

# The Final Judgment in the Book of Revelation

## Introduction

The doctrine of the final Judgment has been a constant element of Christian eschatological belief since the earliest days of the Church. It is a central theme in the first book of Enoch, and is referred to in many parts of the New Testament (NT), but without doubt the most detailed and uniform account of this event is given in the Book of Revelation.<sup>1</sup> Here, and throughout the NT, the final Judgment is described in apocalyptic terms as part of a cosmic upheaval at the ‘end of the age’.<sup>2</sup> As one of the main events defining this universal eschatological transformation, it is also associated closely with the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the eternal eradication of evil from creation and the realization of ‘a new Heaven and a new Earth.’ It is therefore a source of great hope for believers.<sup>3</sup>

However, the traditional understanding of this subject has undergone radical criticism and revision over the last century and a half, as a result of certain philosophical, scientific and also theological developments. These have led to a variety of modern approaches, all of which have tended to diminish or even negate the importance of the final Judgment. They can be summarized as follows:

1. From Hegel’s philosophy of history, in which the Christian eschatological events are understood as phenomena that take place within the world and within history,<sup>4</sup> a belief in mankind’s gradual historical ascendancy to perfection has arisen, which is wholly opposed to the traditional expectation of a sudden, end-historical, divine intervention (the ‘second coming’) leading to total cosmic transformation and renewal. The scientific discovery of the immensity of the cosmos and the literal improbability of its sudden and total transformation have further reinforced this secular belief in ‘progress’, and under the

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<sup>1</sup> “Its emphasis on judgment is undoubtedly more intense and prolonged than in any epistle or gospel”, G.R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, New Century Bible Commentary, Grand Rapids/London: Eerdmans/Marshall, Morgan & Scott, revised ed, 1978; 28.

<sup>2</sup> “It is precisely this cosmic perspective that distinguishes the eschatology of these apocalypses from the older prophetic eschatology”, John J. Collins in *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 2nd ed, Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998; 261.

<sup>3</sup> “The image of the Last Judgement is not primarily an image of terror, but an image of hope; for us it may even be the decisive image of hope” Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi*, 2007; 44 at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20071130\\_spe-salvi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi_en.html).

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed summary, see Paul O’Callaghan: “In his *Philosophy of History* he views the course of history as itself a kind of theodicy. The thinking Spirit will gradually and definitively overcome the negativity and reluctance present in the world, he says, thus bringing about a total reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) of reality. This involves principally the reconciliation of the finite spirit (man) with the Absolute Spirit (God) by means of the renunciation of the former’s autonomy and distinctness from the Divinity, the incorporation of the finite into the eternal, the union of human nature with the divine. In an exceptional and paradigmatic way this synthesis has already been achieved, Hegel says, in the Incarnation, death and resurrection of God’s Word in Jesus Christ. However, since the death (and ultimately, disappearance) of the individual is a necessary part of the process of the ‘coming about of the Absolute Spirit’, no future end-time consummation *beyond* this world will be required, such as would involve the resurrection of the dead and final judgment. The process of ‘reconciliation’ will take place within the world as it stands...In other words, Hegel’s theodicy—the reconciliation of God with the presence of finitude and evil in the world—takes place within the world as it is, and will reach its consummation without going beyond the world’s present framework.” *The Christological Assimilation of the Apocalypse: An Essay on Fundamental Eschatology*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004; 19-20.

influence of evolutionary theory, it has come to be understood as an expression of man's biological, material and technological evolution. So widespread is this belief in historical, this-worldly, evolutionary 'progress' that it has almost entirely replaced traditional Christian doctrine on the end-time.<sup>5</sup> Coupled with the downright rejection of the teaching of eternal condemnation, this belief has come to characterize the agnostic and atheistic mindsets.<sup>6</sup>

2. In theological circles a parallel revision of traditional eschatology has taken place, as a result of which two ideas have come to prevail: "first, that the eschatological texts of the New Testament refer primarily to *the ultimacy of the present moment* and not to a chronologically displaced *future*; and that the Christian *éschaton* impinges neither on matter nor on the cosmos, but rather on human interiority, spirit and personhood".<sup>7</sup> These ideas were held in common by the most influential theological researches of the first half of the twentieth century: from the 'thorough-going eschatology' of Johannes Weiss<sup>8</sup> and Albert Schweitzer,<sup>9</sup> to C.H. Dodd's 'realized eschatology',<sup>10</sup> to the 'supratemporal eschatology', initially proposed by Karl Barth<sup>11</sup> and Paul Althaus,<sup>12</sup> but taken up and developed by Rudolf Bultman, under the influence of Heidegger's existential philosophy.<sup>13</sup> Despite their differences, all these 'schools' agree "in rejecting the idea that

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<sup>5</sup> "In the modern era, the idea of the Last Judgement has faded into the background: Christian faith has been individualized and primarily oriented towards the salvation of the believer's own soul, while reflection on world history is largely dominated by the idea of progress" Pope Benedict XIV, Encyclical letter *Spe Salvi*, 2007; 42 (see n. 3 above for the web reference).

<sup>6</sup> "The most fundamental criticisms directed against Christianity have to do with the moral character of its God, and often focus specifically on the issue of eternal punishment. No theological issue posed greater difficulties for Victorian England, as the writings of George Eliot make clear. It was for this reason that Charles Darwin found his faith, surprisingly unchallenged by his views on evolution, to be stretched beyond its modest capacity. Others had similarly serious misgivings. "Eternal punishment must be eternal cruelty—and I do not see how any man, unless he has the brain of an idiot, or the heart of a wild beast, can believe in eternal punishment" (Robert Ingersoll). Despite its opportunistic overstatement, Ingersoll's complaint resonates deeply with many who find an apparent contradiction between their deepest intuitions of fairness and the traditionally conceived Christian God. Christian apologists cannot hope simply to assert such doctrines as eternal damnation and expect Western culture to nod approvingly." Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World*, London: Rider, Random House, 2005; 274-5.

<sup>7</sup> O'Callaghan, *Christological Assimilation*, 22.

<sup>8</sup> J. Weiss, *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes*, 1892; English trans. R.H. Hiers and D. Larrimore (ed.), *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971.

<sup>9</sup> A. Schweitzer, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede. Eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, 1906; English trans. *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (London, 1910).

<sup>10</sup> O'Callaghan summarizes Dodd's theory as follows: "the 'eschatological' kingdom of God is *already fully present* among believers in the life, words, miracles, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The latter do not constitute a *prelude* to a definitive coming of the kingdom, but are to be simply *identified* with its coming. In other words, the kingdom of God is already complete, active or 'realized'; nothing substantially new is to be expected in the future" *Christological Assimilation*, 32. Cf. C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 3<sup>rd</sup> revised ed., London, 1961; *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London, 1944; *History and the Gospel*, London, 1938; for an exposition, see E.E. Wolfzorn, 'Realized Eschatology: an Exposition of Charles H. Dodd's Thesis', *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 38 (1962), 44-62.

<sup>11</sup> K. Barth, *Römerbrief* (1922); English trans. *The Epistle to the Romans*, London: Oxford University Press, 1933.

<sup>12</sup> P. Althaus, *Die Letzen Dinge*, Gütersloh, 1922.

<sup>13</sup> In this scheme, eschatological hope is focused entirely in the present, on the 'decision of faith' of every individual. Neither the past nor the future has any theological importance. O'Callaghan summarizes it as follows: "Anything apocalyptic that hope might attempt to reserve for the future, whether judgment, justification, resurrection or eternal life, has already been fully given in Christ, and made present by our faith in

apocalyptic texts, whether canonical or not, refer in any way to promised end-of-time events for the whole of humanity (such as the ruin and renewal of the cosmos, the resurrection of the dead or final, universal judgment) that are destined to take place in some future moment bordering on human history”.<sup>14</sup> Instead, these texts are assumed to be a purely rhetorical device—a ‘performative way’—to describe the fullness of Christian eschatological experience inherent in the present life of faith of every individual believer. Even those theologians of the latter part of the twentieth century, who have attempted to restore the element of future fulfilment to the eschatological transformation, “have deliberately refrained from any attempt to provide a detailed description... of what such a future might consist of”<sup>15</sup> —a position that has been termed “eschatological agnosticism”.<sup>16</sup>

3. The pastoral teaching of a definitive and enduring judgment for each and every individual at the time of death<sup>17</sup> has had the effect of voiding the collective final Judgment of any significance, leading therefore to its undervaluation.<sup>18</sup> This was noted by T.F. Glasson in his published reflections on the final Judgment: “Orthodox Christian teaching ultimately envisaged two judgments, one immediately after death and the Final Judgment. But if men know their fate after death what is the purpose of the final collective judgment, which can produce no trepidation or uncertainty since everything is already fixed? No satisfactory answer has been given; and all kinds of problems arise if we attempt to imagine a judgment of all humanity, all who have ever lived, assembled before a Great White Throne, either in the valley of Jehoshaphat or anywhere else”.<sup>19</sup> Arguing that a literal gathering of the whole human race in one company is neither possible nor necessary, and convinced that the forensic representation of the final Judgment in Revelation was a late aberration of the biblical and intertestamental tradition, Glasson goes on to conclude that “the whole idea of the final Judgment as an event should be abandoned”.<sup>20</sup>

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him. Whoever believes in him already *has* eternal life, already has reached the end, because nothing new or definitive is to be expected, in that the *éschaton* is made permanently and fully present by the proclamation of the word (*kerygma*) and by its acceptance in faith. Through faith the Christian goes beyond time and history, and lives as it were an eschatological or ultimate existence in each and every instant.” *Christological Assimilation*, 42. All residues of apocalyptic doctrine must be purged, or demythologized, according to Bultman, for whom even “the ‘Last Day’ is a mythological concept, which must be replaced by the language of *thánatos*, or the death of the individual” *Christological Assimilation*, 42.

<sup>14</sup> O’Callaghan, *Christological Assimilation*, 47.

<sup>15</sup> O’Callaghan, *Christological Assimilation*, 57.

<sup>16</sup> O’Callaghan places the following theologians in this category: Jürgen Moltman, Wolfhart Pannenberg and Karl Rahner; cf. O’Callaghan, *Christological Assimilation*, 52, 57.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, London: Chapman, 1994 (abbreviated CCC hereafter), para. 1022 (cf. 1051): “Each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven—through a purification or immediately—or immediate and everlasting damnation”. The pastoral significance of this is indicated in para. 1036.

<sup>18</sup> For a brief analysis of this ecclesiastical ‘tendency’, see “Comments on paragraphs 1020-1060 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church” at <https://www.newtorah.org/pdf/Comments%20on%20the%20CCC.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> T. Francis Glasson, ‘Last Judgment—in Rev 20 and related writings’ in *New Testament Studies* Vol 28 (1982), 537-8. The author raises the same issue on pages 531-2 of his work, and for a discussion he refers the reader to his book *His Appearing and His Kingdom: The Christian Hope in the Light of Its History*, London, 1953; chs. 7–10.

<sup>20</sup> Glasson, ‘Last Judgment’, 538. This statement is qualified in the next paragraph, where, having excluded the final Judgment as an ‘event’, Glasson is ready to accept it as a ‘conviction’: “The judgment should be regarded

4. The philosophical, scientific, theological and pastoral approaches mentioned above have all had their impact on the field of biblical interpretation and exegesis, especially concerning the book of Revelation.<sup>21</sup> Over the last century the dominant interpretation of this book has been the ‘Preterist’ view, which presents the text more or less completely as a description of the persecuted Church in the Roman period, centered either in Jerusalem or in Rome.<sup>22</sup> The final chapters dealing with the eschatological judgments of God are either reinterpreted in a ‘supratemporal’, or ‘realized’ way, in accordance with the twentieth century theologies mentioned above, or as a relatively insignificant, and perhaps even mistaken, appendix to the author’s main concern, which is asserted to be his anticipation of the triumph of the Christian Church over the Roman Empire. The most extreme examples of this approach leave absolutely no room in the text of Revelation for a future fulfilment.<sup>23</sup>

In brief, over the last century and a half, there has been a widespread intellectual movement against the belief in a future, universal and eschatological transformation. Both inside and outside the Church, hardly a stone has been left unturned in the attempt to abolish, replace, obfuscate or dilute traditional Christian teachings on this subject. This revisionist attitude towards ‘the last things’ has strongly influenced biblical exegesis in general, and the interpretation of the final Judgment in particular. The aim of the present work, then, is to try to rectify these misunderstandings by re-examining the final Judgment as it is presented in the Book of Revelation, a book that speaks of judgment more than any other book in the NT.

### **The Final Judgment in the Book of Revelation**

The passage describing the author’s vision of final Judgment is located towards the end of the Book of Revelation (Rev 20,11-15), at the conclusion of a series of divine judgments on the earth and its inhabitants.

Throughout the text, scenes of judgment and salvation are juxtaposed. Furthermore, there is a progression in the text towards more and more final, complete and irrevocable judgments. The corrective judgments of the risen Christ to the seven churches (Rev 2–3) are followed by the historical judgments caused by the breaking of the seals of his scroll (Rev 6). Before the delivery of divine judgment on the world (6,9-11), there is a series of warning judgments announced by the trumpets and the two witnesses (Rev 8–11). These culminate in the eschatological fulfilment of God’s Kingdom, which includes the judgment of the dead and the destruction of those destroying the earth (Rev 11,15). The text then describes in greater

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as a pictorial representation of a transcendent reality. The conviction remains valid, that finally wrong will be righted, realities seen in their true light, the mysteries of life made plain; the conviction that we are responsible to God, and that his purpose to sum up all things in Christ will be fulfilled.” It is not at all clear, though, how this conviction can be realized in practice, if the judgment that will bring it about, through the radical separation of evil, is not recognized as a real transforming ‘event’ with a real, once-and-for-all, impact on the collective life of human beings, and on all creation.

<sup>21</sup> And also, of course, their effect on the other eschatological passages in the NT, and on the ‘Quest for the historical Jesus’.

<sup>22</sup> See G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999; 42-46, for a fuller description of the two versions of the Preterist approach and its weaknesses.

<sup>23</sup> E.g., *The Apocalypse of John: A Commentary*, Francis J. Moloney, Ada, MI: Baker Academic Press, 2020; *El Libro del Apocalipsis*, Ariel Álvarez Valdés, Madrid: PPC Editorial, 2017; *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, Elaine Pagels, New York: Viking Penguin, 2013.

detail the stages of judgment leading up to the consummation: the angelic warnings of the imminence of eternal judgment (14,6-11), the judgment of the wicked ‘outside the city’ (14,17-20), the final expression of God’s judgmental wrath on the earth and its inhabitants (Rev 16) and the eternal judgment and condemnation of Babylon (Rev 17–18), the Beast and his false prophet (19,11-21), and Satan (20,7-10). These divine judgments all conclude with the vision of judgment before the throne (20,11-15), which involves the resurrection of the dead and results in the eternal ‘separation’ of all the evil remaining in creation, including Death, Hades, the ‘sea’, and all those whose name is not written in the scroll of Life. This vision of final Judgment and condemnation is not the last word in Revelation, however, since it leads immediately into an extended description of eternal salvation, the ‘reward of the saints’, described as the New Jerusalem at the centre of the New Heaven and the New Earth (Rev 21–22).

From the text of Revelation, therefore, it is evident that the final Judgment vision of 20,11-15 constitutes the conclusion and culmination of a lengthy process of divine judgment, through which eternal salvation is brought to fulfilment.<sup>24</sup>

By prefacing the visions of ultimate salvation by that of the final Judgment, the author indicates that it is only through this judgment, and the resulting removal of all that is evil, that creation can attain its state of fulfilment and eternal salvation. In fact, these two successive stages of the eschatological transformation are presented as the aim and climax of the entire book: “The whole book, and especially the cycles of visions within its apocalyptic section, reaches a climax in the description of judgment and of eschatological salvation. The reader thereby is constantly confronted with the end”.<sup>25</sup>

Despite its importance as the culmination of a series of divine judgments, and as an integral part of the aim and purpose of the whole Book, the text of the final Judgment vision is surprising for its brevity and economy of detail.<sup>26</sup> This brings us to consider the text more closely, wondering if there is not more to it than meets the eye.

## **The Description of Final Judgment in the Book of Revelation**

“(11) *And I saw a great white throne and the One seated on it from whose face the earth and heaven fled, and no place was found for them.* (12) *And I saw the dead, the great and the small,*

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Beale: “The scene in chs. 4–5 referred to the inaugurated reign of God through Christ, part of which is expressed through preconsummate judgments against the unbelieving world. The scene is repeated here to signify the consummate judgment, to which all previous judgments pointed and which is the climax of them all” *Revelation*, 1031.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985; 55; see also *Justice and Judgment*, 47: “The goal and high point of the composition of the whole book, as of the individual ‘little apocalypses’, is the final judgment and the eschatological salvation”. So prominent is this theme of eschatological salvation and judgment, that Schüssler Fiorenza is able to present a compelling case for eschatology, and not history, as the proper horizon for the understanding of Revelation. She demonstrates how the whole composition of the text is organized by three main themes: the Christian community as the already established kingdom of God and Christ in heaven and on earth, the imminent expectation of the eschatological fulfilment of this kingdom from the point of view of being only a short time before (cf. Rev 6,9-11); and the ultimate fulfilment of the kingdom of God and Christ through their judgment on this world (*Justice and Judgment*, 46-56). In her words: “This means that in Rev. ‘history’ is completely subordinated to eschatology and receives its significance from the future” (op. cit. 46).

<sup>26</sup> “The judgment itself is described with a stark economy,” observes G.B. Caird in *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, BNTC, London: A. & C. Black, 1966; 259. Robert Mounce compares this evaluation with other descriptions of Judgment: “The grim simplicity of the narrative stands in contrast with the lurid descriptions found in Jewish apocalypticism” *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT series, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977; 367.

*standing before the throne, and scrolls were opened. And another scroll was opened, that which is of the life. And the dead were judged according to their deeds, from what had been written in the scrolls. (13) And the sea gave up the dead in it, and Death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and they were judged, everyone according to their deeds. (14) And Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. (15) And if anyone was not found written in the scroll of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev 20,11-15).<sup>27</sup>*

Firstly, before entering into the symbolism of this text, it is necessary to emphasise that, contrary to the modernist philosophical and theological thinking mentioned above,<sup>28</sup> the final Judgment described in Revelation is both universal and future. It concerns the whole earth and heaven, which flee from the face of the One sitting on the great white throne (20,11) and it concerns all the people who have ever lived and died on earth or at sea (20,11-13). Secondly, this universal judgment has not yet occurred, since its main result is the removal of all sin, evil and suffering, in order to make way for the fulfilment of eternal salvation (Rev 21–22), and no one can seriously argue that evil has been eradicated from the world or that creation has yet reached this state of eternal perfection.<sup>29</sup>

After reaffirming that the final Judgment in Revelation has both universal and future dimensions, it must be admitted that the brevity and summary nature of its description may also have contributed to its undervaluation. As the culmination of the whole process of judgment, and the necessary gateway to eschatological salvation, the vision of final Judgment in the Book of Revelation has definitely not received the attention it deserves.<sup>30</sup> And from those scholars who have given it some attention, there have been a number of negative comments.

Several commentators have criticized the text of 20,11-15 as it stands and suggest that it has been poorly composed. R.H. Charles, for example, notes that “This vision has suffered at the hands of the interpolators” and in verse 13 he finds “a hopeless confusion of thought, which can only be due to deliberate change of text”.<sup>31</sup> Some commentators have noted the absence of Christ in this passage, which they find confusing because it appears to contradict

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<sup>27</sup> This, and all the other passages in this article from the Book of Revelation, are translated by the author from Nestle-Aland’s *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28<sup>th</sup> edition revised by the Institute for New Testament Textual Research under Holger Strutwolf, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> As noted, these tend to reduce the eschatological transformation to the level of the individual, and to his or her limited capacity for experiencing eternity in this life, in a way that has enabled predominantly historical interpretations of Revelation to prevail. As soon as the universal and eschatological dimensions of this event are given their due importance, the historical elements recede and can be recognized for what they are: the necessary preparation for the as yet unattained goal of eschatological fulfilment.

<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the most compelling indication that we have not yet reached this state of perfection is the presence of suffering, mourning and pain in the world, for all these will be absent in the Holy City after the consummation and renewal of creation (cf. Rev 21,3-4). It is interesting, in this light, to examine the self-description of the city called Babylon as a woman who claims royalty and denies suffering (18,7). She appears to think that she is the Holy City, in which there will be no more suffering. This gives rise to the term “Babylonian Theology” for those habits of thought that deny the reality of a future, final Judgment by claiming that the consummation has already arrived.

<sup>30</sup> A literature search in the library at the *École Biblique et Archéologique Française* in Jerusalem, under “judgment/judgement” in the Book of Revelation, reveals only a small number of dedicated studies. There is a tendency to skirt around this subject, or unintentionally play it down, as acknowledged by Richard Bauckham, in ‘Judgment in the Book of Revelation’, *The Book of Revelation: Currents in British Research on the Apocalypse*, eds. Allen, Paul and Woodman, WUNT II, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015; 55.

<sup>31</sup> R.H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, ICC, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1920; 2:191-200, esp. 194-5.

the traditional Christian belief that Christ “will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead”.<sup>32</sup> Others have observed that only the dead are mentioned and there is no direct reference to the judgment of the living.<sup>33</sup> Mounce complains that the “relationship between the record of men’s deeds and the book of life is not clear”.<sup>34</sup> Prigent argues that this passage should not include the faithful who have participated in the first resurrection, since they cannot logically be resurrected twice, but then wonders why verse 15 “seems to presuppose that there are some among the crowd of resurrected men and women whose names are recorded in the book of life, and who must therefore have participated in the millennium.” He goes on to conclude: “It is undoubtedly wiser to see verses 11 to 15 as a passage that was directly inspired by Jewish traditions and insufficiently modified to be in perfect harmony with the context”.<sup>35</sup> Aune sees the references to the scroll of Life in verses 12 and verse 15 as redactional insertions, since “the only criterion of salvation is to have one’s name written in the book of life, and it appears to make superfluous the rendering of judgment on the basis of the deeds recorded in the books”.<sup>36</sup>

However, there is another explanation for these puzzled observations. They may reflect a failure to grasp the full connection between this description of final Judgment in 20,11-15 and its antecedent context, with the result that it appears detached from the judgmental process of which it is the climax and conclusion. In the comments of Mounce, Prigent and Aune above, the main focus of criticism appears to be the ‘scroll of Life’ (20,12.15), so this would be a good place to start our investigation.

### **The Scroll of Life in the Book of Revelation**

The scroll of Life is unlikely to have been added as an afterthought to the vision of the final Judgment (20,11-15), since it assumes a role of such supreme importance. For those standing before the throne, judgment according to the deeds that are recorded in the scrolls (20,12-13) has no salvific effect whatsoever if one’s name is not also recorded in the scroll of Life. Those whose names are not inscribed in the scroll of Life, whatever good deeds they may have done in their life, are condemned to the second Death, or lake of Fire (20,14-15). Reserved especially for the devil and all those who identify themselves with him, the lake of Fire refers to a state of eternal punishment (cf. 14,9-11; 19,20; 20,10) and exclusion from eternal salvation (cf. 21,8.27; 22,22.15).<sup>37</sup> It is important to emphasize that the judgment here described is eternal and irreversible, and that the key to understanding it appears to lie in the decisive role of the scroll of Life. In other words, the process by which names are included or excluded from the scroll of Life reveals how the future, final, universal, divine and eternal judgment is conducted.

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<sup>32</sup> Cited from the Nicene Creed; cf. Jn 5,22; 2Cor 5,10; 2Tim 4,1; and 1*Enoch* 45:3.

<sup>33</sup> Some commentators assert that no one is left alive after the battles of Rev 19,17-21 and 20,7-10, e.g., David E. Aune *Revelation 17-22*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998; 1101; Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John: Studies in Introduction*, New York: Macmillan Co., 1919; 748.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Mounce, *Revelation*, 366.

<sup>35</sup> Pierre Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, English trans by W. Pradels, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001; 579. This comment neatly illustrates a common tendency to blame the author of Revelation for passages that have not been well understood.

<sup>36</sup> Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1102-1103.

<sup>37</sup> For the background and meaning of the terms ‘second Death’ and ‘lake of Fire’, see Attilio Gangemi, “La Morte Seconda (Ap 2,11)”, in *Rivista Biblica Italiana*, XXIV (1976), 3-11.

The scroll of Life<sup>38</sup> is mentioned in several other parts of Scripture where it denotes a heavenly register of those who are considered righteous or worthy (cf. Ex 32,32-33; Is 4,3; Deut 29,20; Ps 69,29; Dan 12,1; Mal 3,16-18; Lk 10,20; Phil 4,3; Heb 12,23, also 1 *Enoch* 47,3; *Jubilees* 19,9; 30,20,22).<sup>39</sup> In Revelation, the scroll of Life is explicitly mentioned no less than six times (Rev 3,5; 13,8; 17,8; 20,12,15; 21,27) in ways that yield much more specific information than in any other biblical context. From the fact that it contains names of people and is called ‘the scroll of Life from the foundation of the world’ (13,8; 17,8),<sup>40</sup> it is evident that the scroll of Life is a register of the names of all the people that have ever lived, or will ever live, on earth, since its foundation. It is also clear that this scroll is now in the possession of the Lamb that was slain (13,8; 17,8; 21,27), and that the same figure, previously identified as the ‘one like a son of man’ (1,13), or ‘risen Christ’ (1,17-18), has authority to erase names from the scroll: “*The one who overcomes will dress himself like this in white clothes and never will I erase his name from the scroll of Life, and I will declare his name before my Father and before his angels*” (Rev 3,5).<sup>41</sup> Since those whose names Christ removes from the scroll of Life are condemned to eternal punishment (20,15), and only those whose names remain inscribed in the scroll are permitted to experience eternal salvation (21,27), it is clear that the risen Christ is involved in a process of judgment and that the scroll of Life functions as a scroll of judgment.<sup>42</sup>

In brief, the scroll of Life exists in heaven as a register of the names of all who have ever lived, or will live, on earth, and it comes into the possession of Jesus Christ at some point after his ascension to heaven. The risen Christ then has the authority to remove names from the scroll, before it is read out at the assembly for final Judgment (3,5; 20,12,15). At the time of final Judgment, the scroll of Life functions as a scroll of judgment, and all those whose names do not appear in the scroll will be condemned to eternal punishment.

So much is explicit in the text, but we should not overlook the implicit identity of the scroll of Life with “*the scroll on the right of the One sitting on the throne, with writing on the inside and on the back and sealed with seven seals*” (Rev 5,1).<sup>43</sup> The main evidence for this is that:

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<sup>38</sup> The Greek words for ‘scroll’ (βιβλίον is used interchangeably with βιβλος in Revelation) can also mean ‘book’, but scrolls made of papyrus were the dominant form of media in the first century, when Revelation was written. Although the book-form, or ‘codex’, made its very first appearance at the end of the first century, it was not in common use until the 3-4<sup>th</sup> centuries. In other contexts, the same object may be translated as “book of life”, or “book of the living”.

<sup>39</sup> Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Dallas: Word Books, 1997; 224. Adela Yarbro Collins adds “At first this roster symbolized just membership in the people of God; later, it came to represent those destined for eternal life (e.g., Dan 12,1)”, *Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, reprint 1976 ed, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2001; 51, n. 87.

<sup>40</sup> Our interpretation of the unusual word order in 13,8 and 17,8 joins ‘the scroll of life’ with ‘from the foundation of the world’. Translators commonly combine ‘the Lamb that was slain’ with ‘from the foundation of the world’, suggesting that Christ was somehow crucified before the world was created.

<sup>41</sup> For those who question the identity of the Lamb that was slain (Rev 5,6,12) with the ‘one like a son of man’ and with the risen Jesus Christ, in the opening vision of Revelation (1,10-20), see John and Gloria Ben-Daniel, *Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple*, Jerusalem: Beit Yochanan, 2003; 26-27, accessible at <https://www.newtorah.org/pdf/The%20Apocalypse%20in%20the%20Light%20of%20the%20Temple2008%20final.pdf>.

<sup>42</sup> The sheer universality and inclusivity of salvation should be noted. Before the final Judgment all human beings, without exception and regardless of religious affiliation, have their names inscribed in the scroll of Life. Clearly, the Creator’s original intention was that all mankind should attain the fulfilment of his promised salvation.

<sup>43</sup> “Few features of the Revelation have been so widely discussed as the nature of the scroll...sealed with seven seals” Beasley Murray, *Revelation*, 120. See Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 343-5 for a summary of the proposals to

1. Both scrolls belong to the Lamb that was slain. Since there is no mention of any other scroll belonging to the Lamb, it is reasonable to assume that the sealed scroll that comes into the possession of the slain Lamb in 5,6-10 is in fact the same as the scroll that is later identified as the Lamb's scroll of Life (13,8; 17,8; 21,27).<sup>44</sup>
2. Both scrolls have the same function. Regarding the scroll of Life, the text explicitly describes its central role in the plan of salvation—a role that involves judgment (20,12.15). In the case of the sealed scroll, the same salvific role is implied by the accomplishments of the Lamb, who is uniquely 'worthy' to receive and open it because his victorious death has brought salvation to the world (5,5; 5,9-10). His unique qualification as saviour and redeemer implies that the scroll itself also has a significant role in the plan of salvation—a role whose significance is reflected in the universal acclamation of all creation (5,12-13).<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, the fact that the scroll was sealed with seven seals is also indicative of a role in judgment, since scrolls of judgment were often described as sealed until the Day of Judgment (e.g., 1 *Enoch* 90:20; cf. 1 *Enoch* 89:61-64, 68-71).<sup>46</sup>

Finally, it would be odd, to say the least, if the scroll that occupies such a central place in Rev 5–8 were never to be mentioned again, as would be the case if it were not identified with the scroll of Life.<sup>47</sup> So although the scroll with seven seals is not explicitly identified with the

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date, and Ranko Stefanovič, *Background and Meaning of the Sealed Scroll of Revelation 5* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1996; 81-2, for the authors who have identified the sealed scroll with the scroll of Life. Both Aune (*Revelation 1-5*, 345) and Beale (*Revelation*, 339) dismiss this suggestion on the grounds that the opening of the scroll in Rev 6,1–8,1 appears to have no relation with the disclosure of the names of the redeemed, but rather with the judgment of the unredeemed. Furthermore, there is no mention of the scroll of Life until much later, in 20,12. Even if these observations were correct, they do not prevent the identification of the sealed scroll with the scroll of Life, as we hope to demonstrate in this study. Yarbro Collins also insists “the identification of the scroll in Revelation 5 with the book of life should be rejected” by arguing that, while the scroll of Life clearly functions as a judgment scroll, a) “the heavenly scene of chs. 4–5 is not characterized as a judgment scene” and b) “the events which follow the seven unsealings are too varied to fit the rubric of the last judgment” (*The Combat Myth*, 24). Again, even if these observations were correct, they do not hinder the identification of the scroll with the scroll of Life. Although the heavenly scene of chs. 4-5 does not depict final judgment, it does represent the appointment of the judge and the assignment of judgment. In this light, it is quite logical to interpret the unsealings as part of the preparation for final judgment. Only when all the seals are broken, and the scroll can be opened, can we suppose that the time for judgment has arrived (this interpretation is the one developed in the study). Yarbro Collins' opposition to the identification of the sealed scroll with the scroll of Life appears to be determined primarily by her desire to prove that the first half of Revelation (1.9 – 11,18) is structured around the sealed scroll of Rev 5 and the second half (12.1–22,5) around the open scroll of Rev 10 (*Combat Myth*, 19-32). To identify the sealed scroll of the first half of Revelation, with the scroll of Life, which appears mainly in the second half of Revelation, would instantly invalidate this thesis.

<sup>44</sup> Yarbro Collins disagrees with this argument by noting “there is no reason why the slain Lamb might not have had jurisdiction over several types of heavenly books”, *Combat Myth*, 24. But there is even less reason to reject this plain and obvious interpretation, which reaffirms the Lamb's role as judge of mankind (cf. Rev 2,23; 22,12), for an interpretation that presents the Lamb as a kind of heavenly librarian or collector of books.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Beale, *Revelation*, 349.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Yarbro Collins, *Combat Myth*, 23.

<sup>47</sup> “The strange absence of any mention of the book after the opening of the seventh seal” is noted by Prigent, who concludes “Nevertheless, how can one not be struck by this silence which seems to say that the book is not there in order to be opened, or more precisely that its only reason for existing is in order to provoke the anguishing question, will someone be able to open it?” *Apocalypse*, 243-4. It should be noted that Prigent had previously rejected (op. cit. 242) Richard Bauckham's theory that the scroll in ch. 5 is the same as the little scroll in ch. 10 (*The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993; 243-56), on the grounds that it gives too little importance to the opening of the seals and the series of trumpet blasts. The arguments for and against Bauckham's position are summarized by Aune in *Revelation 6-16*, 571. Our

scroll of Life, the text is implicitly pointing the reader in this direction.<sup>48</sup> And as a result of this step, the whole process of judgment comes into view.

### The Judgment Process

The identification of the seven-sealed scroll with the scroll of Life, which plays such a decisive role in the final Judgment, unveils a process of judgment that prepares for, and culminates in, the resurrection and judgment of the dead (Rev 20,11-15). This process begins with the transfer of the seven-sealed scroll (now identified as the scroll of Life) to the Lamb, the risen Christ (Rev 5), who has the authority to act as judge and remove names from the scroll (3,5). However, he is clearly unable to alter the contents of the scroll until all of its seven seals have been broken.<sup>49</sup> So with the purpose of bringing judgment to the world and to humankind, the Lamb starts breaking the seals of the scroll.

With the breaking of the first four seals, the initial expressions of messianic judgment are let loose on earth by the four horsemen (6,1-8).<sup>50</sup> With the fifth seal divine judgment is delayed for a short time, in order to prepare those whom God wishes to save (6,9-11; ch.7). The breaking of the sixth seal depicts the dramatic cosmic upheaval that is traditionally associated with divine judgment on the 'Day of the Lord' (6,12-17). However, the precise form of this divine judgment is not revealed until the breaking of the seventh seal, which leads, after a period of intense silence and prayer, into two further series of judgments: the seven preparatory trumpet plagues (Rev 8-11) followed by a rapid and final series of seven libation bowl plagues (Rev 15-16). With these "*the wrath of God is finished*" (Rev 15,1) and the time of the second coming and final Judgment have arrived (11,15-18; 19,11-21; 20,11-15).<sup>51</sup>

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position on the little scroll in ch.10 and its relation the scroll in Rev 5 will be explained in the next section of our study.

<sup>48</sup> This identity may easily be missed if, as is often the case, the scroll with seven seals in Rev 5 is translated as a 'scroll', whilst the Lamb's scroll of Life is translated as a 'book'. Since the same Greek words are used in both cases, and since books had scarcely been invented when Revelation was written (cf. n. 38 above), it is preferable to translate both objects as 'scroll'. This would probably help, and at least not hinder, the reader in identifying the two scrolls.

<sup>49</sup> This very logical inference has been affirmed by many commentators, but does not go unchallenged. The text informs us that the contents of the sealed scroll, when identified with the scroll of Life, are eventually disclosed at the final Judgment (Rev 20,12.15). However, after falsely concluding that the sealed scroll and the scroll of Life are not the same, Yarbrow Collins proceeds to argue in a circular fashion, *ex silentio*, that because there is no reference to the reading of the sealed scroll after the breaking of the seventh seal, then it must be assumed that the contents of the scroll are revealed to the seer by means of a series of visions—those represented by the unsealings of the scroll and trumpet blasts (*Combat Myth*, 24-26). Even though this interpretation promotes a gross discontinuity between the image of a scroll being opened and the disclosure of its contents, several other scholars have repeated it. It is rightly challenged by Bauckham, among others: "But the events that occur at the opening of the seals are not, as interpreters of Revelation have too often supposed, the contents of the scroll. It would be a very odd scroll whose contents could be progressively revealed by the opening of a series of seals. The events of the seven seal-openings merely accompany the opening of the seals", *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, Cambridge: CUP, 1993; 80.

<sup>50</sup> In contrast to the first horseman, who represents the mission of evangelization around the world, the second, third and fourth horsemen not only recall the messianic woes that will precede the second coming of Christ in the 'synoptic gospels' (Mk 13; Mt 24; Lk 21), but they also evoke the divine judgments that would pursue the Israelites if they do not observe the commandments of God (cf. Lv 26,14-15; Dt 28,15-69; Jer 29,17-19; Ez 5,12-17).

<sup>51</sup> The rapid progression and completion of judgment indicated in the text (esp. Rev 11,15-18; 15,1) leave no room for a millennial interlude (20,1-6) between the second coming of Christ (19,11-21) and the resurrection of the dead for judgment (20,11-15), as predicted by the premillennialist (chiliasm or millennialist) reading. The

At a certain point during this sequence of ever more final, complete and irrevocable judgments on the world, the Lamb is able to open the scroll of Life and remove names. More specifically, this act of judgment takes place after the breaking of the seventh and last seal of the scroll of Life (8,1), and before the opening of this scroll at the resurrection and judgment of the dead (20,12.15). This period corresponds to the period of the trumpet plagues (Rev 8-11), whose primary purpose is indeed to elicit repentance (9,20-21; 11,3-13) in preparation for the consummation of God's kingdom and the final Judgment (10,7; 11,15-18). Since the whole series of trumpet blasts takes place within a short time of end-historical judgment (6,9-11), and the seventh and final trumpet announces the arrival of that time, it is fair to conclude that the trumpet series, and therefore the time of judgment, take place within a short period of time leading up to the end of history.

After the breaking of the seventh seal, therefore, the Lamb can open the scroll and begin to perform judgment by erasing names that have been inscribed in it since 'the foundation of the world' (13,8; 17,8). It is a period of intense scrutiny, associated with the blowing of trumpets and the call to repentance. All these features strongly recall the Jewish New Year tradition, according to which the New Year is considered as an annual Day of Judgment, when all creatures pass before the penetrating eyes of the Lord in order to be examined. This day is announced by the sound of trumpets (cf. Num 29,1-6) and initiates a period of penitence lasting 10 days and ending with the Day of Atonement.<sup>52</sup>

It is said that three books are opened in heaven: one for the few who are completely wicked, one for the few who are thoroughly pious, and one for the majority of people, who are neither entirely evil nor completely good. Judgment for the few who are either completely wicked or thoroughly pious is already decided, but for the great majority of people it is suspended until the end of the Day of Atonement, after the period of 10 days, by which time the decision will be sealed as to whether a man will live or die. The final decision takes account of all the prayers, mortifications and rituals performed during the penitential period and on the Day of Atonement.

All the features of this tradition are reflected in the trumpet series described in Revelation, the main difference being that the context is no longer the threshold of the 'New Year', but rather the threshold of eschatological transformation into the 'New Heaven and the New Earth'. After breaking the final seal of his scroll of Life, the risen Christ is able to open this scroll and perform judgment by erasing names from it (Rev 3,5). Trumpets are sounded and it is a time of repentance (9,20-21; 11,3-13) as in the Jewish New Year tradition. Every living creature passes before the eyes of the risen Christ, who as Lord and Judge examines the attitudes and conduct of all the living (cf. 2,23) with the purpose of recording his final decision in the scroll of Life, as to whether a person will live eternally in bliss or in torment. It is a testing time (3,10) and "*if anyone was not found written in the scroll of life, he was thrown into the lake of Fire*" (20,15).<sup>53</sup>

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thousand-year reign of Christ must be understood in a different way, see "Revelation 20,1-6: The Millennium and the Mystery of Iniquity", currently accessible at:

[https://www.academia.edu/78868602/The\\_Millennium\\_and\\_the\\_Mystery\\_of\\_Iniquity](https://www.academia.edu/78868602/The_Millennium_and_the_Mystery_of_Iniquity) .

<sup>52</sup> The tradition is recorded in the *Mishnah*, m. Rosh Hashanah 1:2 and in the *Babylonian Talmud*, Rosh Hashanah 16a and 16b. Its origin can be traced back to the annual New Year festivities held in the ancient kingdom of Babylonia (see Hayyim Schauss, *Jewish Festivals: History and Observance*, New York: Schocken Books 1965, 156-58), so important elements of this tradition must have been known to the author of Revelation and commemorated in some way by Jews during the first century.

<sup>53</sup> Of particular relevance is the correspondence between the heavenly liturgy of the Book of Revelation and the liturgy for the Day of Atonement in the second Temple. On the basis of this comparison, the liturgy represented in Revelation can be identified as a liturgy for Atonement, which starts with the sacrifice of the Lamb and ends

The ancient Jewish New Year tradition gives the necessary background to be able to confirm the identification of sealed scroll with the scroll of Life and clarify the process of judgment performed by the risen Christ.

### The Little Open Scroll

Having established the identity of the sealed scroll (βιβλίον, βιβλος) of Rev 5 with the scroll of Life, we are in a better position to examine the little open scroll (βιβλαρίδιον) of Rev 10. Firstly, it is evident that these two scrolls cannot be identical,<sup>54</sup> because the first is of vital importance for the final Judgment (20,12.15) and the second is swallowed by the author of Revelation (10,8-11). If it was the scroll of Life that St. John swallowed, then clearly it could not then serve as a vital record at the final Judgment. However, having made the point that they are not identical, some connection between the two scrolls is implied by the fact that just after the Lamb has broken the last of the seals of the scroll of Life in heaven, and can therefore open it (8,1), an angel transmits the little open scroll to St. John and urges him to swallow it (10,1-11). Furthermore, it is the same ‘mighty’ angel who mediates the giving of the sealed scroll to the Lamb (5,2) and the little scroll to St. John (10,2). Although not openly expressed in the text, the two scrolls do appear to be related in some way.

In order to explore this relationship further, it should be recalled that the little open scroll was given to the author in order to prepare him to “*prophesy again about many races and nations and tongues and rulers*” (10,11). The author’s renewed prophetic activity concerns the final period of history (cf. 10,7), during which the two witnesses prophesy for 1,260 days and the “Beast from the sea” is permitted to reign for 42 months (Rev 13).<sup>55</sup> This information permits a more accurate understanding of the timing of Christ’s judgment. Not only does it correspond precisely to the period of the trumpet blasts, when the risen Christ has unsealed the scroll of Life (8,1) and is able to open it in order to erase names in judgment (3,5; 13,8; 17,8),<sup>56</sup> but, more specifically, it coincides with the mission of the two witnesses for 1,260 days and the subsequent 42-month reign of the Beast.<sup>57</sup>

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with the reading of the scroll of Life at the final Judgment (cf. Ben-Daniel, *Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple*, 17-79). In Revelation, then, just as in the Jewish New Year tradition, the judgment for the majority takes place at the end of the liturgy for Atonement.

<sup>54</sup> Contra Bauckham’s thesis that they are identical, cf. *The Climax of Prophecy*, 243-56.

<sup>55</sup> The ‘Beast from the sea’ (Rev 13,1), or ‘abyss’ (11,7), reigns for the brief period of 42 months prior to his defeat by Christ at his second Coming (17,14; 19,11-21). He is a false messiah according to his position in a hierarchy of three evil figures, the devil, the beast and the false prophet, which the author contrasts with God, his messiah (Jesus Christ) and his prophet John. He is also the ultimate antagonist of Christ and his followers (the Antichrist in Christian tradition, cf. 11,7; 13,7; 17,14) and by seeking to be worshipped as God (13,4.8.15-17; 17,8; cf. 1,8) he shows himself to be the embodiment of the devil.

<sup>56</sup> This period of time is therefore analogous to the period of 10 days in the Jewish New Year tradition (see last section).

<sup>57</sup> Forming a final seven-year period (septennium), or ‘week of years’, composed of two consecutive periods, the first characterized by the prophetic mission of the two witnesses, and the second by the reign of the Beast. The duration of the mission of the two witnesses is 1,260 days, which is 14 days short of 42 months, according to the sectarian (Essene) solar calendar, and 21 days more than 42 months according to the Hebrew luni-solar calendar. The author would have known that 1,260 days is not exactly the same as the period of 42 months, whichever calendar was used. This is important, because most commentators assume that they are the same. More significantly, they cannot be the same because they are identified with mutually exclusive protagonists: the 1,260 days are known for the two witnesses, who have the power to kill anyone who wishes to harm them (11,5) and the 42 months are dominated by the reign of the Beast who has power to combat and overcome the saints (13,7). If these two periods were the same, the two witnesses and the Beast would have the power to destroy each other, but this is not what is described. The beast is only allowed to overcome the two witnesses at

With this in mind it is possible to clarify the connection between the two scrolls. The little open scroll assimilated by St. John describes, in the form of prophecy, the conditions on earth at the time when Christ will judge the conduct of every living person, registering the results of his judgment by erasing names from the scroll of Life in heaven. So, the little scroll describes the conditions under which the final judgment will be decided, whereas the scroll of Life in heaven conveys the results of that judgment, which will be declared before the throne at the final Judgment (3,5; 20,12.15). The first reveals the *outer form* of the final Judgment, and the second discloses its *inner content*. The fact that the scrolls are complementary, and that their relationship can be expressed in terms of *outside* and *inside*, suggests that the little scroll represents the writing on the *outside* of the Lamb's scroll in heaven (5,1), while on the *inside* of that same scroll are recorded the names of all who have lived since the foundation of the world.

In its visionary context, the little scroll can be identified as the initial section of the larger, sealed scroll—the part which forms the outermost roll of the scroll, and whose outer surface has writing on it. As the leading edge of the sealed scroll, this very short, initial section can be unrolled after all the seals are broken, cut free from the main scroll and rolled up in such a way that the external writing now appears on the inside of a new, much smaller scroll.

Understood in this way, the little scroll ingested by John (10,8-11) contains the text that he previously saw on the outside of the larger scroll (5,1). The prophecy that issues from this experience concerns the final period of history, understood as a time when Christ will judge who will live in eternal bliss and who will not. It is indeed part of the scroll of Life. Since it is the part that is given to the Church to know how the judgment will take place, its role can be identified with that of the scroll (or tablets) of Destiny known to ancient tradition.<sup>58</sup>

### **The Reign of the Beast and the Final Judgment**

The identification of the sealed scroll (Rev 5) with the scroll of Life has created a much broader and more concrete conception of final Judgment than the one conveyed by taking the text of 20,11-15 in isolation. Before expanding on this, it may be worthwhile to summarize our findings:

1. The judgmental process essentially begins with the transfer of the scroll of Life, containing the names of all the earth's inhabitants from 'the foundation of the world', to the Lamb that was slain (Rev 5). This signifies the appointment of the risen Christ as judge—the one who is uniquely qualified to perform judgment (5,5; 5,9-10) by deleting names from the scroll (3,5). However, he is unable to open the scroll and perform this judgment until the scroll's seven seals have been broken.

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the end of the 1,260 days, when they have finished their witnessing (11,7). This suggests that the 1,260-day mission of the two witnesses is followed by the future 42-month rule of the beast, and that the two consecutive periods together constitute a final seven-year period—a final 'week of years' reminiscent of the last week in Daniel's prophecy of 'seventy weeks' of years (Dn 9,24-27). This sequence (the mission of the two witnesses followed by the reign of the Beast) is consistent with the observation that the main focus of the prophecy of the two witnesses is the reign of the 'Beast from the sea'. It is clear that the mission of the two witnesses must precede the main event they are prophesying.

<sup>58</sup> The scroll of Destiny is one of the more common proposals for the identity of the seven-sealed scroll of Rev 5: "A typical broad understanding of the significance of the scroll is that it is a "book of destiny" ..." Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 344-5. Instead, we find it should be identified with the little scroll given to John in ch. 10.

2. The Lamb proceeds to break the seven seals of the scroll (Rev 6). This unleashes a series of preliminary judgments on earth and brings it to the point of divine judgment (6,12-17).
3. The breaking of the last seal reveals, in much greater detail, how this divine judgment will take place: after a short period of silence and prayer (8,1-5), a series of seven trumpet blasts announces further judgment-plagues on earth, whose intention is to bring about repentance (cf. 9,20-21; 14,6-7). Coinciding with the prophetic mission of the two witnesses (11,3-13) and then the reign of the Beast (Rev 13), the risen Christ opens the scroll of Life and performs judgment by removing names from it.
4. The blast of the last trumpet announces the arrival of the time for the final and definitive expression of divine judgment (11,15-18): a series of libation bowl plagues (Rev 15–16), which includes the destruction of Babylon (14,8; 16,19; Rev 17–19,5) and the battle of the Great Day of the Lord (16,12-14; 19,11-21; 20,7-10).
5. Divine judgment concludes with the resurrection of the dead before the throne to receive judgment according to the contents of the scroll of Life and the scrolls of Deeds (20,11-15). This is followed by the description of the eternal reward for those whose names are written in the scroll of Life (Rev 21–22).

The main implication of these findings is that the most important part of final Judgment is barely described at all in the vision of the resurrection of the dead for judgment (20,11-15). Neither the judge, nor the process of judgment, is described in this short passage, but is only alluded to in the mention of the scroll of Life. In fact, the most important part of judgment is represented as the erasure of names from the book of Life, which is a register of the names of all who ever lived, or will live, on the earth. This act of judgment is performed by the risen Christ and takes place during the period represented by the trumpet blasts and their plagues (Rev 8,6–11,15).

The time of this judgment can be more precisely identified with the final period of history characterised in the text by the prophetic mission of the two witnesses (1,260 days) and by the subsequent reign of the Beast from the sea (42 months).

During this time, all those living on earth are judged eternally, according to how they respond to the conditions imposed by the trumpet plagues and by the Beast, during the 42 months of his reign. Those who are judged adversely by having their names erased from the scroll of Life will not be allowed to participate in the eternal salvation that God is preparing for his people. Instead, they will be subject to eternal punishment in the lake of Fire. The text identifies these people as follows:

1. The Beast and the false prophet (19,20), who are followed by the devil himself (20,10; cf. Mt 25,41)
2. All those people who worship (13,8) or admire the Beast (17,8) or receive its markings (14,9-11). They end up blaspheming God (16,9.11.21; cf. Mk 3,29; Mt 12,32; 1Jn 5,16-17; Heb 6,4-6; 10,26-31) like their leader, the Beast (Rev 13,6).
3. The unrepentant cowards, faithless, depraved, murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters and liars (Rev 21,8; cf. 21,27; 22,15).

According to the way it is described in the text (Rev 13), the reign of the Beast can be understood quite literally and historically as a brief, and diabolically inspired, system of government that controls the whole world immediately before the second Coming of Christ. It is headed by a false redeemer who promises a false redemption. Those who are attracted to,

or coerced to identify with, the false redeemer exclude themselves from the true redemption in Christ, and go on to merit eternal condemnation. This diabolical system, however, is not established until due warning has been given, in the form of the trumpet plagues and the prophetic announcements of the two witnesses. During this final period of history, those living at the time will have to choose between Christ and the Beast, the true or the false messiah, and it appears that there will be little or no opportunity to take an intermediate position. It is in this personal choice that eternal judgment appears to consist.

With these insights, then, the reign of the Beast for 42 months at the end of history reveals its true significance and purpose. Up until the start of that short period, repentance is possible and is openly preached by the two witnesses (11,3-13), but during the reign of the Beast, the risen Christ's irreversible and eternal condemnation falls on all those who identify themselves with the Beast by worshipping him or accepting his markings (Rev 13).<sup>59</sup> By choosing to align themselves with this false messiah, they put themselves against Christ and beyond salvation through the forgiveness of sin. The sinner and his sin are henceforth inseparably united, prior to their removal from creation.

The reign of the Beast therefore plays an important part in the identification and removal of eternal sin, prior to the eschatological renewal of creation, and this appears to be its main purpose.<sup>60</sup> The corollary to this observation is that the reign of the Beast and the final Judgment are inseparably linked in time and purpose.<sup>61</sup>

### **The Assembly for Final Judgment**

According to the foregoing interpretation of final Judgment in the Book of Revelation, the most important part concerns the living. It is performed during the final period of history and is expressed particularly, as we have seen, during the 42-month reign of the Beast. The eternal destiny of everyone alive in the body, at that time, is decided by the risen Christ and recorded in his scroll of Life.

The living are the first to appear before the great white throne to receive their eternal verdict or reward (Rev 20,12).<sup>62</sup> If their name is inscribed in the scroll of Life, they are rewarded according to the record of their deeds in the scrolls of the Deeds; if not, they are condemned to the lake of Fire. The living are followed in turn by those who have been

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<sup>59</sup> This raises the question of which comes first: removal of one's name from the scroll of Life, followed by acceptance of the beast's markings, or acceptance of the beast's markings, followed by removal of one's name. The wording of the text of Rev 13,8 and 17,8 supports the former—the removal of the person's name from the scroll of Life has taken place before he or she worships (13,8) or admires (17,8) the Beast, or accepts its markings (14,9-11). It is therefore implied that, as the one who searches hearts and minds (2,23), the risen Christ is able to discern the people who are not his own, and remove their names, even before their loyalties are made manifest during the end-historical reign of the Beast.

<sup>60</sup> This also appears to be what St. Paul was referring to in 2Thess 2,9-12, where he wrote: "The coming of the lawless one by the activity of Satan will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are to perish, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends upon them a strong delusion, to make them believe what is false, so that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (RSV).

<sup>61</sup> With this in mind, it is impossible to identify the 42-month reign of the Beast with the Roman Empire, or any other past regime, as in the Preterist interpretation.

<sup>62</sup> We should note that, in the text, the living are ironically referred to as "the dead, the small and the great" (20:12), in order to reserve the term "living" for those who participate in the "first resurrection" (cf. 20,5). If this were not the case, the next verse (v.13) would be an empty repetition of v.12. In biblical literature, it is not uncommon for the people who are alive in the body, but dead to God and to his Salvation in Christ, to be called the 'dead', for these unredeemed souls are indeed 'spiritually dead' (Gn 2,17; 3,3; Mt 8,22; Lk 9,60).

resurrected from the intermediate states of ‘Death and Hades’<sup>63</sup> and by the dead who died at sea<sup>64</sup> (Rev 20,13). As most of the resurrected dead were not alive in the final period of history, during the reign of the Beast (Rev 13), they would not have passed through the time of the Lamb’s judgment and so were never in danger of having their names deleted from the scroll of Life. For this reason, it appears, they are judged according to their deeds, which are recorded in the scrolls of Deeds (Rev 2,23; 20,12-13; 22,12; also 1Cor 3,8; 2Cor 5,10;11,15; Eph 6,8; Mt 16,27; 1Pet 1,17).<sup>65</sup>

Among the dead, though, will be those who had died during the reign of the Beast and were judged adversely at the time because they identified themselves with the Beast and his regime. These will not be judged according to their deeds, like the others, but rather by the fact that their names had been erased from the scroll of Life. Their destiny is the lake of Fire (Rev 20,15).

The question remains as to whether this vision of the final Judgment includes other groups of people apart from the living (20,12) and resurrected dead (20,13). Some commentators assume that all people will appear before the great white throne for judgment, the living and the dead, as well as the good, the bad and the average.<sup>66</sup> There are, however, some obvious exceptions to this assumption. For example, the Beast and the false prophet are dragged directly off to the lake of Fire without appearing before the throne of judgment (19,20). Those who are thrown into the winepress of the passion of God, from which a lake of blood is formed (14,17-20), may also be consigned to eternal punishment without having to appear before the throne for judgment in 20,11-15 (cf. Mt 13,36-42).

There is also considerable doubt about whether the martyrs and the saints must appear before the throne for judgment. Some commentators strongly reject this suggestion, on the grounds that there can only be one resurrection, and the text has already described the rising of the saints and martyrs in the ‘first resurrection’ (Rev 20,4-6).<sup>67</sup> It must be admitted that the text of Revelation not only omits to mention them in the final judgment scene (20,11-15), but also shows them in roles that strongly conflict with the notion that they are under judgment. For instance, they have resurrected in order to rule and judge with Christ (3,21; 20,4-6), they fight on his behalf (17,14; 19,14) and finally they are represented as a bride, who is preparing

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<sup>63</sup> ‘Death and Hades’ (Rev 1,18; 6,8; 20,13.14) are the post-mortem abodes for the dead and correspond to the two divisions of Sheol in Jewish tradition and to Purgatory and Hell in Christian theology. They are distinguished from the lake of Fire (the second Death) by the fact that they are themselves thrown into this lake at the final Judgment (20,14), thus confirming that they are only temporary abodes for the dead, which operate up to the final Judgment and no longer. In both Jewish and Christian theology, ‘Hades’ has sometimes been confused with ‘Gehenna’ (e.g., CCC, 1035), which is traditionally the place for the eternal punishment of the wicked by fire after the final Judgment, and is therefore synonymous with the ‘lake of Fire’. This confusion can be traced to the Gospel of Luke, according to Chaim Milikowsky, in ‘Which Gehenna? Retribution and Eschatology in the Synoptic Gospels and in Early Jewish Texts’ *New Testament Studies* 34 [1988], 238-49. In contrast to Matthew, Luke appears to use the word ‘Gehenna’ for the place of the dead immediately after death (e.g. compare Matt 10,28 and Luke 12,5). Luke’s Gospel is the first instance of ‘Gehenna’ being used in this way, although similar usage is found in later Rabbinical writings. It is most probably the result of Hellenistic influence.

<sup>64</sup> Those who died at sea were believed to have been unable to enter ‘Death and Hades’, see Ben Witherington III, *Revelation*, The New Cambridge Bible Commentary, Cambridge: CUP, 2003; 251.

<sup>65</sup> Along with the scroll of Life and the scroll of Destiny, the scrolls of Deeds complete the traditional stock of heavenly scrolls or books. It is a metaphor for God’s memory and “serves as a record of the good and bad deeds a person had performed” Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 224.

<sup>66</sup> E.g. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 310.

<sup>67</sup> E.g. Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 579.

herself for her marriage with the Lamb (19,6-9).<sup>68</sup> Applied to the faithful people of God, the image of a spotless bride about to wed the Lamb is scarcely compatible with the image of a crowd hauled in front of the throne to undergo a forensic judgment. As the bride of the Lamb, they are already identified with the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, which is the eternal 'reward of the saints' (3,12; 21,2.9; 22,17), and no further testing is required to confirm this. It is therefore highly improbable that the people of God, purified through suffering, will have to appear for judgment before the throne. Even if they are present before the throne, it is clear that they are not there to be judged, as judgment has already been made in their favour and their names will be declared before God, along with all the other names that have not been erased from the scroll of Life (3,5).

The exceptions noted above concern the most evil and the most holy members of humankind, recalling again the Jewish New Year tradition, in which the judgment for the most wicked and the most virtuous takes place at the start of the period of penitence and judgment, and is not delayed until the end. The decision does not need to be tested by circumstances, as it was already beyond doubt. Similarly, in the judgment described in Revelation, the most evil and the most saintly people have already been judged by the time of the final Judgment scene (20,11-15) and therefore have no need to appear for judgment before the throne.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

The final Judgment is not the isolated or purely transcendent event that it appears to be from a superficial reading of Rev 20,11-15, but a process whose most essential and decisive part takes place among the living, during the final period of history. It is represented in the text by the series of trumpet plagues, but is more accurately defined by the mission of the two witnesses and the subsequent reign of the Beast. The implications of these findings are many and cannot be examined here in full. We will attempt only to underscore a few of the most important ones:

1. The link, in time and purpose, between the final Judgment and the reign of the Beast reveals the universal judgment as a real, end-historical event or process, which is experienced in every part of the world by those living at that time.<sup>69</sup> The above findings not only confirm that the Beast's reign lies in the future, but also indicate the critical significance of this period for the eternal destiny of each person living at that time.
2. According to the author's careful use of the imagery, the scroll of Life can only be opened, and names erased, during the final period of history represented in the text by the series of seven trumpets. Since erasure from the scroll of Life represents eternal condemnation, this becomes a real possibility for those living during this end-historical period, and especially during the brief reign of the Beast. As presented in the text, eternal condemnation is the tragic result of a conscious and personal choice in favour of the false messiah (the Beast) and against the true messiah (Christ), after due warning has been given (11,3-13; 14,9-11). The only alternative is to resist the Beast's reign with faith in Christ and be ready for martyrdom.
3. The prophetic and angelic warnings (11,3-13; 14,9-11) are unlikely to have any impact (Rev 9,20-21) on those who fail to take the final Judgment seriously, for any of the

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<sup>68</sup> For the various groups that can be identified with the bride, see Ben-Daniel, *Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple*, 206-11.

<sup>69</sup> Contra Glasson, 'Last Judgment', 538, see n. 20 above.

intellectual reasons presented at the outset, or for any other reason. Persistence in denying the reality of final Judgment can only facilitate the soul's tragic progress on the road to eternal condemnation.

4. As described in its practical, end-historical and global context, the final Judgment cannot be mistaken for an individual's 'supratemporal' experience in this life, nor with the particular judgment that takes place immediately after death. These philosophical or theological speculations on final Judgment are totally contradicted by the text of Revelation and appear to be merely an attempt to 'privatise' religious faith.
5. The text of Revelation gives no reason to believe that the particular judgment that takes place after the death of an individual involves a decision on his or her final destiny, or that the risen Christ is continuously engaged in judging souls eternally at the moment of their death.<sup>70</sup> In accordance with the rest of Scripture,<sup>71</sup> this decision is not determined until the general resurrection of the dead for judgment, at the end of history. At that time, each soul will be judged and rewarded according to his or her own deeds, and only those whose names have been erased from the Lamb's scroll of Life will suffer eternal condemnation.
6. According to Revelation, the particular judgment that takes place after a person's death simply determines where that soul must go to await the final Judgment: the souls of the blessed go to Heaven (cf. 14,13) and all the rest go to the regions termed 'Death and Hades' (cf. 1,18; 6,8; 20,13.14). At the final judgment 'Death and Hades' will give up their dead so that they may be judged, and then 'Death and Hades' will be thrown into the lake of Fire, thus confirming that these regions are only temporary abodes for the dead, which operate up to the final Judgment and no longer.
7. Nothing is said explicitly about the kinds of punishment suffered by those waiting temporarily in 'Death and Hades', but of those going to Heaven it is written "*Blessed are the dead, they that die in the Lord from now on. Yes, says the Spirit, so that they may rest from their labours, for their deeds go with them*" (Rev 14,13). Concerning those who do not go to Heaven, it can therefore be postulated that either they do not rest from their labours, or they do not take their deeds with them, or both. In 'Death and Hades', then, there is a relative absence of rest, and no sense of achievement or satisfaction from life's experiences. In this restless, empty, unfulfilling environment the souls who did not 'die in the Lord' await, perhaps rather anxiously, the eternal verdict that will be given to them at the final Judgment, and not before.

Concerning the souls in 'Death and Hades', one important question remains unresolved by the text of Revelation. According to the well-known parable of the final Judgment in the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 25,31-46), it is understood that all whose deeds were purely selfish and neglectful of the needy (the 'goats') will merit eternal condemnation at the final Judgment. In the Book of Revelation, by comparison, there appears to be no possibility of eternal condemnation for the vast majority of the dead—all those souls who did not live during the final period of history, and who will return to be judged according to their deeds at the final Judgment (Rev 20,13). Their names remain inscribed in the scroll of Life right up until their resurrection for final Judgment, since there is no possibility of their names being

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<sup>70</sup> As stated in paragraphs 1051 and 1022 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*.

<sup>71</sup> With the possible exception of the Gospel of Luke, where immediate post-mortem judgment is alluded to. For further analysis of the differing eschatologies of Luke and Matthew, see Milikowsky, 'Which Gehenna?', 242-44 (see n. 62).

removed before this.<sup>72</sup> For these souls, the only possibility of eternal condemnation would seem to depend on whether Christ continues to remove names from the scroll of Life during the assembly for final Judgment itself, in response to what is written in the scrolls of Deeds. One could imagine that, if these scrolls reveal that the deeds of a particular soul were entirely reprobate and uncharitable toward the needy, the name of that soul would immediately be erased from the scroll of Life and eternal punishment would follow. In this way, the final Judgment represented in Revelation would harmonize with the parable in Matthew's Gospel.

However, it must be said that the text gives no indication that Christ is still engaged in the process of removing names at the time of the assembly for the final Judgment in 20,11-15. On the contrary, the wording of verse 15 gives the impression that, by the time of this assembly, the contents of the scroll of Life have already been decided.<sup>73</sup> For something so crucial as the verdict of eternal condemnation, one would expect a compelling textual indication that Christ was still, at this stage, engaged in removing names from the scroll of Life, and it is very significant that no such indication is given.

Arguments from silence are the least persuasive, and so we must admit that although the text gives the impression that all those who died before the series of trumpets will be spared the possibility of eternal condemnation, we cannot be certain about this.<sup>74</sup> Perhaps this uncertainty about the final decision is divinely willed, so that the possibility of eternal condemnation remains before everyone, at all times, until God's all embracing mercy is revealed at the final Judgment—mercy for all, that is, except for those who give themselves to the Beast during his brief, end-historical reign.

John Ben-Daniel,  
Old City, Jerusalem  
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<sup>72</sup> As Christ cannot open the scroll until the start of the final brief period of history, see above.

<sup>73</sup> "*And if anyone was not found written in the scroll of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire*" (Rev 20,15). One must add this to the fact that the erasure of names from the scroll of Life precedes even the reign of Beast, according to the tenses used in 13,8 and 17,8 (see n. 59).

<sup>74</sup> If indeed the impression is correct and there is no possibility of eternal condemnation for these souls, then our attitude to the punishment of 'Hades' (Hell) needs to be re-examined. This should not be confused with the eternal retributive punishment of the lake of Fire (Gehenna), but must be seen rather as temporary and corrective in purpose—an opportunity for the correction of souls as they await final Judgment at the end of history. One can postulate that for the majority of these souls (those who never gave themselves over to the Beast during his end-historical reign), the experience of separation from God in Hades causes such a yearning for God's mercy that when they rise for judgment and stand in God's presence (20,11-15), this is not denied to them. One supposes that even the most hardened sinners would be effectively prepared by this experience to participate in Eternal Life. The explanation may be that individuals of former generations cannot be held fully and personally responsible for their sins, because of ignorance or tradition or both, and cannot therefore be deserving of everlasting condemnation. By restricting eternal condemnation to those who consciously reject God's mercy during the final period of history, it is implied that the individuals of this last generation are uniquely free to choose between Christ and the Beast, the true and the false redeemer, and are therefore able to bear, eternally, the full responsibility for their choice.