

“Katastrophe” in the New Testament

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Abstract

“Catastrophe” comes from the Greek word “katastrophe” (καταστροφή). In general, “katastrophe” means “destruction, overthrow, or ruin”. Etymologically it means “turning upside down” and hence is the antithesis of edification (Mounce, 2000; Jimoh, 2020). In the new testament, “katastrophe” occurs only two times at 2 Timothy 2:14 and 2 Peter 2:6. This article tries to elaborate these 2 verses in their own context in order to rebuild the wider meaning of “katastrophe” in the New Testament. At 2 Timothy 2:14, “katastrophe” is in the context of spiritual ruin. Paul tries to remind people to avoid a useless debate about words, empty speeches and ungodly rumors of the doctrine of mere spiritual resurrection (Turco, 2018). Then, he advises them to “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15).” On the other hand, at 2 Peter 2:6, “katastrophe” is in the physical destruction’s context. But, in the end, this “katastrophe” still has a spiritual meaning to describe the false teachers. “Katastrophe” in 2 Peter 2:6 has a connection to (a) Genesis 18-19 (Sodom and Gomorrah) and (b) the Greek Mythology (Tartarus). “Tartarus” is the Greek name for the underworld. In this context, 2 Peter is signaling his attempt to address a multicultural audience (Neyrey, 1993). Finally, from these two verses, we can find that “katastrophe” in the New Testament can be understood as a spiritual ruin, in the context of the debate with the false teachers.

Keywords: catastrophe, katastrophe, new testament, physical destruction, spiritual ruin

Introduction

In Cambridge Dictionary, we can find a definition of “catastrophe”, i.e. “a sudden event that causes very great trouble or destruction” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). Then, “catastrophe” can also be “a sudden event that causes many people to suffer” or “an event that causes one person or a group of people personal suffering, or that makes difficulties” (Oxford Advanced American Dictionary, 2011). From these both dictionaries, we can find that “catastrophe” relates to “an event” which can be “a sudden” or “not”, but the effect is too obvious that can brings (1) a great trouble, (2) a destruction, (3) people to suffer, and (4) difficulties.

On the other hand, “catastrophe” can also be found in the New Testament. It occurs at 2 Timothy 2:14 and 2 Peter 2:6. From these occurrences, we will try to analyze the context of these two pericopes which the “catastrophe” appears in the text. Moreover, we will try to find an appropriate meaning of “catastrophe” on their own context in the New Testament and to explain the typical usage of “catastrophe” in the New Testament.

II. 2 Timothy 2:14-26

II.1. Background of 2 Timothy 2:14-26

This letter has been called Paul's last will and testament (MacArthur, 1996, c1995). Paul is in prison, resigned to the end of his ministry and life there (Towner, 1994). At that moment, Paul greets Timothy as his "dearly beloved son" (2 Tim 1:2) because Timothy was a great joy to the apostle Paul (McGee, 1991).

In 2 Timothy, the mood is grimmer (Johnson, 2008, c1974). Towner (1994) tries to describe it:

First Timothy is almost wholly devoted to opposing the false teachers in Ephesus and to organizing the church to that end. Second Timothy remains interested in the false teachers and their influence, but this interest is registered in a more general way, and the context is now the church in a broader sense (2:19–20; 3:1–4), even though the heretics mentioned (2:17) are those associated with the Ephesian church. The greater interest is in Timothy's own spiritual condition, which needs attention. As we will see, the battle with heresy provides a background that helps to illuminate Timothy's present condition, and here the contact with 1 Timothy (in the individual heretics who are named) may allow the explanation that 1 Timothy is the background of 2 Timothy.

The text of 2 Timothy 2:14 is a part of 2 Timothy 2:14-26. The title of this pericope [*a set of verses that forms one coherent unit or thought, suitable for public reading from a text, now usually of sacred scripture* (Schumacher, 2003)] is "A Worker Approved by God":

¹⁴ Remind them of these things, and solemnly charge them in the presence of God not to wrangle about words, which is useless, and leads to the ruin (καταστροφή) of the hearers. ¹⁵ Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth. ¹⁶ But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness, ¹⁷ and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, ¹⁸ men who have gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and thus they upset the faith of some. ¹⁹ Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness." ²⁰ Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor. ²¹ Therefore, if a man cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work. ²² Now flee from youthful lusts, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. ²³ But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels. ²⁴ And the Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, ²⁵ with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will. (New American Standard Bible - NASB)

This pericope is a part of a condemnation of apostate ideas that seem to have infiltrated the Ecclesia as early as 65 C.E. (Turco, 2018). In the early church, the majority of false teachers do not have enough skill in the scriptures to discern truth from error (Keener, 1993).

Paul moves into a specific discussion of the Ephesian church problem, i.e. Hymenaeus and Philetus (Jimoh, 2020). They were heretical teachers there. They said that "the resurrection has already taken place". Their talk spread like gangrene (v.17). This became a big problem for the Church. Paul tried to focus on the ministry of word so as the Ephesian church should not follow the

heretical ideas of Hymenaeus and Philetus.

II.2. Text 2 Timothy 2:14

Greek Version (2 Tim 2:14)

Ταῦτα ὑπομίμησθε διαμαρτυρόμενος ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ μὴ λογομαχεῖν, ἐπ’ οὐδὲν χρήσιμον, ἐπὶ καταστροφῇ τῶν ἀκούοντων.

English Version (2 Tim 2:14)

Remind them of these things, and solemnly charge them in the presence of God not to wrangle about words, which is useless, and leads to the ruin (katastrophe) of the hearers.

II.3. Structure of 2 Timothy 2:14

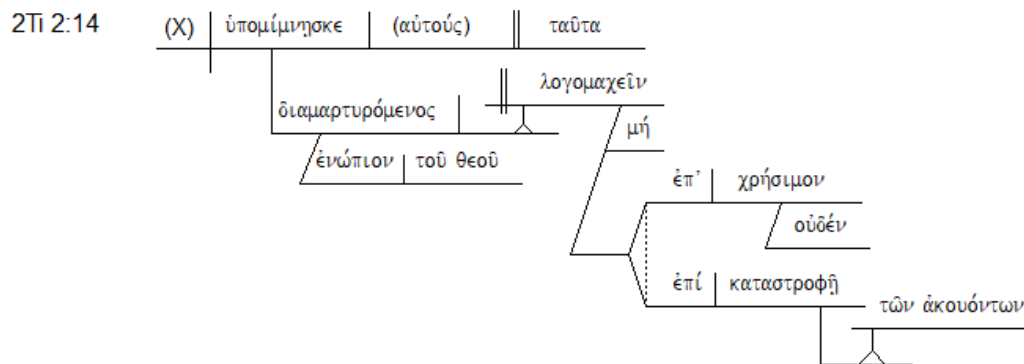


Diagram 1: Structure of 2 Timothy 2:14 (BibleWorks v.10)

Remind *them* of these things,
 and solemnly charge *them* **not to wrangle**
in the presence of God about **words**,
 which is **useless**,
 and **leads to the ruin**
 (**καταστροφή**)
 of the hearers.

From this structure, we can find that the “katastrophe” comes from “the words” which is “useless”. “The useless words”, in this context, is “the resurrection has already taken place” (v.18) that was said by Hymenaeus and Philetus. It became a problem for Paul. For him, “the resurrection is about a future event”. It can be found in 1 Corinthians 15:52, “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye,

at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed". Therefore, we can say that there is a dogmatical debate in this text between Hymenaeus-Philetus and Paul.

II.4. Interpretation

Remind them of these things, and solemnly charge them in the presence of God not to wrangle about words, which is useless, and leads to **the ruin** (καταστροφή) of the hearers.
(2 Tim 2:14)

The word "to remind" in 2 Tim 2:14 is in the form of "present active imperative (ὑπομνήσκω)" that indicates that it is to be a regular practice of reminding. Therefore, this is a never-ending process for Timothy to "remind" the men who are teachers of faith about "these things" (ταῦτα). Then, this "ταῦτα" refers to the hymn in 2 Tim 2:11-13 (Minor, 2008):

*It is a trustworthy statement:
For if we died with Him, we shall also live with Him;
If we endure, we shall also reign with Him;
If we deny Him, He also will deny us;
If we are faithless, He remains faithful; for He cannot deny Himself.*

The phrase of "and solemnly charge them in the presence of God" means that God functioning as witness. Them refers to the Christians in the Church of Ephesus. In this sense, Paul asks Timothy to give the instruction to his people gently. They do not need to dispute and to fight over words. Debate is not fruitful for their faith.

Paul uses the nominal form of the verb when he says about "debate". Therefore, there is an extension of meaning of "words" in this verse. It is not only "individual words" but also "various kinds of teachings and doctrines". Because of this, the teaching of Hymenaeus and Philetus about "resurrection" is not the only one to which Paul is addressed but one of the many things that he is opposed to. For that reason, "debating" is useless and unhelpful like a cancer. Such arguments do not help anyone. On the other hand, it causes great harm (katastrophe) to the people who listen (Arichea, D. C., & Hatton, H., 1995). This katastrophe refers more to the "**Spiritual Ruin**".

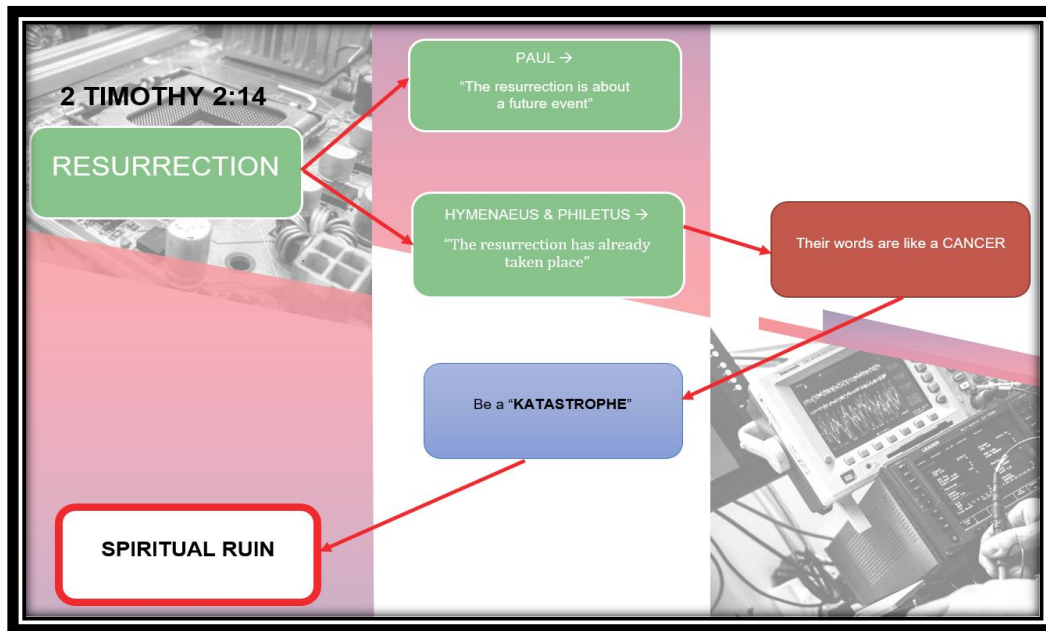


Diagram 2: "Katastrophe" in 2 Tim 2:14

III. 2 Peter 2:1-22

III.1. Background of 2 Peter 2:1-22

The aim of this letter (2 Peter) is to highlight "the knowledge of God". The author tries to describe "the knowledge of God" by dividing the letter to be seven parts (Douw G. Breed, 2021):

1. 2 Peter 1:1-2 : Opening of the letter
2. 2 Peter 1:3-11 : Summary of Peter's teaching
 - a. 2 Peter 1:3-4 : Historical Part
 - b. 2 Peter 1:5-9 : Ethical Encouragement Part
 - c. 2 Peter 1:11 : Eschatological Part
3. 2 Peter 1:12-15 & 2 Peter 3:1-2 : Purpose of writing
4. 2 Peter 1:16-21 : Peter's authority
5. 2 Peter 2:1-22 : Warning against the false teachers
6. 2 Peter 3:3-18 : Lord's coming
7. 2 Peter 3:17-18a : Conclusion of the letter
8. 2 Peter 3:18b : Eulogy

According to the explanation of Breed, we can find that 2 Peter 2:1-22 becomes an important theme in this letter. It is about "a warning against the false teachers". This theme (the false teachers) in 2 Peter 2:1-22 is immediately followed by Peter's teaching of the Lord's coming (2 Peter 3:3-18).

The text of 2 Peter 2:6 is a part of 2 Peter 2:1-22. The title of this pericope is "The False Teachers":

¹ But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. ² And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; ³ and in their greed, they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. ⁴ For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them

into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; 5 and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; 6 and if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly thereafter; 7 and if He rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men 8 for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day with their lawless deeds, 9 then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, 10 and especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority. Daring, self-willed, they do not tremble when they revile angelic majesties, 11 whereas angels who are greater in might and power do not bring a reviling judgment against them before the Lord. 12 But these, like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge, will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed, 13 suffering wrong as the wages of doing wrong. They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are stains and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, as they carouse with you, 14 having eyes full of adultery and that never cease from sin, enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed, accursed children; 15 forsaking the right way they have gone astray, having followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness, 16 but he received a rebuke for his own transgression; for a dumb donkey, speaking with a voice of a man, restrained the madness of the prophet. 17 These are springs without water, and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has been reserved. 18 For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, 19 promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved. 20 For if after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. 21 For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them. 22 It has happened to them according to the true proverb, "A dog returns to its own vomit," and, "A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire." (New American Standard Bible - NASB)

Based on this text, we can find that the main problem of the false teachers is about “their style of life” (following his desires and exploiting people with false words). They can say all the good things for the people, but he did not do it for themselves:

“¹⁸For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, 19 promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved.”

For Peter, this phenomenon cannot be accepted.

III.2. Text of 2 Peter 2:6

Greek Version (2 Peter 2:6)

καὶ πόλεις Σοδόμων καὶ Γομόρρας τεφρώσας καταστροφῇ **κατέκρινεν** ὑπόδειγμα μελλόντων
 ἀσεβεῖν τεθεικῶς

English Version (2 Peter 2:6)

and [if] He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to **destruction (katastrophe)** by reducing [them] to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly thereafter

III.3. Structure of 2 Peter 2:6 (4-10a)

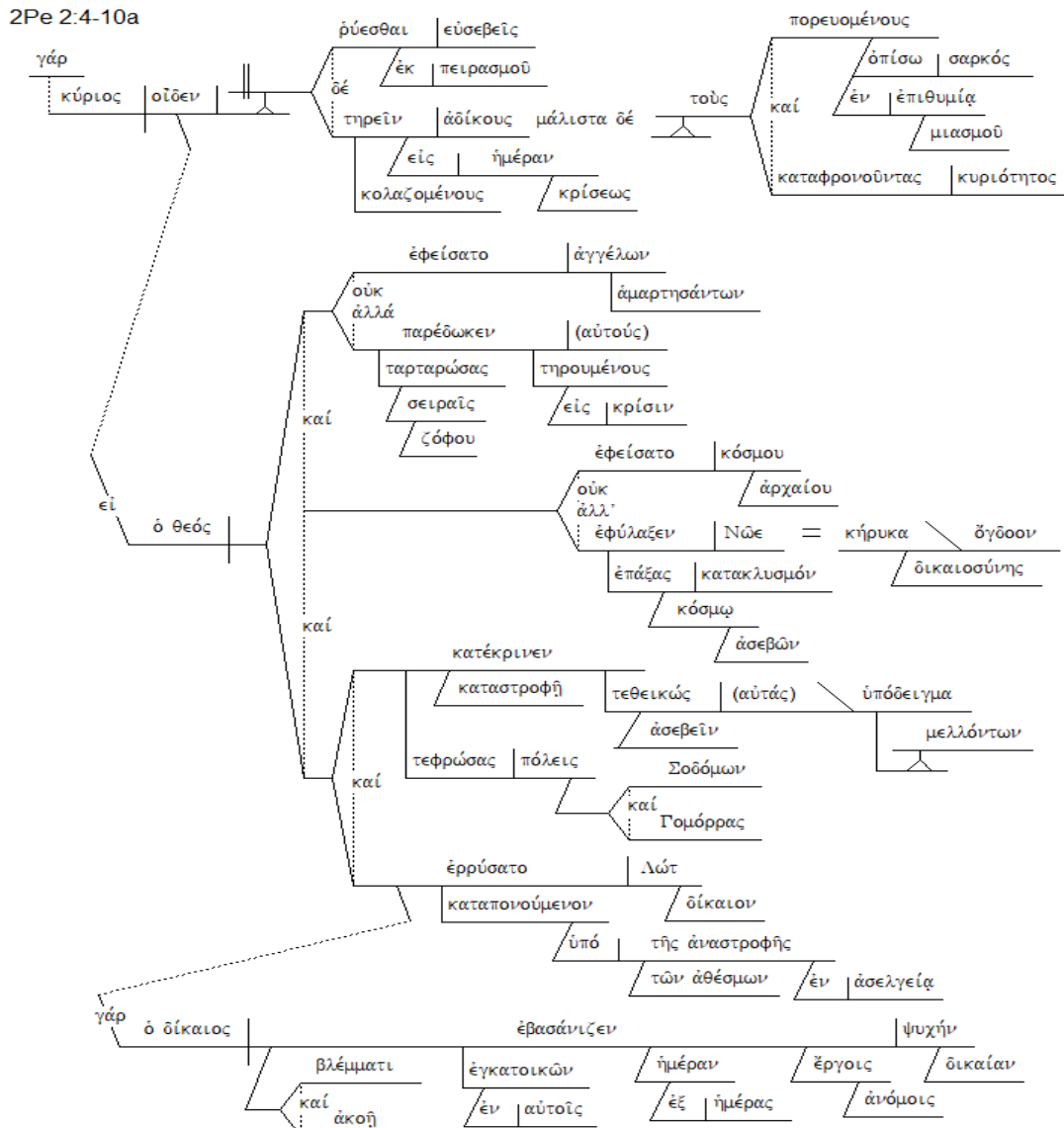


Diagram 3: Structure of 2 Peter 2:6 (4-10a) (BibleWorks v.10)

From the structure, we can find three parts of 2 Peter 2:4-10a:

- a. The opening of the description of God's deeds (v.4)
- b. The main description of God's deeds in the past (Old Testament) (vv.5-7)

- c. The conclusion of the description of God’s deeds (vv.8-10)

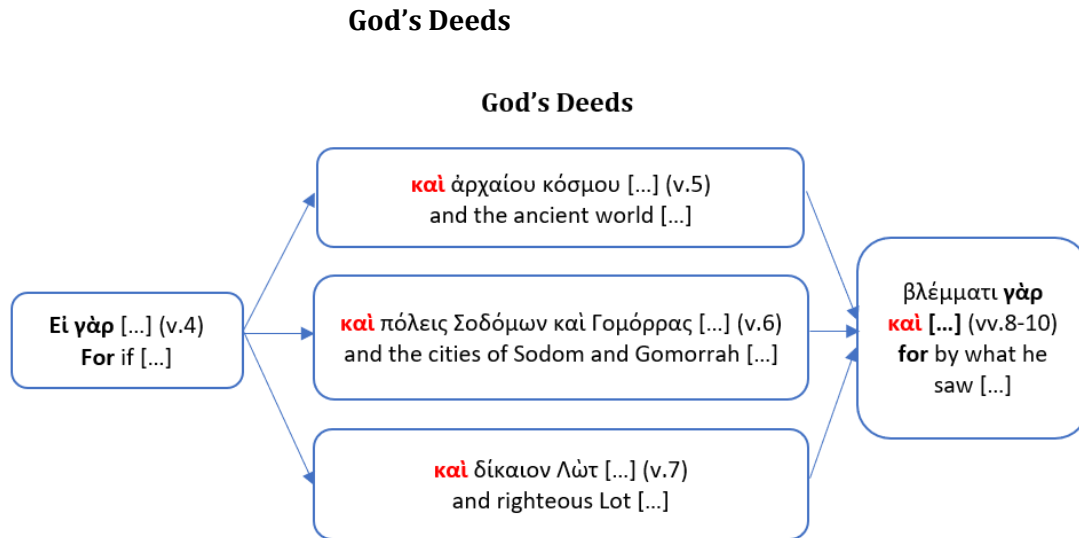


Diagram 4: Structure of 2 Peter 2:6 (4-10a)

The main point of this structure is “In the presence of evil, God did many things in the past (in the old testament), but finally, ‘the Lord knows how to rescue the godly (the good people) from temptation’ (v.9).” God saves his people.

III.4. Interpretation

“and [if] He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to **destruction (*katastrophe*)** by reducing [them] to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly thereafter”

(2 Peter 2:6)

In this context (2 Peter 2:6), we can find that Peter tries to describe what will happen to the false teachers by using the metaphor of the **destruction (*katastrophe*)** of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:24. In the first sight, Peter uses the *katastrophe* in the sense of “physical destruction of the cities”. But after that, Peter uses this metaphor of “the **destruction (*katastrophe*)** of the cities” as a “destruction of spiritual life” of the false teachers. Finally, in 2 Peter 2:6, *katastrophe* refers to the “**Spiritual Ruin**”.

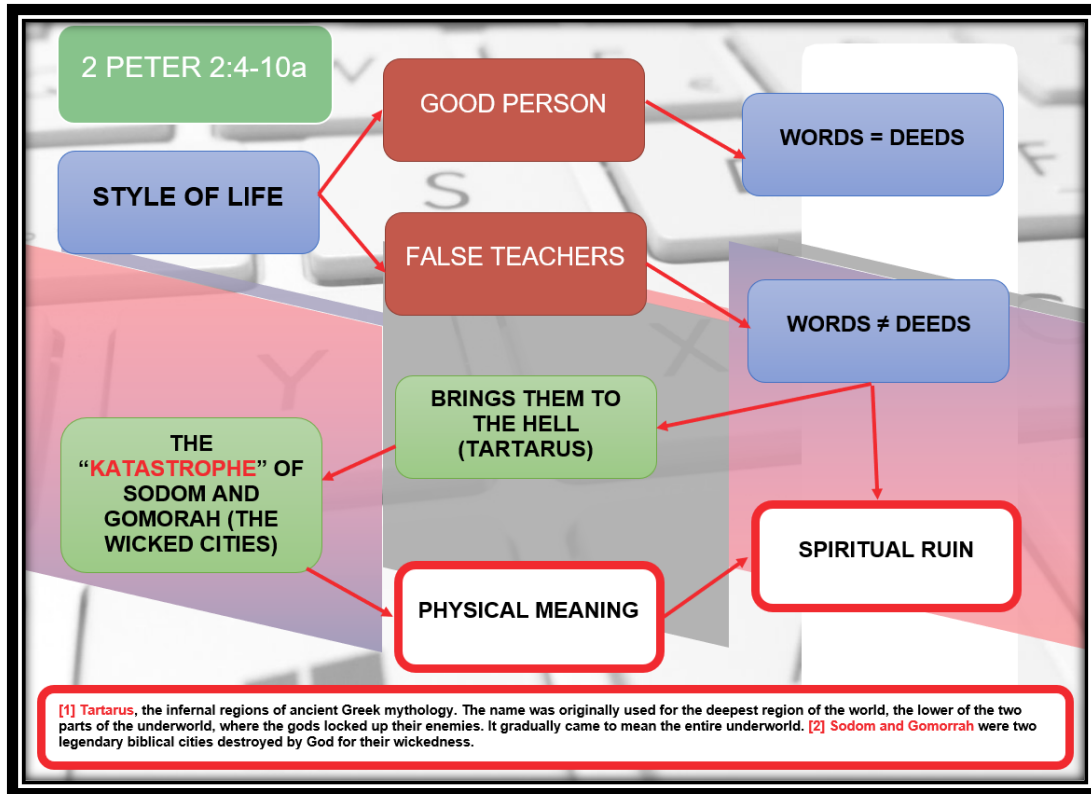


Diagram 5: "Katastrophe" in 2 Peter 2:6 (4-10a)

Moreover, Peter uses the word "Tartarus" (the Greek Mythology of underworld) to describe "hell" in this part, in order to address his multicultural audience (Neyrey, 2008).

IV. Conclusion

"*Katastrophe*" as a word in the New Testament occurs only twice in (a) 2 Timothy 2:14, and (b) 2 Peter 2:6. Both verses use this "*katastrophe*" to describe the "spiritual ruin" of the people. And very interestingly, these two verses are in the context of the debate with the false teachers who were in the midst of the early church in the first century C.E.

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