

Our eternal universe

In response to John Hartnett's *Our eternal universe* (30(3):104–109), one is reminded of the danger of approaching the biblical text on terms other than the text's own. Dr Hartnett has approached the text from a cosmological rather than eschatological viewpoint and has reached conclusions that are not substantiated by an analysis of all the relevant texts.

First, Hartnett has not consulted qualified Hebrew experts regarding the usage of the Hebrew words he cites. He has also not interacted with how his definition of these words has implications for creation cosmology, and only thrown out a vague accusation of eisegesis towards people who hold a definition with which he disagrees. One would hope for a more substantial argument.

Second, the burning bush has nothing to do with eschatology as such, so to use whatever is happening regarding entropy in that passage to argue for an eschatological position is flawed. I would argue that speaking about a miracle in scientific terms may be a definitional exercise in confusing categories, and then to import questionable conclusions from this miracle to *eschatology* makes another gigantic, unsubstantiated (in the most literal sense—he does not justify it at all) leap. Of *course* God can reverse entropy; God can do anything. The question is: what does the Scripture teach God *will* do regarding the New Heavens and Earth?

Third, *ōlām* does not always mean 'forever'. While it may *sometimes* hold this meaning, its more-common meaning is "long time, duration".¹ No one would argue that Ecclesiastes 1:3–11 says that the earth is infinitely old, yet *ōlām* is used for the length of the past duration of the earth in that

passage.² It is also a problem to use *poetic* passages to interpret *didactic*; sound exegesis demands we do the opposite.

Fourth, his misuse of the New Testament shows that Hartnett has not consulted even the most basic scholarly sources; in fact, he does not even pretend to have done so. His opinion ("I say" ... "My claim" ... "I would take it") is presented as definitive, even when it disagrees with the vast majority of NT scholarship. For instance, he interprets Matthew 24:35 as "Jesus is not actually saying heaven and earth will pass away, but that it would be easier for them to do so than it would be for God's words to fail". But that is *precisely* the opposite of the point that Matthew is making. The vast majority of New Testament scholarship realizes that Jesus is saying that even the things that seem most permanent—the heavens and earth—will pass away, but in contrast God's Word will never pass away.^{3–6} Furthermore, the Greek word translated "will pass away" is in the future indicative, meaning Jesus is communicating it *will* happen (as opposed to it being stated in more hypothetical terms). It is egregious to appeal to Luke to negate the clear contrast present in Matthew, because Luke records Jesus making a *similar* (not identical) statement in a much *different* context, as anyone can see who bothers to read the surrounding context.

Then he makes the leap from subjective argumentation based on personal opinion to the *assumption* that these are accurate to form the basis of his next level of argumentation: "Once we accept the fact [!] of the eternal preservation of the heavens" This question-begging is not how scholarship should be done.

Fifth, the idea of the destruction and restoration of the universe, and its parallel with death and resurrection of believers, is so pervasive throughout Scripture. Therefore, to assert that

this restoration amounts to a simple reversing of entropy and to interpret all the destruction passages figuratively is simplistic and disrespectful to the text. The word limit does not allow me to draw out the theme here, but my forthcoming book, *From Creation to Salvation* (CBP, 2017), traces the 'uncreation' theme and its importance to a biblical creationist view.

There can tend to be a distrust of biblical studies as a discipline because of its liberal wing, and perhaps this is why Hartnett neglected to cite even one expert. But we cannot afford to do scholarship in a vacuum. Hartnett's paper would have benefitted from outside expertise; the lack of it means that his paper suffers from several flaws the reader must try to overlook before even weighing the merits of his position.

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References

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» John Hartnett replies:

My article is an essay exploring the idea that the universe—the total sum of all that exists including all stars and galaxies—may, in fact, be eternal. As I pointed out there are scriptures in Psalms 89 and 148 that support such a notion. I admit that I have taken a different eschatological viewpoint to what has been promoted

by many in creation ministries up to this time. But biblical eschatology and biblical creation historical narrative are not the same thing. My friend Russ Humphreys takes exception with my approach also, saying that I am inconsistent, by taking a literal reading of narrative texts in Genesis but not in Revelation and other prophetic texts. I disagree, as I do also with Cosner here, and with many so-called authorities on eschatology. I don't believe biblical history and eschatology have the same standing. One is known and the other is not.

In regards to the Hebrew words (natah, raqa, and mathach) Cosner seems to be referring to, as mentioned in the text, I have discussed their use before (my ref. 12) in *J. Creation* without much comment. I suggest they do not support an expanding universe, as in the rubber sheet analogy of standard big bang cosmology, and as such cannot be used to support such a notion. This has at least one impact on creation cosmology, which Russ Humphreys has acknowledged. It caused him to modify his approach in his own cosmology to looking at a static universe rather than an expanding one.¹

In my ref. 13, I comment on others' interpretations, or what I would call misinterpretations, of some of those verses used to make claims of science well beyond the possible meanings of the Hebrew texts, but I do not make any "vague accusation of eisegesis". I simply state that "I believe that eisegesis is used". There's nothing vague about that and I am not being accusative but stating a problem that I also have been guilty of, i.e. reading into scriptures something I want them to say.

On Cosner's point about the burning bush, I disagree. The burning bush tells us about the created world. It tells us something about the physics of the universe. Williams and I wrote about this in our book *Dismantling*

the Big Bang.² There we wrote that it was the sustaining power of God that maintained the bush burning—essentially reversing entropy—and when the Creator removed that sustaining power the bush then burnt away. In like manner the processes of increase in entropy in the universe result in decay. God's sustaining power is capable of maintaining the physical systems and He has chosen on occasion to demonstrate this to us. The link to eschatology may be seen in the link to the future state of the universe, which is what I put forward in this article.

I agree that *ōlām* has a range of meanings, and one of those meanings is 'forever'. The question then is, do the stars and galaxies remain eternally or not? It seems Cosner is arguing that in these passages because they are poetry they cannot be relied upon to mean what they apparently say. I disagree. The verses cited are not allegorical and have a straightforward meaning. But the passage in Luke 16 I may have misstated as an equivalent verse to that in Matthew 24. I was not meaning to imply it was the same context but rather equivalent in meaning. There Jesus makes the same statement and hence I used Luke 16:17 to interpret Matthew 24:35.

In regards to this article, a reader wrote to me stating the following:

"Just a note to say I agree with your conclusion that the universe as promised by God is eternal. Unfortunately, many Christians read scripture and are unaware of the obvious 'Hebraisms'. So scriptures are misunderstood ... and can seem contradictory. The verse Matthew 24:35 is written in a very common style ... used in the Talmud as well. Like saying that 'salt which has lost its taste' ... salt doesn't lose its taste. You were very wise to look to other verses where God states that the universe is eternal. So, in conclusion, we have

assurance of God's Word being eternal because we know that the universe is eternal."

The discussion in my article is really about the way one interprets the various scriptures I have cited. The standard position of many in biblical creationist circles has been that the New Heavens and New Earth are totally recreated—the old ones being totally wiped out. But even Cosner's statement of "the idea of the destruction and restoration of the universe, and its parallel with death and resurrection of believers, is so pervasive throughout Scripture" is not an argument in favour of total destruction and recreation but of renewal. The believers are not totally recreated again but renewed (or changed, 1 Corinthians 15:51–54) in the New Heaven and the New Earth. Christ was observed in a new resurrection body that bore the marks of His crucifixion. A vestige of the past body was still there. Eschatologically, I argue (my ref. 15) that it is the earth and the atmospheric heavens that are renewed, i.e. refurbished, and not the annihilation and destruction of the whole physical universe, which God created.

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