IN PURIFYING FIRE:
WORLD VIEW AND 2 PETER 3:10

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ABSTRACT

The word εἰρήνῃσται is unintelligible in the text of 2 Peter 3:10. The majority of manuscripts have variant readings. An examination of the various readings shows that in the early church the problem was solved by interpreting the text in the light of the religious context: the Zoroastrian eschatology. Although many modern commentators and translators accept the originality of the reading with εἰρήνῃσται almost all follow the lead of the early church in translating from the context.

1 INTRODUCTION

2 Peter 3:10 is a curious text, not only because it is incomprehensible as it stands but also because of the range of variants in the manuscripts and emendations to the text proposed by modern commentators. The culprit responsible for this textual mélange is the word εἰρήνῃσται. In the NA26 the text reads as follows:

"Ἡζει δὲ ἡμέρα κυρίου ὡς κλέπτης, ἐν ἡ οἱ ὁπίσω καὶ θείοις παρελεύσονται σταυχεὶα δὲ κανονικῶς ἁλθήσεται καὶ γῆ καὶ τὰ ἐν αὐτῇ ἔργα εἰρήνῃσται.

The day of the Lord is coming like a thief, on which day the heavens will come to an end with a loud, sudden roar, and the elements will be destroyed by burning, and the earth and all the works on it will be found.

It is the difficulty of making sense of εἰρήνῃσται (will be found) in this context which spawned all the attempts at wrestling some meaning from this occurrence of the word.

2 RECONSTRUCTING THE ORIGINAL(?) TEXT

Already in the early church problems were experienced with the reading of εἰρήνῃσται which, according to Bruce Metzger, is the oldest reading, and the one which best explains the origin of the others that have been

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1 This reading of NA26 is attested to by Ἐ B K P 0156vid 323 (1241) 1739 pc syph.hmg arm Origen.
preserved’ (1971:705-706), the argument being that since εἰρεθήσεται is the more difficult reading (also attested to by some ancient manuscripts, making it the oldest reading) it should be taken as the original reading. The variants are to be understood as attempts to clarify the meaning of the text. Metzger says: ‘In view of the difficulty of extracting any acceptable sense from the passage, it is not strange that copyists and translators produced a variety of modifications’ (1971:706).

Several witnesses retain εἰρεθήσεται but with qualification. The Sahidic version and one manuscript of the Harclean Syriac version insert the negative οὐχ thus reading ‘it will not be found’ in the sense ‘it will have disappeared’. The Bodmer papyrus P72 adds λιγυμενα, meaning ‘it will be found dissolved/destroyed’, a reading which overloads the context with three occurrences of the same verb.

Some witnesses omit εἰρεθήσεται and its accompanying phrase καὶ γῆ...εἰρεθήσεται (Ψ, two old Latin manuscripts m and z, the Vulgate edition of Wordsworth-White, Pelagius, Cassiodorus, Bede, Ps-Occumeniuscomm and Theophylact). Others substitute εἰρεθήσεται with another verb that makes sense in the context, for example C reads ἀφαιρεθήσεται—‘will disappear’; A 048 33 614 (2464), other manuscripts of the majority text, some manuscripts of the old Latin version, Vulgate (Clementine edition), the Syriac (Harclean), Coptic (Bohairic) and Ethiopic versions, Augustine, Cyril, John-Damascus and Ps-Occumenius, read κατακαίθησεται/κατακαϊσθήσεται—‘will be burned up’.

Various conjectural emendations have been proposed to solve the riddle of εἰρεθήσεται; although being reckoned the oldest reading, it is devoid of meaning in this context. After ἐφρα the word ἐφρα has fallen out (Bradshaw), causing the phrase to read ‘the earth and the things in it will be found useless’; εἰρεθήσεται is a scribal corruption of ῥιψεται/ρέισεται (Hort in an appeal to 1 Enoch 1:6) which would read ‘the earth and the things in it will flow or melt’; συφρυμεται (Naber) reading ‘will flow together’; ἐκπυρωθήσεται (Olivier) creating ‘will be burnt to ashes’; ἀρθήσεται (J B Mayor) which would read ‘will be taken away’; κρυθήσεται (Eb Nestle) producing ‘will be judged’; ἱαθήσεται/ἐξιαθήσεται (Chase) reading ‘will be healed (thoroughly)’; and πυρωθήσεται (Vansittart) ‘will be burned’.

Viewed synoptically, the variants and conjectural emendations evidence the following possibilities: disappear, flow/melt, burn, be judged. More recently Al Wolters proposed a solution which entails finding a new meaning for εἰρεθήσεται altogether (1987:405-413). With an appeal to 1 Pt 1:7, 2 Pt 3:14 and Barnabas 21:6 he argues that εἰρήσκω and cognates refer (in those contexts) to the eschatological result of a purifying process, the survival of judgement. The argument is that behind all these references lies the metaphor of metalworking, the melting of metals found in Mi 4:1: ‘The day comes, burning like a furnace; all
the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble, and that day when it comes, will set them ablaze, leaving them neither root nor branch, says the Lord of Hosts' (REB). The conclusion is that εἰρήνη τελεῖ的意义 refers here to the metalworker's melting of metal to purify it, thus to 'prove' it, meaning it was 'found', that is 'was shown to be' pure, unblemished, etc.

The problem with this semantic possibility is that, despite Wolters's insistence, εἰρήνη τελεῖ is not used unqualified (that is, without an implied subject or predicate) in 1 Pt 1:7, 2 Pt 3:14 and Barnabas 21:6 as it is in 2 Pt 3:10. This makes the use of those texts as reference material questionable. In those contexts the use of εἰρήνη τελεῖ is perfectly natural, being good idiomatic Greek. That would make 2 Pt 3:10 the only occurrence of the word where it carries the pregnant meaning of 'found/ was shown to be' (in a metalworking sense). Unless other instances of this same unqualified use of εἰρήνη τελεῖ with an indubitable reference to a background of metalworking can be found, it remains improbable that this could have been the intended meaning of the word. And this still leaves us with an incomprehensible text.

Either one of two possibilities remains. The first is that εἰρήνη τελεῖ represents an early corruption of the text, that is, before the extant witnesses. The second would be to find another semantic possibility for the word, which in my opinion is improbable.

3 TRACING THE TRAJECTORIES OF INTERPRETATIONS

As early perhaps as the first half of the third century the original(?) meaning had already been lost. Not only do the majority of witnesses replace εἰρήνη τελεῖ with another word, but the old translations also follow the same trend. Thus we have the old Latin translation (the T-tradition) reading ex-sventur, that is 'will be burned up'. The old Latin (S-tradition) deals with it in another way. It omits the word, thereby subordinating the rest of the phrase to the foregoing resolventur and making it read 'and the elements will be molten in fire as well as the earth and all the works on it'. The Vulgate has a still more radical way of dealing with it; it omits the whole phrase after solventur.

Looking at all the variants and proposed emendations, one thing becomes clear. They are all attempts to give meaning to an essentially incomprehensible text and they do so from the context. An examination of the world in which these words were meaningful sheds some interesting light on this text-critical dilemma.

Although exegetes search for the religious context in more or less the same

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2 This imagery is also employed in a similar context in 1 Cor 3:13-14.
3 By context I do not mean only textual context but also, and even more importantly, the religious context.
broad direction, there is no full agreement as to the exact background or context of the text. Appeals are made to the Old Testament, for example:

Ml 4:1: The day comes, burning like a furnace; all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble, and that day when it comes will set them ablaze, leaving them neither root nor branch, says the Lord of Hosts (Wolters 1987:411; Martin & Elliott 1982: 155).

Mi 1:3ff: Even now, the Lord is leaving his dwelling-place; he comes down and walks on the heights of the earth. At his touch the mountains dissolve like wax before fire; valleys are torn open as when torrents pour down a hillside: all this for Jacob's crime and Israel's sin (Sidebottom 1967:122).

Zph 1:18: On the day of the Lord's wrath by the fire of his jealousy the whole land will be consumed; for he will make a sudden and terrible end of all who live in the land (Martin & Elliott 1982:155; Sidebottom 1967:120).

Zph 3:8: in order to pour my wrath on them, all my burning anger; the whole earth will be consumed by the fire of my jealousy (Sidebottom 1967:120).

Jl 2:3: Their vanguard is a devouring fire, their rearguard a leaping flame; before them the land is a garden of Eden, but behind them it is a desolate waste; (Schelkle 1988:226)

Is 66:15-18: See, the Lord is coming in fire, his chariots like a whirlwind, bringing his retribution with his furious anger and with the flaming fire of his rebukes. The Lord will judge with fire, and by his sword he will test all mankind, and many will be slain by him. Those who consecrate and purify themselves for garden-rites, one after another in a magic ring, those who eat swine flesh, rats, and vile vermin will all meet their end, says the Lord, for I know their deeds and their thoughts (Martin & Elliott 1982:155; Sidebottom 1967:120).

Ps 97:3-5: Fire goes ahead of him and consumes his enemies all around. His lightning-flashes light up the world; the earth sees and trembles. Mountains melt like wax at the Lord's approach, the Lord of all the earth (Sidebottom 1967:120).

And from extra-Biblical literature the following references:

1QH 3:29ff: The torrents of Satan shall reach to all sides of the world. In all their channels a consuming fire shall destroy every tree, green and barren, on their banks; unto the end of their courses it shall scourge with flames of fire, and shall consume the foundations of the earth and the expanse of dry land. The bases of the mountains shall blaze and the roots of the rocks shall turn to torrents of pitch; it shall devour as far as the great Abyss (Schelkle 1988:226; Sidebottom 1967:120).

TLevi 4:1: Know, then, that the Lord will effect judgement on the sons of men. For
even when stones are split, when the sun is extinguished, the waters are dried up, fire is cowed down, all creation is distraught, invisible spirits are vanishing, and hell is snatching spoils by sufferance of the Most High, men—unbelieving still—will persist in their wrongdoing. Therefore they shall be condemned with punishment (Balz & Schrage 1973:145).

1En 1:6ff: Mountains and high places will fall down and be frightened. And high hills shall be made low, and they shall melt like a honeycomb before the flame. And the earth shall be rent asunder; and all that is upon the earth shall perish. And there shall be judgement upon all, [including] the righteous (Martin & Elliott 1982:155, Schelkle 1988:226).

1En 52:6ff: As for these mountains which you have seen with your own eyes—the mountain of iron, the mountain of copper, the mountain of silver, the mountain of gold, the mountain of coloured metal and the mountain of lead—all of them, in the presence of the Elect One, will become like a honeycomb [that melts] before the fire, like water that gushes down from the top of such mountains, and become helpless by his feet... All these substances will be removed and destroyed from the surface of the earth when the Elect One shall appear before the face of the Lord of the Spirits.4 (Schelkle 1988:226).

Life of Adam and Eve (Vita) 49:3: and the archangel Michael said to us, 'Because of your collusion, our Lord will bring over your race the wrath of his judgement, first by water and then by fire; by these two the Lord will judge the whole human race' (Schelkle 1988:226).

SibOr 2:196ff: And then a great river of blazing fire will flow from heaven, and will consume every place, land and great ocean and gleaming sea, lakes and rivers, springs and implacable Hades and the heavenly vault. But the heavenly luminaries will crash together, also into an utterly desolate form. For all the stars will fall together from heaven on the sea. All the souls of men will gnash their teeth, burning in a river, and brimstone and a rush of fire in a fiery plain, and ashes will cover all. And then all the elements of the world will be bereft—air, land, sea, light, vault of heaven, days, nights...(252) and then all will pass through the blazing river and the unquenchable flame. All the righteous will be saved, but the impious will then be destroyed for all ages5 (Schelkle 1988:226).

SibOr 3:84ff: An undying cataract of raging fire will flow, and burn earth, burn sea, and melt the heavenly vault and days and creation itself into one and separate them into clean air. There will no longer be twinkling spheres of luminaries, no night, no dawn, no numerous days of care, no spring, no summer, no winter, no autumn. And then indeed the judgement of the great God will come into the midst of the great

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4 Note that the judgement at the end, the world fire, the elements that burn away and the return/parousia occur in the same combination as in 2 Pt 3. See below.

5 Also 2:283-338, where the fire is also an instrument of punishment.
world, when all these things happen (Schelkle 1988:226).

SibOr 4:17ff: But if you do not obey me, evil-minded ones, but love impiety, and receive all these things with evil ears, there will be fire throughout the whole world, and a very great sign with sword and trumpet at the rising of the sun. The whole world will hear a bellowing noise and mighty sound. He will burn the whole earth, and will destroy the whole race of men and all cities and rivers at once, and the sea. He will destroy everything by fire, and it will be smoking dust (Schelkle 1988:226; Martin & Elliott 1982:155).

There is one similar occurrence of this image in the New Testament outside of 2 Pt, and that is in 1 Cor 3:12ff:

If any builds on that foundation with gold, silver, and precious stones, the work that each does will at last be brought to light; the day of judgement will expose it. For that day dawns in fire, and the fire will test the worth of each person’s work (Schelkle 1988:228n3; Sidebottom 1967:120).

Outside of the New Testament in other early Christian literature one can point to Apoc Peter 5:

And this shall come at the day of judgement upon them that have fallen away from faith in God and that have committed sin: cataracts of fire shall be let loose; and darkness and obscurity shall come up and clothe and veil the whole world; and the waters shall be changed and turned into coals of fire, and all that is in them shall burn, and the sea shall become fire. Under the heaven shall be a sharp fire that cannot be quenched, and flow to fulfil the judgement of wrath. And the stars shall fly in pieces by flames of fire, as if they had not been created, and the powers of the heaven shall pass away for lack of water and shall be as if they had not been. Then he shall command them to enter into the river of fire while the works of every one of them shall stand before them to every man according to his deeds. As for the elect that have done good, they shall come unto me and not see death by the devouring fire. But the unrighteous, the sinners and the hypocrites shall stand in the depths of darkness that shall not pass away, and their chastisement is the fire, and angels bring forward their sins and prepare for them a place wherein they shall be punished for ever (every one according to his transgression).

It is important for the understanding of what is involved here to gain a synoptic overview of what is presented. All the selections are taken from contexts dealing with eschatological judgement. This judgement is simultaneously a testing

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6 I have selected only those passages which deal with the end of the world through fire, and omitted all references to fire falling outside this scope. I do not claim that this list is exhaustive, but only that this selection provides sufficient evidence to prove the case I am arguing here.
by fire and a burning up of the world. The fire is, moreover, also an instrument of punishment. The eschatological fire is accompanied by spectacular phenomena: earthquakes, loud hissing noises, dark clouds obliterating sun, moon and stars, the earth splitting open to reveal the abyss, rivers of fire flowing from the abysmal depths down the mountains, melting them, burning everything in their way, leaving a thoroughly scorched earth, burnt to ashes, with people fleeing in front of the flames. The world does not end with a 'meltdown' (Wolters 1987:409) but with a big bang. What is described is not a metalworker melting metal to purify it. The root image underlying all these texts is that of a volcanic eruption. That is why I believe that Wolters's attempt to describe the meaning of ειρεθίσται as 'show to be/show its mettle', in the sense of the purification of metal, misses the mark. He employs the wrong root image.

The burning question concerns the origin of this root image. Most exegetes only list the textual references. Some do frame these references in a certain context by indicating that the expectation of the end of the world through fire, the conflagration, grew out of Iranian and Greek thought. Iranian cosmology was taken up in Greek (Roman) thought, whence it was carried over to hellenistic Judaism (Schelkle 1988:226; Grundmann 1979:114). There it is reflected in such diverse writings as Josephus Antiquities I 2,3 (70), the Sibylline Oracles, 1QH 39 and Pseudo-Sophocles.10

One can be even more specific. The world view is Iranian, or Zoroastrian. The ministry of the prophet himself should probably be dated to circa 1000 BC12 and although it was for a long time more or less a local religion in Persia and Bactria, it was through influential converts such as Cyrus and the Achaemenid

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7 ‘In this great apocalyptic vision Zoroaster perhaps fused, unconsciously, tales of volcanic eruptions and streams of burning lava with his own experience of Iranian ordeals by molten metal’ (Boyce 1979:28).
8 This depiction of the end of the world has ancient roots. According to the father of Greek philosophy, Heraclitus, fire is the Urelement of the world, identical with the godhead or the Logos, and from it originates water, earth and soul. The world exists in a number of world periods which return to fire and again appear from it. The consistency of the world lies in its metamorphoses. Heraclitus' thought is again taken up in the Stoics' concept of world fire, the ἐκπυρωμένος.
9 According to Hippolytus Adv Haer X 27, this doctrine of the eschatological conflagration was, within Judaism, held by the Essenes.
10 The second fragment attributed to Sophocles, quoted by Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius (quoting Clement), and Pseudo-Justin. ‘The fragment contains an eschatological vision with many parallels in Stoic thought, as well as in Jewish apocalyptic eschatology’, (Attidge, in Charlesworth 1985:826).
11 The prophet's name was originally Zarathushtra in the Avesta; the old Persian form would have been Zarauzhrta, the Median form Zaratushra and the Pahlavi Zardusht. The English spelling Zoroaster is derived from the Greek Ζωροαστράς, which incorporates the word σταυρός, or star, probably because of the later identification of the prophet as the source of astrological knowledge. See Yamauchi 1991:411.
12 See Yamauchi 1991:413-415 for the debate on this.
dynasty that it became the state religion of the Persian empire. As such, Zoroastrianism spread to the whole of the Persian empire, including Asia Minor and Egypt. Knowledge of the ‘Persian religion’, as it was called, also reached Greek shores where it is reflected in Greek philosophy, especially the pre-Socratic school of the Ionians. In the case of Heraclitus the influence is perhaps most marked. But there were also numerous references to the Persian religion in Greek historiography. (Boyce 1982:1991)

It is probably through close contacts between Jewish and Zoroastrian communities that this world view was transported into Jewish lore. This would explain why the Zoroastrian view of the end of the world found its way into Jewish writings such as are listed above. But how would the world end according to Zoroastrian sources?

The sun will become dark, the year, month and day will become shorter. Crops will wither and dry. A dark cloud will make the sky dark, and a hot wind and a cold wind will blow. Rain will stay away and the rivers and waters dry up. The metal on the hills and mountains will melt and will flow like a river. Then will the Last Judgement take place. God will try humanity by fire, a fire which lives by itself without nourishment, pure and liquid, fluid like water. Airyaman,
Yazata of friendship and healing, and Atar, Fire, will melt all the metal in the mountains, and this will flow in a glowing river over the earth. All people will enter into the molten metal. To the righteous it will be like passing through warm milk, but to the godless it will be like walking in the flesh through molten metal. Those whose sins exceed their good deeds by number and weight will be scorched and burnt. The flame will not harm the righteous—they will be purified and enter into Paradise restored.\footnote{This view is nowhere presented systematically. This is a reconstruction based on the various sources. (See Yamauchi 1991:457; Boyce 1975:242ff; Boyce 1991:377ff; Boyce 1979:27-29.)}

The themes of judgement, the end of the world, end or purification through fire, burning away of sins and the sinful evildoers, recur in our text. Note also the wider context of 2 Pt 3. Chapter 2 lists a whole \textit{Lasterkatalog} of sins and iniquities. Ending this litany of evildoings is the reference to the judgement awaiting the evildoers. They will be destroyed on the day of judgement when the heavens and earth will burn (3:5-7, 10-12). Since the fire will also be an instrument of testing, the faithful should take care to live ethically correct lives (v11, 14). Then, after the world fire, the Big Restoration will take place: the ‘new heavens and a new earth, in which justice will be established’ (v13).

This view on the end proved to be pervasive. Not only is it verbally reflected in the Apocalypse of Peter, but Clement of Alexandria has Paul saying in a work anonymously attributed to him: ‘Take also the Hellenistic books, read the Sibyls, ...and taking Hystaspes, read’ (\textit{Stromata} VI.5.43.1)\footnote{\textit{Hystaspes} refers to the pre-Christian (Hellenistic) Zoroastrian work, the \textit{Oracles of Hystaspes}. The frame story of the oracle is a dream dreamt by Hystaspes (Vishtaspa), the princely patron of Zoroaster, ‘a very ancient king of the Medes’ (Boyce 1991:377-381).} Explicit quotations from \textit{Hystaspes} were made by two Christian apologists, both born of pagan parents: Justin Martyr in Samaria about 100 AD, and Lactantius in Africa about 250 AD. Either \textit{Hystaspes} or poems of the Persian Sibyl, or both, appear also to have been used by Commodianus, a Christian Latin poet who lived a little earlier than Lactantius and who, like him, was born a pagan in Africa (Boyce 1991:377). Justin Martyr records that ‘the Sibyl and Hystaspes hath given out that this whole system of incorruptibles shall be destroyed by fire’ (\textit{Apologia} I.44.12). This reflects the Zoroastrian doctrine that evil will be destroyed at the end of time. Lactantius, too, mentions the fire at the end of time. Although he does not explicitly quote from the \textit{Hystaspes} (and could be drawing on utterances of the Persian Sibyl), what he describes is strikingly Zoroastrian, namely that it is by fire that God will try humanity. The important thing to realize here is that these apologists, while zealously defending their new faith, \textit{had recourse to Zoroastrian writings precisely because they had found in ancient Greek, Egyptian and Persian wisdom positive proof of the truth of similar Christian doctrines}. Ancient wisdom and
Sibylline prophecy had already become folklore and constituted the very air the Christians breathed. It is therefore not surprising that in a sort of circular argument the Persian oracles were drawn in to undergird an already accepted worldview.  

4 BY WAY OF CONCLUSION: A RETURN TO THE TEXT

In the light of the foregoing one can safely say that each of the manuscript variants evidences an acquaintance with this widely pervasive worldview. From this conclusion it is only a short distance to surmise that all the early transmitters and translators presented what they perceived to be the meaning of the text, or what should have been the meaning. Thus we have in the variants a number of interpretations of the text.

The mystery that needs to be clarified is this: is there an internal relation between εὑρεθησεταί and the variant readings? Are the variant readings correct interpretations of an original (similar) meaning of εὑρεθησεταί which has been lost since very early? Or is εὑρεθησεταί simply a corruption or a mistake? My own sympathy lies with the last possibility. If εὑρεθησεταί did make sense, the major part of the tradition would not have found it necessary to change the text into something more intelligible.

Whichever way one wants to see it, it is curious to notice that modern translators of 2 Pt 3:10 follow the same route as the early church, even those translations based on NA26/UBS3. All imbue εὑρεθησεταί with a meaning derived from the context:

and the earth and all that is in it will be brought to judgement. (Revised English Bible)

19 Perhaps it is opportune to say something about the Persian Sibylline works. Not only were they composed in Greek, but in them Zoroastrian teachings took on a Greek guise. The names of the prophet himself and of Vistaspa remained to give the oracles their authority and claim to antiquity. Greek renderings, however, had long before been established for the major Zoroastrian divinities (e.g. Zeus for Ahura Mazda) and could be readily used. The religio-political message of the Persian Sibyllists had an overriding eschatological concern, and those doctrines which because of their antiquity and essentially Iranian character were irrelevant to the present purposes were omitted. It is for this reason that these writers, concentrating on the Zoroastrian salvation teachings, played a notable part in making these not only more widely known but also more generally acceptable in the Hellenistic age. The Persian Sibyllists wrote primarily for their Greek-speaking co-religionists in Asia Minor, and secondly for other Greek-speaking Asians, but Sibylline utterances circulated freely, and those of the Persian Sibyl evidently came to be read also by Greeks, included in her ever-increasing sisterhood (for ‘barbarian’ and other Sibyls multiplied at this time) (Boyce 1991:380).

20 A more definite answer to this question can only be given once all possible similar uses of εὑρέθησα in the TLG are computer-checked. But that remains for another day.
en die aarde met alles wat daarop is, vergaan. (New Afrikaans translation)

and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. (New International Version)

and the earth with everything in it will vanish. (Good News Bible)

and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up. (Revised Standard Version)

and the earth and everything done on it will be found out. (New American Bible—New Catholic translation)

und die Erde und alles, was darauf ist, werden ihr Urteil finden. (Luther Bibel, rev ed 1975)

und die Erde und alles, was auf ihr ist, wird zerschmelzen. (Gute Nachricht)

and the earth with all that is in it will be laid bare. (New English Bible)

the earth and all that it contains will be burned up. (New Jerusalem Bible)

All that is now left for me to say is that I have to repeat: εἰρεθησαται in this context is unintelligible, and all interpreters have, of necessity, to fall into its trap. But I have no way out, as yet.

WORKS CONSULTED


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