What are the Elements of 2 Peter 3?

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Email: preteristadvocate@gmail.com.

Bible Version
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(Note: All bolding of Scripture quotations for emphasis has been added by the author.)

Many Christians believe that the universe is soon going to be incinerated and replaced with a new heaven and earth. This view is based on a single passage of Scripture:

2 Peter 3:10, 12-13:
10 *But the day of the Lord will 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.*

12 *Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and* ***the elements*** *shall melt with fervent heat?*
13 *Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.*

The traditional view holds that the melting "elements" (of 2:10, 12) are either the heavenly bodies (the stars, planets, and so forth), or the very chemical elements that make up the universe.
This error is promoted through mistranslation even by some of the better Bible versions.[1]
Most versions, thankfully, retain the term "elements" in both verses.

Context matters!

Two points of relevance here:
First, when Peter wrote, the melting of these elements was imminent.
His readers were eagerly anticipating both "the day of God" and a new world order indwelt by "righteousness". They could even "hasten" its arrival (3:12-13).[2]
Second, Peter is here addressing the claims of certain "scoffers" who would soon arise (cf. 2 Pet 3:3-4).
By these he intends Jewish unbelievers who would soon begin to openly ridicule the Christian hope of the Parousia. More specifically, they would mock the threats Jesus had made to return in judgment against them.[3]
They will point out that 30+ years had elapsed since Jesus had made his threats, and life was continuing on as normal (2Pet 3:4). Jesus was therefore mistaken; worse, he was a false prophet and imposter — certainly no Messiah.

[1] The ESV, LEB, and NET translate *stoicheia* as "heavenly" or "celestial bodies".
[2] That certain major events affecting Peter's readers were soon to transpire is suggested also by 1 Peter 4:5, 7, 17.
[3] Such promises as are found, for example, in Matthew 23:35-38; 24:1-34; 26:64. See also Matthew 22:7; Luke 19:41-44.

So, what is Peter referring to here?
Answer: He is referring to the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Roman army.
Peter is writing in the early 60s AD, and within a few short years both Jerusalem and its temple were burned.
Jesus kept his promise (cf. 2Pet 3:9)!
The very things that these scoffers put their hope in — the city and its temple — melted "with fervent heat".

A scoffer (of both ancient and modern ilk) might say that this interpretation is farfetched.
So our task now is to garner evidence to show that *the elements* do indeed refer to Jerusalem and the temple.

The "elements" relate to Judaism

First up, we should note that the term *elements* is related to our word *elementary*:
The Greek term here — *stoicheia*[4] — denotes the **elementary** or **basic principles** of something.[5]
The authors of the King James Version clearly understood this, for here is how they translated *stoicheia* outside of 2 Peter 3:

Galatians 4:3:

> *Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the **elements** of the world:*

Galatians 4:9:

> *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 again to be in bondage?*

Colossians 2:8:

> *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.*

Colossians 2:20:

> *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,*

Hebrews 5:12:

> *For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the **first principles** of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat.*

From these verses we can see that the *stoicheia* of:

- Galatians 4:3 refer to aspects of the Law of Moses.
  Paul in context is explaining how God had imposed the Law on his people as a sort of guardian — to guide and govern them in their state of spiritual immaturity. See Galatians 3:23-25; 4:1-7.
- Galatians 4:9 refer to the ceremonies of the Mosaic Law that the Judaizers were trying to impose.[6]
- Hebrews 5:12 denote the basic truths (doctrines) of God's word.

[4] From the noun *stoicheion*, Strong's G4747.
[5] Hence the modern use of the term "elements" to denote the basic building blocks of physical matter: atoms of hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, nitrogen, silicon, iron, and so forth. But that is clearly not how first-century people understood the term!
[6] The following are helpful for understanding Paul's discussion in Galatians 3 – 4:
Albert Barnes: *Notes on the Whole Bible*, via the Bible Hub website: https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/galatians/4.htm.
Charles R. Erdman, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians: An Exposition* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1930), pages 73-87. Via the Internet Archive: https://archive.org/details/epistleofpaultog0000char/page/72/mode/2up.

We should, however, take a closer look at Paul's use of the term in Colossians 2.
The phrase "the rudiments of the world" in Colossians 2:8 translates the Greek *ta stoicheia tou kosmou*.
The exact same (Greek) phrase is found in Galatians 4:3.
In Colossians 2:20 the Greek is *tōn stoicheiōn tou kosmou*.
What does Paul mean by *the rudiments,* or *elements, of the world*?

It seems that the *stoicheia* of Colossians 2, as in Galatians 4, refer to aspects of Judaism — certain outward rituals and practices that the Judaizers sought to impose on Gentile converts.
Note the following:

1. Paul in Colossians 2:8 refers to "philosophy and vain deceit", and "the tradition of men".
   Both Josephus and Philo refer to the Jewish religion as "philosophy". The Jews considered their religion to be the one true philosophy.
   "The tradition of men" should make us recall Jesus' use of the exact same phrase in Mark 7:8 in connection with human-instigated Jewish religious practices. (See Mark 7:3, 5, 8, 9, 13.)
2. The false teachers in Colossae were seeking to impose:
   - Circumcision (2:11-13). But Paul declares that his readers have already been circumcised — spiritually!
   - Dietary rules; feast days; New Moon festivals; Sabbath observance (2:16).
     These were all aspects of the Law — mere "shadows" that have now been fulfilled in Christ (2:17).
   - Worship of angels (2:18).
     Angels featured prominently in first-century Judaism (cf. Ac 7:53; Gal 3:19; Heb 1:4-14).[7]
   - Legalism and asceticism (2:21-23). Certainly aspects of first-century Judaism!

   All these were aspects of the mix that the Judaizers sought to impose on Gentile converts.
   There is no evidence that Paul in Colossians is dealing with some nascent Gnosticism.
   Indeed, there is little evidence that Gnostic heresies even existed in the first century AD.
   They first arose in Egypt sometime in the second century.

Paul's answer to the Judaizers' demands is the all sufficiency of Christ (Col 2:9-10):
In him all believers have been spiritually circumcised (2:11-13); all our infractions of the law have been nailed to the cross (2:14); the Mosaic Law's rituals were mere "shadows" that have been fulfilled in him (2:17).

Charles Erdman makes some helpful comments relating to this section of Colossians:

> The Colossian heresy is further described as being "after the rudiments of the world." This phrase probably applies to the Jewish ceremonials which the false teachers were attempting to bind upon the consciences of the Colossians. Many modern scholars, who find in the Colossian heresy rather elaborate elements of Gnosticism and angelolatry, are inclined to identify these "rudiments of the world" with the "elemental spirits" which in pagan and later Jewish belief were associated with wind, cold, heat, and all natural phenomena. "The rudiments of the world," therefore, would mean "the angelic beings supposed to be in control of the universe."

[7] That is why the author of Hebrews begins his epistle by contrasting Jesus and the angels, showing his superiority.

> However, the use of the phrase in Gal. 4:3, and the fact that here it is followed by the references to "circumcision" (Col. 2:11-13) and to feast days and Sabbath Days (v. 16), and also the connection with Jewish "ordinances" in which the phrase is repeated (v. 20), indicate that it may be sufficient to find in the words a designation of the ritual observances of the Jews. They are here called "rudiments," because they belonged to an elementary and preparatory system of religious teaching. They are "of the world," belonging to the sphere of the outward and material as opposed to the realm of the spiritual. Such ceremonies and rites were adapted to an age of religious immaturity. To return to these would be distinct retrogression.[8]

Erdman makes several important points:

1. The Colossian heresy did not involve paganism or Gnosticism, but rather the imposition of Jewish "ordinances". [See Colossians 2:14, 20; Ephesians 2:15, KJV.]
2. This suggests that the phrase "the rudiments of the world" refers to Jewish ritual observances.
3. Paul calls them "rudiments" because they belonged to "an elementary and preparatory system of religious teaching."
4. They are "of the world" because they are outward and material, not of the internal, spiritual realm.
5. They "were adapted to an age of religious immaturity."

Albert Barnes gives a further reason why the Jewish institutions are called "the elements of the world":

> … like the things of the world, they were transient, temporary, and of little value. They were unsatisfactory in their nature, and were soon to pass away, and to give place to a better system — as the things of this world are soon to give place to heaven.[9]

Don Preston also makes a pertinent suggestion. He ties all this to Paul's directive in Colossians 3:2:
Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.

The Judaizers believed Jerusalem would continue on as the center of God's purposes.
They wanted Gentile converts to effectively become Jews through circumcision and observance of the Law.
Modern Dispensationalists make the same error, with their focus on Jerusalem and the latest developments in the Middle East.
But Paul's directive is for Christians to focus on the heavenly kingdom, which we inherit when we die.[10]

We should note that the author of Hebrews also urges his readers not to go back to the safety and comfort of institutional Judaism. Early Jewish believers felt pressured to "come back home", as it were.
But to abandon their Christian profession meant certain judgment, if not in this life then certainly in the next.

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[8] Charles R. Erdman, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Exposition* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1933, 1966), pages 74-75. Via the Internet Archive: https://archive.org/details/commentariesonne0000char/page/74/mode/2up. Accessed 25-November-2025.
[9] From Barnes' comments on Galatians 4:3. Via the Bible Hub website: https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/galatians/4.htm.
[10] See Don K. Preston, *Minds Misplaced: Colossians 3:1-2 and Dispensationalism* (Ardmore, OK: JaDon Management, 2017).

Application to 2 Peter 3

Peter seems to use the term *stoicheia* in a slightly different way to Paul and the author of Hebrews.
His reference is not to the rituals of the Mosaic Law, but rather to Jerusalem and the temple.
Peter is answering the false hopes of the last-days scoffers, which centered on the Holy City and its temple.
But of course, all these — Jerusalem, the temple and the Law's rituals — were closely related.
All were facets of Judaism — "an elementary and preparatory system of religious teaching."

Within a few years of Peter's writing, the temple and city were burned and destroyed by the Roman army.
In the conflagration the genealogical records were lost, so no Jewish man today can prove his priestly ancestry.
Moreover, with the 70 AD termination of national Israel, a whole new world order was inaugurated.
Peter calls this order the "new heavens and a new earth". John depicts this new order in Revelation 21 – 22.
Judaism, with its narrow focus and external rituals, gave way to the spiritual and universal religion of Christ.
Importantly, the new order under the rule of Christ is characterized by ever-increasing righteousness (2Pet 3:13).
With all of this being in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, including the following:
Psalm 72; Isaiah 9:6-7; 11:1-10; 42:1-4; 65:17-25; cf. Luke 1:32-33.

Appendix 1: The burning of Jerusalem and its temple by the Roman army in AD 70

The dates sometimes given for the siege of Jerusalem are:
14th April to **8th September** of the year 70.
The siege therefore lasted almost 5 months.

The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (37 to ca. 100 AD) wrote a detailed account of the Jewish-Roman War.
The following are from his work, *The Jewish War*, written ca. 75 AD.
They relate to the last month of the city's siege:

1. The Temple is consumed by fire on **10th Lous** (= 10th Av) — probably 10th August:
   Josephus notes twice (in 6.4.5 / 6.250 and 6.4.8 / 6.268) that this was the anniversary of the burning of the First Temple by the Babylonians in 586 BC.

   Josephus (in 6.5.1 / 6.275) provides an eyewitness account of the destruction, the fire, and the noise:

   > You would indeed have thought that the temple-hill was boiling over from its base, being everywhere one mass of flame, but yet that the stream of blood was more copious than the flames …

2. Jerusalem is sacked and set ablaze on **8th Gorpaeus** (= 8th Elul) — 28 days after 10th Lous:
   The Romans now command the whole city and plant their ensigns on the towers.
   All Jerusalem is in flames (6.8.5 / 6.407).

Sources and Notes:

1. Josephus' works can be found online on the Christian Classics Ethereal Library (CCEL) website:
   https://www.ccel.org/ccel/josephus/complete.toc.html.
   This website employs the traditional (Whiston) sectioning of *The Jewish War*:
   6.4.5 means Book 6, Chapter 4, Paragraph 5.
2. Livius.org website: Chronology of the Jewish War, 66-70:
   https://www.livius.org/articles/concept/roman-jewish-wars/roman-jewish-wars-5/.
3. The citation in point one above is from *The Jewish War.* Translated by Henry St. John Thackeray.
   Original source:
   The 1928 Loeb Classical Library edition of *Josephus*, Volume 3 (of 9): The Jewish War, Books 4 – 7.
   6.275 means Book 6, Section 275 in this Greek-English (Loeb) edition of the *War.*
   This corresponds with 6.5.1 in the system devised by William Whiston in his 1737 translation of the work.

Appendix 2: Sermon by John Owen

John Owen (1616-1683) is considered by many to have been the greatest of the Puritan theologians. He served as chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, and was the vice-chancellor of Oxford University.

Owen held that 2 Peter 3 is a prophecy of the impending destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. His sermon on 2 Peter 3:11 can be found on the Christian Classics Ethereal Library website: https://www.ccel.org/ccel/owen/sermons.iv.xiii.html.
Sermon 10, entitled *Providential changes, an argument for universal holiness*.

Here are four excerpts from Owen's sermon:

> It is evident, from sundry places in the New Testament, what extreme oppositions the believing Jews met withal, all the world over, from their own countrymen, with and among whom they lived. They in the meantime, no doubt, warned them of the wrath of Christ against them for their cursed unbelief and persecutions; particularly letting them know, that Christ would come in vengeance ere long, according as he had threatened, to the ruin of his enemies. And because the persecuting Jews, all the world over, upbraided the believers with the temple and the holy city, Jerusalem, their worship and service instituted of God, which they had defiled; they were given to know that even all these things also should be destroyed, for their rejection of the Son of God. After some continuance of time, the threatening denounced being not yet accomplished, — as is the manner of profane persons and hardened sinners, Ecclesiastes 8:11, — they began to mock and scoff, as if they were all but the vain pretenses, or loose, causeless fears of the Christians. That this was the state with them, or shortly would be, the apostle declares in this chapter, verses 3, 4. Because things continued in the old state, without alteration, and judgment was not speedily executed, they scoffed at all the threats about the coming of the Lord that had been denounced against them.
>
> . . .
>
> On this foundation I affirm, that the heavens and earth here intended in this prophecy of Peter, the coming of the Lord, the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men, mentioned in the destruction of that heaven and earth, do all of them relate, not to the last and final judgment of the world, but to that utter desolation and destruction that was to be made of the Judaical church and state; for which I shall offer these two reasons, of many that might be insisted on from the text:—
>
> (1) Because whatever is here mentioned was to have its peculiar influence on the men of that generation. He speaks of that wherein both the profane scoffers and those scoffed at were concerned, and that as Jews; — some of them believing, others opposing the faith. Now, there was no particular concernment of that generation in that sin, nor in that scoffing, as to the day of judgment in general; but there was a peculiar relief for the one and a peculiar dread for the other at hand, in the destruction of the Jewish nation; and, besides, an ample testimony, both to the one and the other, of the power and dominion of the Lord Jesus Christ; — which was the thing in question between them.

(2) Peter tells them, that, after the destruction and judgment that he speaks of, verse 13, “We, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth,” etc. They had this expectation. But what is that promise? where may we find it? Why, we have it in the very words and letter, Isaiah 65:17. Now, when shall this be that God will create these “new heavens and new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness?” Saith Peter, “It shall be after the coming of the Lord, after that judgment and destruction of ungodly men, who obey not the gospel, that I foretell.” But now it is evident, from this place of Isaiah, with chap. 66:21, 22, that this is a prophecy of gospel times only; and that the planting of these new heavens is nothing but the creation of gospel ordinances, to endure for ever. The same thing is so expressed, Hebrews 12:26-28.

. . .

[Concerning the need to be watchful and to live holy lives]:
(1) As it was foretold and threatened by Christ. How were believers cautioned to be ready for it with eminent holiness and watchfulness therein! So Luke 21:34, 36, “Take heed to yourselves; watch, therefore.” Why so? “Christ is coming,” verse 27. When? “Why, in this generation,” verse 32. What to do? “Why, to dissolve heaven and earth,” verse 25; to “dissolve the Jewish church and state. Watch, therefore; give all diligence.” So also Matthew 24:42. “Watch, therefore.” Oh! on this account what manner of persons ought we to be!

. . .

[Concerning Christ’s ongoing, periodic interventions in world affairs]:
Because in every such providential alteration or dissolution of things on the account of Christ and his church, there is a peculiar coming of Christ himself. He cometh into the world for the work he hath to do; he cometh among his own to fulfil his pleasure among them. Hence such works are called “his coming;” and “the coming of his day.” Thus James exhorts these very Jews to whom Peter here writes, with reference to the same things, James 5:7-9, “Be patient unto the coming of the Lord.” But how could that generation extend their patience to the day of judgment? “Nay,” saith he, “that is not the work I design, but his coming to take vengeance on his stubborn adversaries;” which he saith, verse 8, “‘draweth nigh,’ is even, at hand; yea, Christ, ‘the judge, standeth before the door,’” verse 9, “ready to enter;” — which also he did within a few years. So upon or in the destruction of Jerusalem (the same work), Luke 21:27, the Son of man is said to “come in a cloud, with power and great glory;” — and they that escape in that desolation are said to “stand before the Son of man,” verse 36.