

WORLDVIEW AND TEXTUAL CRITICISM IN 2 PETER 3:10

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The Textus Receptus of 2 Pet 3:10 has the verb *katakaisetai*, which is reflected in all Bible translations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The *KJV*, for example, renders the clause in which it occurs as follows: “the earth also and the works that are therein *shall be burned up*” (my emphasis).

With the rise of modern textual criticism, this reading was soon rejected. This was due especially to the discovery and publication of Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, the two great fourth-century uncials, both of which read *heuresetai*, “will be found.” To my knowledge, all critical editions of the New Testament text since that of Tischendorf¹ (1872), notably including the landmark edition of Westcott and Hort² (1881), have adopted the latter reading, which is also supported by early patristic evidence (Origen) and is now attested by an early papyrus (P⁷²).³ A number of other significant variant readings also have a respectable pedigree (being attested as far back as the fifth century, or even earlier), but these are all readily explained as attempts to make sense of an earlier *heureshetai*. On this point virtually all editors and commentators are agreed.⁴

The difficulty is that *heureshetai* does not appear to make much sense. In Metzger’s words, it “seems to be devoid of meaning in the [406] context.”⁵ In a passage which clearly speaks of the coming day of judgement as a kind of cosmic conflagration, in which all things dissolve in fiery heat, what can it mean that the earth and its works “will be found”? The sentence sounds incomplete; moreover, it seems to indicate survival rather than destruction.

¹ C. Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum Graece* (2 vols.; Leipzig: Giesecke and Devrient, 1869-1872) 2.315

² B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hon, *The New Testament in the Original Greek* (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1881).

³ The reading of P⁷² (third/fourth century) is *heureshetai lyomena*, which is undoubtedly an expansion of an earlier *heureshetai*.

⁴ See for example Westcott and Hon, *New Testament*, 279-80, 576; Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971) 706; Kurt Aland, *Neutestamentliche Entwürfe* (München: Kaiser, 1979), 149; E. Fuchs and P. Reymond, *La deuxième épître de Saint Pierre. L'épître de Saint Jude* (CNT; Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestle, 1980) 117-18; R. J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco, TX: Word, 1983) 303.

⁵ Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 706

A number of solutions have been proposed for this difficulty. One is to treat *heurethisetai* as itself a corruption of an earlier original. This was the view first put forward by Tischendorf,⁶ and later adopted by Westcott and Hort⁷—the very men who had first reinstated this reading into the text. This opinion still finds favour in contemporary scholarship,⁸ and has given rise to a whole series of conjectural emendations,⁹ none of which has gained widespread support.

Ironically, the result has been that many twentieth-century versions have returned to the *katakaisetai* of the Textus Receptus. This is true not only of popular renderings like those of Phillips¹⁰ and Taylor,¹¹ but also of *RSV*¹² and *JB*,¹³ to mention only translations into English. Other contemporary versions appear to translate the variant readings *aphanisthesontai*,¹⁴ “will disappear,” or *ouch heurethisetai*,¹⁵ “will not be found.” The recent official Swedish version of the NT translates [407] “will perish” (*skall förgås*) and adds in a footnote: “This word renders what the author must have meant,” even though the best manuscripts read “will be found.”¹⁶ We find ourselves in the anomalous situation that some of the most widely used versions translate one text, while the critical editions of the Greek all print another.

Of course, the best solution to the problem posed by *heurethisetai* would be to find an interpretation of the verb which does make sense in the context. It has been proposed, for example, to translate *lieurethesetai* as “will be laid bare” (so *NEB* and *NIV*) or “will be exposed” (Reicke),¹⁷ but there seems to be virtually no lexical support for this sense. Danker has proposed the meaning “will be judged,”¹⁸ and this has been adopted by some scholars, either with or without the

⁶ Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum Graece* 2.314-15, where after listing the manuscript evidence he comments: “pro hac testium ratione dubium non est quin *heurethisetai* edere iubeamur, at hoc vix ac ne vix quidem potest sanum esse.”

⁷ Westcott and Hort, *New Testament*, 280: “Yet it is hardly less certain by intrinsic probability that *heurethisetai* cannot be right: in other words, it is *the* most original of recorded readings, the parent of the rest, and yet itself corrupt” (cf. also p. 103).

⁸ See for example Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 705-6.

⁹ These include *rhyisetai* or *rheusetai* (Hort), *synyisetai* (Naber), *ehpyrOthisetai* (Olivier), *arthisetai* (U. B. Mayor), *krithisetai* (Eb. Nestle), (*ex*) *iathisetai* (Chase), *pyrithesetai* (Vansittart) and the insertion of *arga* after *ergo* (Bradshaw). See Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 706, and Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 316-21.

¹⁰ J. B. Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English* (London: Bles, 1960): “will be burnt up to nothing.”

¹¹ Ken Taylor, *The Living New Testament* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1967): “will be burned up.”

¹² “Will be burned up” (note the absence of a marginal note.)

¹³ “Will be burnt up.”

¹⁴ For example *Today's English Version* (“will vanish”).

¹⁵ For example *The Moffatt Translation of the Bible* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953), which has “will disappear,” with a note adopting the reading reflected in the Sahidic Version.

¹⁶ *Nya Testamentet. Bibelkommissionens utgåva 1981* (Stockholm: Swedish Bible Society, 1981) 606.

¹⁷ Bo Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude* (AB 37; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964) 180.

¹⁸ F. W. Danker, “II Peter 3:10 and Psalm of Solomon 17:10,” *ZNW* 53 (1962) 86. Danker also emends the text to read *kata ta ergo*. His proposal is cited s.v. *heurisko* in the revision of BAG, of which Danker was co-editor (=BAGD).

concomitant emendation which Danker proposed.¹⁹ Most commentators, however, have rejected this translation. Another way out of the difficulty was suggested by J. N. D. Kelly, who adopted the simple expedient of punctuating the concluding sentence of our verse as a question: “And the earth and the works it contains—will they be found?”²⁰ This is ingenious, but simply replaces one awkwardness with another. The most thorough discussion of the question is found in R. J. Bauckham’s recent commentary. He retains *heurethisetai*, translates “will be found,” but interprets it to mean “will be judged.”²¹

The interpretation we propose takes another tack altogether. We accept the reading *heurethisetai*, but reject a common assumption about the context which has made this reading unnecessarily difficult. This assumption is that the worldview which is given expression in 2 Peter 3 envisages the coming judgement as a cosmic annihilation, a complete destruction or abolition of the created order. Against this we shall argue that the author of 2 Peter (whom we take to be either the apostle Peter himself or a close associate writing on his behalf)²² pictures the day of judgement as a smelting process from which the world will emerge purified. In the light of this understanding of the apostle’s worldview, we shall return to the verb *heurethisetai* and suggest that it is a metallurgical term appropriate to smelting and refining.

We must bear in mind that 2 Peter 3 speaks of three “worlds,” each consisting of heaven and earth: a world before the flood, called “the world that then existed” (3:6), the present world between the flood and the Day of the Lord, called “the heavens and earth that now exist” (3:7), and a future world after the Day, called the “new heavens and new earth” (3:13).²³ The three worlds (which are really the same world in three periods of its history) are marked off from each other by two cosmic crises: judgement by water in the flood, and the judgement by fire on the Day. In speaking of the future world judgement, the apostle is explicitly drawing a parallel with the earlier world judgement.²⁴ Just as the former world “was destroyed” (*apekto*, 3:6), so the present world is facing the day of “destruction” (*apaleia*, 3:7). However, just as the “destruction” wrought by the water did not cause the world to vanish (it continues to be preserved “by the same word” [3:7]),

¹⁹ Danker’s proposal is favoured, for example, by S. Kubo, *P² and the Coda Vaticanus* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965) 137, and the meaning “will be judged” for *heurethisetai* is adopted by Fuchs and Reymond, *La deuxième épître*, 116, 119, and by K. H. Schelkle, *Die Petrusbriefe; Der Judasbrief* (5th ed.; HTKNT; Freiburg: Herder, 1980) 222.

²⁰ J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and of Jude* (London: Black, 1969) 364. This punctuation (originally proposed by Weiss) has been followed by *The Translator’s New Testament* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1973).

²¹ Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 303, 318-21.

²² The case for an early date of 2 Peter is effectively made in E. M. B. Green, *II Peter Reconsidered* (London: Tyndale, 1961), and J. A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1976) 169-99.

²³ See Fuchs and Reymond, *La deuxième épître*, 84-85, 113.

²⁴ This is well brought out by T. Fornberg, *An Early Church in a Pluralistic Society* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1977) 65-67.

so the “destruction” which will be wrought by the fire will presumably not cause the world to vanish either. Just as the second world is the first one washed clean by water, so the third world will be the second one even more radically purged by fire.

The coming cosmic judgement is said in so many words to be “the day of the Lord” (3:10) and is described by verbs meaning “to dissolve” (*lyomai*, vv 10, 11, 12), “to melt” (*tekomai*, v 12), and “to burn” (*kausoomai*, vv 10, 12, and *pyroomai*, v 12). It is worth observing that the words for “burn” used here commonly refer to a state of [409] intense heat (like the German *glühen*), as when a person is “burning” with fever, or a piece of metal is red hot. In fact, *pyroomai* is regularly used of metals being heated in a smelting furnace.²⁵ Conspicuous by its absence is the common verb *kaiomai* and its compounds, which mean “to burn” in the sense of going up in flames (like the German *brennen*). The apostle is describing the Day of the Lord in the terms of cosmic elements which, as the result of intense heat, become incandescent and melt. They do not “burn up,” as is frequently imagined. To use the language of contemporary scientists in describing nuclear accidents, the future cataclysm is not a “burnup” but a “meltdown.”

The association of the Day of the Lord with the image of heating-to-the-melting-point gives us a clue to the OT background of Peter’s eschatological imagery here. He seems to have in mind a famous passage from Malachi about the Day of the Lord:

But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fuller’s soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the Lord. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord. [Mal 3:2-4, RSV]

The great day of judgement will witness the appearance of the Lord as a refiner, one who puts gold or silver in the melting pot in order to purify them. The great question is: who will be able to stand the test of that fiery day of God’s judgement? What can survive the heat of his anger? In Malachi’s vision of the Day the fire will burn until the purification is accomplished, until “right offerings” which are “pleasing to the Lord” are found at the end of the purifying process. A few verses down the prophet expands on this image: “Behold the day comes, burning like an oven,” bringing a judgement which will mean destruction for the wicked but healing for the righteous (Mal 4:1-2).

In Peter it is the entire cosmos, not just the Israelite priesthood, that is to be refined in the crucible of judgement on the great day of God’s appearance (cf. *parousia*, vv 4, 12). In apocalyptic fashion the metaphor is given a cosmic application, for a renewed and pur-^[410]ified heaven and

²⁵ Cf. Zech 13:9 (LXX) and Rev 1:15, as well as numerous places in extrabiblical Greek; see the citations in H. Blümner, *Technologie und Terminologie der Gewerbe und Künste bei Griechen und Römern* (4 vols.; Leipzig: Teubner, 1872-87) 4. 130, 132, 170 and *passim*.

earth is found at the end of the refining process (v 13).

Given this understanding of the context, we return to the verb *heuresetai*. First of all, it should be noted, as Danker has stressed,²⁶ that the passive of *heutiski* occurs again in verse 14: “Be zealous to be found by him without spot or blemish.” The argument here explicitly connects the ethical blamelessness for which Christians are exhorted to strive to the newness of the future world of righteousness which will emerge from the crucible. The expression “to be found,” like the phrase “without spot or blemish, “ apparently refers to the *eschatological survival in the* third world of righteousness begun in the second. As in Pauline eschatology (to which Peter refers in the next two verses), on the Day of the Lord “the fire will test what sort of work each one has done” and only some of it “will survive” (1 Cor 3:13-14). In Peter, it seems, *heurethenai* can have the connotation “to have survived,” “to have stood the test,” “to have proved genuine.”

Support for this interpretation is found in 1 Pet 1:7 where the passive of *heuriske* describes, again in an eschatological context, the surviving of a purifying fire. Peter there speaks of the joy which believers have in the midst of their present trials, and adds these words:

so that the genuineness [*dokimion*] of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may be found [*heurethi*], for praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

It is significant that *heurethi* is here used absolutely, without predicate, exactly comparable to *heuresetai* in 2 Pet 3:10. This is a point which is frequently obscured in contemporary versions, such as the RSV, which has “may redound to praise”, or the NEB which has “may prove itself worthy of all praise.” This is a pity, since the parallel with *heuresetai* and *heurethenai* in 2 Peter 3 is very striking in the Greek. In all three cases, it would appear, the passive of *heuriske* refers to the eschatological result of a purification process.

Further support for this interpretation is found in two passages in the Apostolic Fathers which seem to allude to our text. The first occurs in the conclusion of the Epistle of Barnabas, where we read: *poieite hina heurethite*²⁷ *en himera kriseas* (21:6), “act in order that you may be found in the day of judgement.” The parallel with 2 Pet 3:10 is so close (the same absolute use of *heuriskesthai*, the same eschatological context, the same link with ethical exhortation) that it looks like an explicit verbal echo. It is noteworthy that the passive of *heurisko* in this context has been translated “(that) you may pass muster,”²⁸ which fits well with our interpretation of the verb in the Petrine texts.

²⁶ Danker, “2 Peter 3:10,” 84

²⁷ This is the reading which is to be preferred (one late manuscript has the active *heurite*). See the textual note in P. Prigent, *Epître de Barnabé* (SC 172; Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1971) 217.

²⁸ See BAGD s.v.

The other passage is found in the so-called Second Epistle of Clement:

But you know that the day of judgement is already coming like a burning oven, and some of the heavens will melt, as will the whole earth, like lead melting due to fire, and then the hidden and manifest works of men will appear [*phanesetai*] [2 Clem. 16:3].

The allusion to Malachi is here made explicit (Pseudo-Clement's *erchetai... hemera hos klibanos kaiomenos* clearly echoes the LXX of Mal 4:1: *hemera erchetai kaiomeni hos klibanos*), and the verbal parallels with 2 Peter 3 are unmistakable (*tekomai* used twice, the juxtaposition of *ouranoi, ge, pyr*, and *erga in an* eschatological context, the same tense and ending of the verb).²⁹ The conclusion therefore seems inescapable that *phanisetai*, literally "will come to light," takes the place of *heurethisetai* in 2 Pet 3:10 and clarifies the somewhat unusual usage exemplified by this form of the verb.³⁰ The earth and its works, as we say in the vernacular, will "show what they are made of."

How are we to account for this use of *heuriskesthai*? Part of the answer undoubtedly lies in the fact that the passive of *heuriske* in other contexts frequently means "to turn out," "to prove."³¹ In this sense the verb is regularly construed (as in 2 Pet 3:14) with an adjective as predicate. But we seem to have a special development of this meaning in 1 Pet 1:7, 2 Pet 3:10, and *Barn.* 21:6, since here the passive of *heuriske* is used in an absolute sense. An instructive semantic parallel is the German verb *sich bewahren*, which can mean not only "to prove to be" with a predicate adjective, but also to "prove true," "hold good," "stand the test," without a predicate.³²

It is striking that for the two occurrences of the absolute use in the letters of Peter the context in both cases evokes the image of a metal's purification in a melting pot or crucible. Could it be that the common Greek verb *heuriskesthai* has a precise technical sense in the vocabulary of the smelter and refiner? Its meaning would then be something like "emerge purified (from the crucible)," with the connotation of having stood the test, of being tried and true. In a word, the technical sense would be equivalent to the English "to show one's mettle," an idiom which also originates in the world of metallurgy. A number of passages in extrabiblical Greek authors dealing with the refining of metals

²⁹ It is unnecessary to assume, *pace* Bauckham (*Jude, 2 Peter*, 304-5), that 2 Clement and 2 Peter both depend on an unknown Jewish apocalyptic source.

³⁰ This point was already suggested by Montague R. James in his commentary *The Second Epistle General of Peter and the General Epistle of Jude* (Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges; Cambridge: University Press, 1912) 35. Cf. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 319, 320.

³¹ BAGD s.v.

³² See *The Oxford-Harrap Standard German-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977ff) s.v.

use *heuriski in a way* which is consistent with this hypothesis.³³

It must be admitted that this is a sense of *heuriskesthai* which is not found in the lexica, and is based largely on the two occurrences in Peter. This circumstance is somewhat mitigated by the fact that it has recently been shown by R. C. Van Leeuwen that the common Hebrew verb *yasa* appears to have a closely parallel technical metallurgical sense which has also escaped the notice of lexicographers. In a number of cases *yasa* and its cognates apparently mean to “‘come out’ of the smelting process as refined.”³⁴ In the light of this it is particularly striking that the most recent translation of the NT into Modern Hebrew renders *heurethe in* 1 Pet 1:7 with the appropriate form of *yasa*.³⁵

Whether or not this proposed technical sense of the passive of *heutiskii can* be substantiated, it seems clear that the reading *heurethisetai in* 2 Pet 3:10 is not only the best-attested text, indirectly [413] supported by two second-century patristic allusions, but also yields excellent sense in its context. Textual criticism seems in this case to have read into Peter’s text features of a Gnostic worldview which looked on the present created order as expendable in the overall scheme of things. The text of 2 Pet 3:10, on our interpretation, lends no support to this perspective, but stresses instead the permanence of the created earth, despite the coming judgement.³⁶

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³³ See the places quoted by Blümner, *Technologic* 4.132n.1 (Agatharchides 28), 4.149n.2 (Strabo 9.1.23), and 4.176n.1 (Dioscorides 5.119). The passage in Strabo speaks of metalworkers who “melted again the old refuse, or dross, and were still able to extract from it pure silver (*heuriskon eti a antis apokathairomenon alyrion*)” (translation by H. L. Jones in the Loeb edition). To speak of pure silver being “found” from impure raw material sounds like a technical metallurgical expression.

³⁴ R. C. Van Leeuwen, “A Technical-Metallurgical Usage of De,” *ZAW* 98 (1986) 113.

³⁵ *Habbertt Hahadaia* (Jerusalem: United Bible Societies, 1983)

³⁶ On the Petrine use of Malachi 3 and the eschatological smelting image see now also Dennis E. Johnson, “Fire in God’s House: Imagery from Malachi 3 in Peter’s Theology of Suffering (1 Peter 4:12-19),” *JETS* 29 (1986) 285-94. Though Johnson’s article (which appeared after the completion of the present essay) does not refer to 2 Peter, it provides persuasive evidence that 2 Pet 3:10 has striking thematic parallels, not only with 1 Pet 1:7, but also with 1 Pet 4:12-19.