

# John Lightfoot on the 'New Heavens and New Earth'

THURSDAY, APRIL 20, 2023 BY [GARY DEMAR](#)



I love reading older commentaries that have not been tainted by elements of dispensationalism and where the authors had the freedom to publish their works without being shunned or denounced. Lightfoot is hard to go up against since his academic *bona fides* are difficult to question. Lightfoot was one of the original members of the [Westminster Assembly](#) that produced the Westminster Standards. His best-known work is the four-volume *Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae* that cover the gospels up through 1 Corinthians (1658-1678). It's published in English as [A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica](#) (4 Vol. hardback set). Thirteen volumes of his works as PDFs are FREE online [here](#).

Understanding the meaning of the "new heavens and new earth" is controversial today. Some argue that the physical cosmos will be destroyed and renewed (e.g, Kenneth Gentry) while others like Lightfoot argue that the passing away of heaven and earth refers to "the destruction of the Jewish

economy.” It might surprise some that this was and is a popular interpretation. See Douglas Wilson’s “Biblical Pictures of the New Cosmos” in the 1993 book [And It Came to Pass](#). Also, David Chilton’s essay “[What Does Peter Mean by the Passing Away of Heaven and Earth?](#)” published by American Vision.

The following is excerpted from John H. Duff’s “[A Knot Worth Unloosing](#)”: *The Interpretation of the New Heavens and Earth in Seventeenth-Century England*, A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of Calvin Theological Seminary in Candidacy for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (May 2014).

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John Lightfoot (1602-1675), minister and noted rabbinic scholar, assigned a thoroughly figurative sense to the biblical texts which proclaimed a new heavens and earth. His stance on the new heavens and earth is easily discernible from his commentaries as well as two published sermons. The first sermon was delivered in 1645, the second sermon in 1663, and the commentaries were published over a period of years.[1] The sermon of 1645 before the House of Commons provides a convenient launching pad into his thought.

In the [introduction](#) to the printed version of the sermon, Lightfoot reveals that the purpose of his sermon was to call into question the teaching of millenarianism in order that

*the Millenary Opinion, which I cannot but judge erroneous, might not goe on altogether uncontrolled, and one man take it at another for a truth without gainsaying; but that it might receive some check by the way, and it might bee shewed, that Posse vinci Hannibalem, that there is a faire possibility that that Opinion is but a falshood.*[2]

Not surprising then is his text for the occasion—[Revelation 20:1-2](#)—which narrates an angel that comes down from heaven to bind the devil for a thousand years. Lightfoot posits that this text is “the hardest peece in all the Bible by many degrees” and briefly notes that the angel had been interpreted as Pope Calixtus, Pope Innocent III and Constantine.[3] But the more recent

interpretation of this text by the millenarians is the one on which Lightfoot sets his sights.[4]

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Nearly two decades after Lightfoot delivered this sermon [of 1645 before the House of Commons], he preached a sermon on [2 Peter 3:13](#) to his congregation at Hertford.[5] In this epistle, Peter asserts the following: “Nevertheless, we, according to his promise, look for new heavens, and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness” ([2 Peter 3:13](#)). Like the sermon before the House of Commons, the aim of this sermon is not a systematic treatment of the new heavens and earth; the burden of the sermon is on the kind of righteousness Peter had in mind. Lightfoot finds it necessary to begin the sermon by disposing of the notion that the new heavens and earth are a reference to a renovation of the earth’s qualities at the last day. ... Rather than referencing a cosmic renewal at the end of human history, Peter uses the language of a new heaven and earth to describe the destruction of the Jewish dispensation by the Romans in the first century.

According to Lightfoot, the destruction of the Jewish economy is frequently described in Scripture as the destruction of the whole world. This manner of expression began with Moses ([Deuteronomy 32:22](#)), continued with the prophets ([Jeremiah 4:23](#)) and used by Christ ([Matthew 24:29](#)) and the Apostle John ([Revelation 6:12-14](#)).[6] The context of all of these texts makes it clear that the destruction described within them is not universal, but is limited to Jerusalem or the Jewish nation; the Jewish state is referred to under the figure of the whole world. Thus when Peter writes of the heavens dissolving and the elements melting ([2 Peter 3:10, 12](#)), “he intends no other thing, than the dissolving of their church and economy, by fiery vengeance; the consumption of their state, by the flame of God’s indignation; and the ruin of their elements of religion, by God’s fury.”[7] Unlike many of his contemporaries who took the “elements” as a reference to the Aristotelian elements of earth, water, air and fire, Lightfoot thinks Peter uses the term as Paul did. It is a reference to the rites and traditions of the Jewish cult.[8] These will be done away in order to be replaced by new elements of the gospel.

Although Lightfoot thinks his hearers can now “plainly see” what Peter had in mind by the phrase “new heavens and the new earth,” he reviews four types of biblical texts that together solidify his conclusion regarding the new heavens

and earth. The four types are texts which speak of the 'last days,' texts which speak of the 'end,' texts that mention the 'coming' of Christ, and texts anticipating a 'new heavens and earth.' [9]

The last days frequently mentioned in Scripture are not the final days of the world but the last days of the city of Jerusalem. Lightfoot appeals to Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost to defend this assertion. In [Acts 2:16-17](#), Peter proclaimed to the crowd that what they were witnessing was none other than what the prophet Joel had prophesied. In [Joel 2:28](#), Joel places the coming of God's Spirit in the last days. By appropriating [Joel 2:28](#) to his own day, Peter implicitly identified his generation with the last days. Hence, Lightfoot concludes that the outpouring of the Spirit in the last days was not to be fulfilled in the last days of the world but in the last days of the city of Jerusalem. [10] He comments that this understanding of 'last days' iterated by Peter was shared by Paul and John as well. [11]

Biblical texts announcing 'the end' receive a similar treatment from Lightfoot; the destruction of the Jewish state is the referent for expressions about the end of the world ([1 Cor. 10:11](#)), the end of all things ([1 Peter 4:7](#)) and similar expressions. [12] Again, the destruction of Jerusalem is the fulfillment of those texts which speak of Christ's coming, his coming in power, in glory, in his Kingdom. In the Olivet discourse, Jesus himself indicated that his coming would take place before that generation had ended ([Matthew 24:34](#)). Consequently, the coming of Christ in power and glory ([Matthew 24:30](#)) is not the final judgment of humankind but the judgment upon Jerusalem. Jerusalem's destruction is the day of the Lord. [13]

The last days, the end of the world and the coming of Christ issue forth into a new age. The conditions following the end of the Jewish economy are described variously as 'the world to come', 'new heavens and new earth' or 'all things new.' In [2 Peter 3:13](#), Peter employs the imagery of new heavens and new earth to describe conditions following the destruction of the Jewish state and religious system. Lightfoot points out that Peter bases his hope of a new heavens and earth on the promise of God. Where was this promise made? It was made in [Isaiah 65:17](#) where God announces he will create a new heavens and earth following the dissolution of the Jewish system. [14] Lightfoot selects several statements from Isaiah 65 to indicate the thrust of the prophet's message; God had rejected his people and was creating a new

people from the Gentiles. The turn from the Jews to the Gentiles is none other than a destruction of the old world and the creation of a new one.[15]

In defense of his position that the new heavens and earth is figurative language for the first-century destruction of the Jewish political and religious systems, Lightfoot also draws on Peter's statement that in the new heavens and earth righteousness will dwell ([2 Peter 3:13](#)). He poses the question as to what kind of righteousness does Peter have in mind?[16] It is not God's justice since God has always been just and always will be. It is not that humans will be more righteous at the end of the world as some imagined; Scripture never makes such a promise. It is not a reference to the righteousness the saints will have in glory, "for where do you find righteousness applied to that estate?"[17] Righteousness is a term Scripture employs to describe believers in the present age. The righteousness Peter has in mind is the righteousness received by way of justification; it is the righteousness of God. God's "condemning justice" was made evident by the Law but God's "justifying justice" was made evident by the gospel.[18] Lightfoot admits that God's justifying justice was not entirely absent prior to the times of the gospel, but it is in the new heavens and earth, the time of the gospel rather than the Law, that " 'justifying righteousness' should dwell most evidently, and appear most glorious, when such abominable ones, as the Gentiles had been, should be justified." [19] Its glorious nature would appear most wonderfully due to the vast number of Gentiles who would believe and due to the Gentiles' extreme alienation from God.

The position reflected in Lightfoot's sermon on [2 Peter 3:13](#) also appears in several places in his commentary on some New Testament books, two of which are especially instructive. In [John 21:22](#), Jesus comments to Peter that if Jesus desires for John to remain until Jesus returns, that should be of no concern to Peter. Lightfoot notes that the return Jesus has in mind is his return to destroy the Jewish nation.[20] This is consistent with what Jesus said in [Matthew 16:28](#)—that some of the disciples standing there that day would not die until they had seen Christ come in his kingdom.[21] Lightfoot then encourages the reader to observe four items in the reading of Scripture, items that replicate hermeneutical themes from his sermon on [2 Peter 3:13](#).

First, the destruction of Jerusalem is frequently referred to in Scripture under the figure of the destruction of the world. The extremity of the description is fitting given that the Jews were once so dear to him" and "accounted of as



much or more than the whole world beside.”[22] When Peter mentions the elements melting in [2 Peter 3:10](#), he is speaking of “Mosaic elements” and “only of the conflagration of Jerusalem, the destruction of the nation, and the abolishing of the dispensation of Moses.”[23] Second, the days preceding this return of Christ to judge Israel are what Scripture designates as the last days or last times.[24] This interpretation is confirmed by the apostle John in [1 John 2:18](#) where he indicates that there are already many antichrists in the world—a condition that signifies the presence of the last time.

Third, the days which will follow the end of the Jewish state are described as a new heavens and earth or a new creation. God had announced through Isaiah (65:17) that he would create a new heavens and earth. Lightfoot argues that the timing of the new creation is clear from the entire chapter of Isaiah 65; the new creation will occur following the cutting off of the Jews and the establishment of the “evangelical world among the Gentiles.”[25] Paul agreed with Isaiah when he wrote that old things have passed away and all things have become new ([2 Cor. 5:17](#)). John’s vision of the new heaven and new earth and Peter’s forecasting the same are all simply in fulfillment of God’s promise through Isaiah of creating a new people of God among the Gentiles via the gospel.

Fourth, Scripture denominates the time of the Jews’ overthrow as “the day of the Lord,” “the day of Christ,” “his coming in the clouds, in his glory, in his kingdom.”[26] Christ’s first coming was marked by humility; he himself was ridiculed and hated and eventually murdered. His teachings were rejected and his followers persecuted. But on the day of the Lord, Christ will come to avenge himself on his enemies, specifically the nation of Israel which had rejected him. Many of the scriptural texts which mention the coming of Christ being “near” or “at the door” or “at hand” all refer to his coming to enact judgment on the Jews.[27] These texts “must be understood of Christ’s coming in judgment and vengeance against that wicked nation.”[28] Thus Lightfoot concludes that Jesus’ reference to his coming in his words to Peter in John 21 point to this coming in judgment against his people, a coming fulfilled via the Roman army.

What remains is to investigate Lightfoot’s treatment of [Romans 8:19-21](#) to see if he regards this text as a first-century event or if it pertains to the end of the world. He begins his exposition by asserting, “There is a twofold key hanging at this place that may unlock the whole, and make the sense plain and

easy.”[29] This two-fold key is the proper understanding of two Greek expressions. The first expression is *πάσα κτίσις* (every creature) in verse 22 and the second is *ματαιοτητι* (vanity) in verse 20.[30] Lightfoot does not understand the former phrase to refer to the natural world—the earth and the nonrational creatures that inhabit it. Rather, the phrase refers to just the opposite—to the world of rational creatures, i.e., the world of humans. His proof relies on the use of this Greek expression in two other instances in the New Testament. In the first instance, Mark records Jesus as commanding his disciples to preach the gospel to every creature (*πάση τη κτίσει*) and in the second instance, Paul announced that the gospel had been reached to every creature (*πάση τη κτίσει*).[31] Lightfoot maintains it is obvious that in these two texts the phrase refers to “all nations, or the heathen world.”[32] Indeed, Matthew sustains such an interpretation for in his version of the last words of Jesus, Jesus tells his disciples to go and teach all nations. To teach all nations (Matthew) is clearly equivalent to preaching the gospel to the nations’ inhabitants (Mark and Paul). Appealing to his knowledge of Judaica, Lightfoot further argues that the phrase “every creature” was a Jewish cipher for Gentiles.[33]

The second key to grasping Paul’s meaning in Romans 8 is the interpretation of the word *ματαιοτητι*, or *vanity*. Lightfoot has no quibble with the translation of the word but to what is being described by it. He avers that the word is often “improperly applied to this vanishing, changeable, dying state of the creation.”[34] However, the word is more aptly descriptive of the “inward *vanity* and emptiness of the mind.”[35] Paul uses this word in other texts with respect to the cognitive disposition of the Gentiles in their unregenerate state.[36]

These two keys, forged by linguistic comparison of texts, unlock the meaning of Romans 8 for Lightfoot. Rather than describing the restoration of the created order at the glorification of believers as many of his contemporaries believed, Paul is describing an entirely different scenario. It is the Gentile nations who are earnestly expecting God to call out a people from among the Gentiles, for that is what the Old Testament prophets had led them to expect. The Gentiles had concocted false views of God ever since the first instance of idolatry at Babel and it was at Babel that they became vain in their thinking.[37]

Consequently, in verse 21, Paul iterates that the Gentile nations will be liberated from their bondage to corruption. That is, according to Lightfoot, the Gentiles will be delivered from their sin. He collates several New Testament texts to argue that “corruption” (φθορά) is typically a reference to sinful desires and affections.[38] From these desires the Gentiles will be freed. Lightfoot’s paraphrase of verse twenty-one is transparent: “The Gentile world shall in time *be delivered from the bondage of their sinful corruption*, that is, the *bondage* of their lusts and vile affections, (under which it hath lain for so long a time,) into a noble liberty, such as the sons of God enjoy.”[39]

Bondage to sin becomes the cause of the Gentiles groaning ([Romans 8:22](#)). That is, the Gentile world had been groaning under the vanity of its mind until now—until the time when they heard the gospel.[40]

The above analysis of Lightfoot’s exegesis proves that he interpreted the new heavens and earth in a figurative sense. He self-consciously denied that the new heavens and earth were to be construed as a future state of affairs coincident with the final judgment of the world in which the physical creation would be released from the effects of Adam’s sin. The new heavens and earth sprung to life even while the Jewish civil and religious way of life perished at the hands of the Roman legions. In the new heavens and earth, the gospel of justification is proclaimed to the Gentiles who had been so long subject to vanity.

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## Notes:

[1]Lightfoot produced a variety of works on the Bible, including a harmony of the Gospels, a harmony of the Old Testament, and several volumes of biblical commentary that drew extensively from his knowledge of rabbinics.

[2]John Lightfoot, *A Sermon Preached before the Honorable House of Commons: At Margarets Westminster, Upon the 26. Day of August 1645. Being the Day of Their Solemne Monethly Fast by John Lightfoot, a Member of the Assembly of Divines* (London : Printed by R.C. for Andrew Crook, and are to be sold at his shop at the signe of the Greene Dragon in Pauls Churchyard, 1645), no page, *Early English Books Online*, British Library.



[<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A88148.0001.001/1:4?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>]

[3]Lightfoot, *A Sermon Preached*, 2.

[4]Lightfoot gives an indication of how prevalent the belief in a millennium had become when he comments that “the glosse and exposition upon this prophecy which hath got the deepest root and the highest seate in the hearts and estimations of very many in these times, and carrieth the greatest cry with it, is the opinion of the chiliasts of old, refined by the Millenaries alate....An opinion so strange to mee that I must confesse I could not but make it a sad *omen* and a presage a good while agoe what opinions we should fall into in time, when such an opinion as this could bee so swallowed downe and entertained as I saw it was.” Lightfoot, *A Sermon Preached*, 3.

[5]John Lightfoot, *The Works of the Reverend and Learned John Lightfoot D. D., Late Master of Katherine Hall in Cambridge Such as Were, and Such as Never before Were Printed: In Two Volumes: With the Authors Life and Large and Useful Tables to Each Volume: Also Three Maps: One of the Temple Drawn by the Author Himself, the Others of Jervsalem and the Holy Land Drawn According to the Author's Chorography, with a Description Collected out of His Writings*, ed. B. G and John Strype (London : Printed by W. R. for Robert Scot, Thomas Basset, Richard Chiswell, 1684), *Early English Books Online*, Bodleian Library. This first edition of the complete works of Lightfoot was published posthumously in 1684. Before he died, Lightfoot had written a Latin commentary on some of the New Testament books utilizing his considerable knowledge of Judaica. During his own lifetime, he published separate commentaries on each of the four Gospels and 1 Corinthians. His commentaries on Acts and Romans were published posthumously as part of the collected works volumes. Any of Lightfoot's works originally published in Latin were translated into English in these volumes.

[6][Deuteronomy 32:22](#)—“For a fire is kindled in mine anger, and shall burn unto the lowest hell, and shall consume the earth with her increase, and set on fire the foundations of the mountains.” [Jeremiah 4:23](#)—“I beheld the earth, and, lo, [it was] without form, and void; and the heavens, and they [had] no light.” [Matthew 24:29](#)—“Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken.” [Revelation](#)

6:12-14—"And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood; And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind. And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places."

[7]Lightfoot, *The Works of ... Lightfoot*, 1074.

[8]Lightfoot, *The Works of ...Lightfoot*, 1074. Lightfoot is drawing on Paul's use of the word *elements* in Galatian 4:3 and 4:9 where it signifies Jewish rites.

[9]Lightfoot, *The Works of ...Lightfoot*, 1074.

[10]Lightfoot, *The Works of ...Lightfoot*, 1074. Lightfoot does not consider the possibility that the last days embrace all that would occur between the first and second advents of Christ.

[11]Lightfoot, *The Works of ...Lightfoot*, 1074. Lightfoot cites [1 Timothy 4:1](#), [2 Timothy 3:1](#) and quotes [1 John 2:18](#); in the latter verse John states plainly that "it is the last time."

[12]Lightfoot does not present an exegetical argument for this conclusion but merely asserts it. [1 Corinthians 10:11](#)—"Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. The antecedent for "them" and "whom" in this verse are clearly the Jewish people." [1 Peter 4:7](#)—"But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer."

[13]Lightfoot, *The Works of ...Lightfoot*, 1074.

[14]Lightfoot, *The Works of ...Lightfoot*, 1075. Lightfoot takes this opportunity to comment on the belief in a future mass conversion of the Jews—a view popular at the time. He argues that in Isaiah the *new heavens and earth* are promised to coincide with the Jews' rejection and *not* their conversion. Lightfoot states it thus: "It is a strange opinion that would persuade you, that the most glorious things, that are foretold by the prophets, should come to pass when the Jews are called, which calling is yet expected: whereas, those

glorious things are plainly enough intimated to come to pass at the Jews casting off." See Lightfoot, *The Works of ... Lightfoot*, 1075.

[15]Lightfoot echoes Calvin's emphasis in his commentary on Isaiah, namely, that Isaiah spoke of the day when the Gentiles would be welcomed as the people of God whereas the Jews would be rejected. Unlike Calvin and other commentators, Lightfoot does not allow for degrees of fulfillment over time. Hence he does not extend the new heavens and earth to the time of Christ's Second Advent as did Calvin.

[16]Lightfoot, *The Works of ...Lightfoot*, 1075.

[17]Lightfoot, *The Works of ...Lightfoot*, 1075.

[18]Lightfoot, *The Works of ...Lightfoot*, 1075.

[19]Lightfoot, *The Works of ... Lightfoot*, 1075-1076.

[20]Lightfoot, *The Works of ... Lightfoot*, 625.

[21]Though Lightfoot does not point it out, this is also consistent with what is known of the lives of Peter and John. It is fairly well accepted that Peter died in Rome prior to Jerusalem's fall (i.e., Christ's coming) and John's death, though not definitively known, was subsequent to that event.

[22]Lightfoot, *The Works of ... Lightfoot*, 626.

[23]Lightfoot, *The Works of ...Lightfoot*, 626.

[24]Lightfoot, *The Works of ...Lightfoot*, 626. Lightfoot comments that "[t]his manner of speaking frequently occurs."

[25]Lightfoot, *The Works of ...Lightfoot*, 626.

[26]Lightfoot, *The Works of ...Lightfoot*, 626.

[27]Lightfoot, *The Works of ...Lightfoot*, 626. Lightfoot cites [2 Thessalonians 2:2](#), [Hebrews 10:37](#), [James 5:9](#), [Revelation 1:7](#) and [22:12](#).

[28]Lightfoot, *The Works of ...Lightfoot*, 626.

[29]John Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament From the Talmud and Hebraica: Matthew-I Corinthians*, 4 vols., vol. 4 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1989), 156.

[30]Lightfoot treats the two expressions in this order and not in the order in which they appear in the verses.

[31][Mark 16:15](#), [Colossians 1:23](#).

[32]Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament*, 156.

[33]Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament*, 156. Lightfoot argues this point in his Mark commentary. See Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament*, 478.

[34]Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament*, 157.

[35]Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament*, 157.

[36]Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament*, 157. Lightfoot cites [Romans 1:21](#) and [Ephesians 4:17](#) and [I Corinthians 3:20](#).

[37]Lightfoot makes a distinction here to help him explain what Paul meant by the Gentiles becoming subject to vanity not willingly: “May we not say...*it became vain willing* but ...*it was made subject to vanity not willingly?*” At Babel, the Gentiles willingly succumbed to the vanity of their minds by their idolatry. However “that they were subjected to that vanity proceeded from the just indignation and vengeance of God.” In other words, the perpetual condition of vain thinking was a judgment of God to which the Gentiles were subject, but they were not subject to this judgment by their own choice or desire. The vain thinking of the Gentiles lasted from the time of Babel until the time of the

gospel when God was pleased to send his Son and bring light to the Gentiles. See Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament*, 157-158.

[38] [2 Peter 1:4](#), [2 Corinthians 11:3](#), [1 Corinthians 15:33](#).

[39] Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament*, 158.

[40] In his commentary on [Mark 16:15](#), Lightfoot comments again on Romans 8, essentially repeating his comments in the Romans section of his commentary. He mounts the argument that the phrase *every creature* in [Mark 16:15](#) and in [Romans 8:22](#) signifies the Gentile world. The Gentiles had been lost in vain thinking but were soon to be found by the preaching of the gospel. Lightfoot adds that the *we* of [Romans 8:23](#) designates Jews who had embraced Christ as the Messiah. Christian Jews of Paul's day were the first fruits of the gospel; they like the Gentiles " 'sigh among ourselves for their sakes, waiting for the adoption, that is, the redemption of our mystical body, whereof the Gentiles make a very great part.' " See Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament*, 480.