incidents of male headship in the laws and customs of Israel cannot be passed off as merely cultural anomalies. Such laws and customs had their roots in the Creator's order established in the garden and the decree that the husband rule over the wife. While certain customs may have been unique to Jewish life and history, the underlying principle of male headship that gave birth to them is valid for every age and people and should be honored accordingly.

Male Headship And The New Testament

In I Corinthians 11:1-16, Paul addresses a problem within the church regarding women praying and prophesying without covering the head with a veil. The veil was a sign of woman's submissiveness and of a man's power over his wife and daughters. (v. 10) Thus, by removing the veil, the Corinthian women were wittingly or unwittingly disclaiming their husbands' and fathers' authority over them. Although Paul concedes that the church itself has no official custom requiring a woman to wear a veil (v. 16), he urges them to honor their husbands and fathers by adhering to the tradition of wearing veils lest they scandalize the church and dishonor their head: "But I would have you to know that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God. Every man praying or prophesying having his head covered, dishonoreth his head. But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoreth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven." (I Cor. 11:3-5)

Note that Paul unequivocally affirms male headship over the woman, of which the veil was merely a cultural expression. Although the veil may come and go, the underlying principle of male headship endures. Thus, Paul writes in Ephesians 5:22-24: "Wives, submit yourselves unto you own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the savior of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing." As long as Christ is head of the church, the man is head of the woman and the wife is to be subject to her husband.

It is sometimes argued or assumed that the Corinthian women were praying and prophesying in the church and that Paul approves of this, provided she dons a veil as a sign of her subjection. However, this position is not supported by the text. Nowhere does the text indicate the situation Paul addresses concerns assemblies of the church. Indeed, in chapter fourteen, Paul expressly prohibits women to speak in church assemblies. Therefore, the better view is that Paul here is speaking to the women's conduct in other contexts.

Obedience And Silence Enjoined

After addressing the problem regarding male headship and the wearing of veils in chapter 11:1-16, in verse 17 Paul turns to problems occurring in

assemblies of the church. Because verse 17 is the first of numerous references to the church's coming together (vv. 18,20,33,34; 14:4,19,23,24,26,28,34,35), it is generally accepted that chapters 11:17-14:40 have a common thread. Although Paul will make several "asides" in the course of his discussion, appropriate conduct in the church's assembly is the common theme running through all.

Chapter fourteen, is devoted primarily to correcting problems concerning abuses of spiritual gifts in the church's assembly. Paul does not want the Corinthians all speaking in tongues simultaneously, but by turns, and then only if there is present one who can interpret. If not, they are to be silent. (vv. 27,28) Likewise, prophets are to speak by turn, while the others remain silent. (vv. 29,30) In verses 34-37, Paul prohibits women from public utterances in the assembly: "Let your woman keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also sayeth the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church. What came the word of God out from you" or came it unto you only? If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord."

The context of chapter fourteen is abuses of spiritual gifts in the assemblies of the church. Hence, not even inspired utterances were permitted the women, but they were to remain in silence. Questions concerning things taught or said were to be kept for home. Note that Paul appeals to the law in saying that woman are to be silent and under obedience. This is important because it establishes continuity between what Paul says here and what was enjoined by the mosaic law and the order established at creation. The church is the new creation and the original order of things is to be honored and restored. The church is the successor of the synagogue and, just as women were not allowed to read or speak in the synagogue, a similar rule obtains here. In saying, "What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only?" (v. 36), Paul points out that the Lord chose men, not women, to be his apostles and to publish his word. Moreover, the message of the gospel did not come only to women, as if it depended upon them to be taught or spread. As it had come to men who were capable to speak the word, there was no excuse for women to usurp this role. Hence, women were/are to be silent in church.

In response to this it is sometimes argued that Paul enjoins only a particular type of speech; *viz.*, that in saying she is prohibited "to speak" (I Cor. 14:34), Paul means that she is merely prohibited to be *the speaker*. However, this argument is without merit. Paul also expressly prohibited women from asking questions in the assembly, but to save them for home. Thus, clearly more is contemplated here than a mere prohibition against public preaching or teaching. Rather, she is to learn in silence.

Teaching And Preaching Prohibited

Paul's first epistle to Timothy charges Timothy with correcting problems that had erupted at the church in Ephesus. Among the issues Paul addresses is the proper dress and demeanor of women claiming to be servants of God: "In like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; but (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works. Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety." (I Tim. 2:9-15)

Modesty and submissiveness are the most attractive qualities of the fairer sex. Paul thus exhorts women to adorn themselves in the manner that is pleasing to God, and not according to the world's standards. Peter says substantially the same thing. (I Pet. 3:1-6) The woman is not to be a teacher of men. She is a teacher of other women and of children. (Tit. 2:2-5; cf. II Tim. 1:5) In saying that she will be saved in childbearing, Paul indicates that women must not suppose that their salvation depends upon being a preacher or teacher of men. A woman's salvation lies not in acting out the roles God has assigned the man, but in the faithful performance of the duties of a wife and mother. Here, as in I Corinthians 11:1-16, Paul bases his injunction, not upon culture, but upon creation and the fall. The apostle's reference to the fact that Adam was formed first, then Eve, goes to the order of God's creation. First in time is first in authority. In a manner similar to the authority of the firstborn son over the rest of the family upon the father's demise, so man being made first has authority over woman. Moreover, as Paul said in I Corinthians

11:9, man was not made for the woman, but woman for the man.

The tradition of permitting women to participate verbally in assemblies of the church for Bible class seems to violate the ordinance that she learn in silence and keep her questions for a private setting (*i.e.*, ask her husband at home). In answer to this it is sometimes said that the word silence here is merely attitudinal, and does not imply the absence of all speech. However this seems plainly false. The Greek word used here is *hesuchia* - *stillness, i.e., a distance from bustle or language; quietness, silence*. The same term is used in the identical manner in Acts 22:2 where the mob, when they heard Paul make his defense in the Hebrew tongue, "kept the more silence" (*i.e.*, stopped shouting and listened quietly). In the same manner, in assemblies of the church women are to listen and learn in silence.

One of the objections of the nonclass churches is/was that there is no scriptural distinction between the "worship" assembly and other assemblies of the church (*i.e.*, Bible class) and that permitting women to participate violates this injunction. This objection is well made. If she can participate verbally in the class, she is free also to teach the class, for the injunction against teaching is coterminous with the command to learn in silence. In any circumstance she is prohibited to teach, she is also to learn in silence. But as we do not concede the right to teach, so we ought to require that she be in silence.

It is sometimes objected that women have many good thoughts to contribute to our public classes and therefore she ought not be prohibited to participate. True. But by this same reasoning one might justify a woman's preaching or teaching over the man. The question is not whether she is capable of contributing in a meaningful way to class, but whether she is authorized to. Doubtless women of the first century who had received the gift of the Holy Ghost had many meaningful and worthwhile things to contribute. But, despite their inspiration, they were prohibited to do so. (I Cor. 14:34) How much more then ought women today, who have no claim to inspiration, submit to the instruction to learn in silence?

Another argument that is often made by advocates of increased roles for women in the church is that in Christ the distinctions of "Jew and Greek, bond and free, male and female" have all be done away. (Gal. 3:28) Thus, the argument goes, limitations upon the authority and role of women have necessarily also

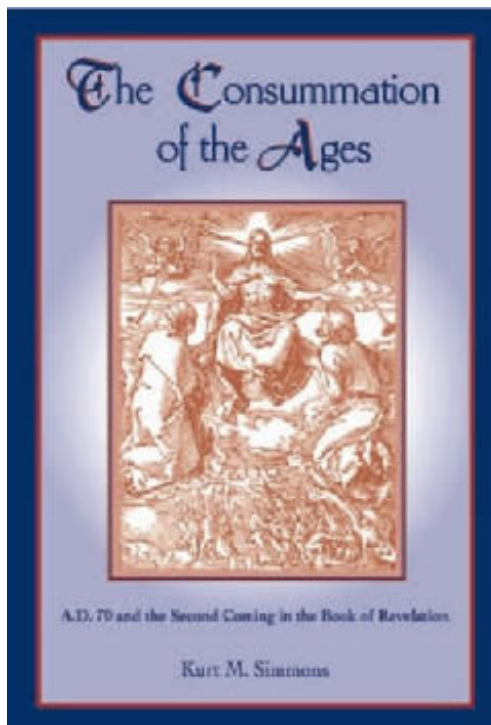
been done away. But, this argument is without merit and does violence to the text.

The part of mankind that has "put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27) so as to no longer admit of differentiation is "the inner man of the heart." (I Pt. 3:4) It is the spirit that is "born again" (Jn. 3:3), and it is here, in the spirit, that the outward distinctions of gender do not obtain. Moreover, under the mosaic law, there were different courts for worship at the temple: a court for priests; another for Jewish men; another women; and another for gentiles. God's presence was secreted away in the Holy of Holies, accessible only to the High Priest. How close the worshiper could get to God therefore depended upon his status: Whether he was a Priest, Jewish male, etc. Another aspect of what Paul is getting at in Galatians 3:28, is that all these distinctions are now done away in Christ. All approach the throne of grace on equal terms. However, the removal of these distinctions is purely *soteriological* (*i.e.*, pertaining sanctification). All other incidents of one's sex and position of authority (*i.e.*, parent/child) remain undisturbed. Man is still head of the woman or wife, and she is to be under obedience to his God-given authority and responsibility in the home and church.

Conclusion

The Biblical doctrine and principal of male headship is as old as mankind itself. It originated in the garden by the commandment of God and has been the Creator's design for every succeeding age and generation. Woman is the equal of man in value and essence but not in authority or role. That woman is the legal, political, and economic equal of man in society offers no authority for her being made his equal in the home or church. The Bible speaks

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