

THE GREAT WHITE THRONE JUDGEMENT (REVELATION 20:11-15) AND RELEVANT ASPECTS

A BASIS DOCUMENT FOR DISCUSSION

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THE PRIMARY QUESTION AT HAND: How does our understanding that the Book of the Revelation had been fulfilled in its entirety (final fulfilment in 70 AD) agree with the Great White Throne Judgment (Revelation 20:11-15) and the New Heavens and New Earth (Revelation 21 & 22)?



This is a very relevant question, given the knowledge and understanding with which we (definitely my and Martie's generation) grew up with and must therefore be welcomed. For the topics of the New Jerusalem and the New Heavens and New Earth, which are really part of the answer(s), please see our individual articles for those specific discussions.

We underline the fact that this should not be taken as a complete document on the subject. It is only a concise starting point to progress towards a more complete and responsible treatise. Your input, whether in agreement or disagreement, will make an appreciated contribution to complete the required product. However, as a starting point, we wish to repeat the plea by Ephraim Currier in 1841 to readers of his book on the so-called Second Coming of Christ:

“All I ask of the community is, that they will give my views an impartial investigation, and if they are agreeable to the word of God, embrace them, if not reject them. One thing in particular I have to request of the clergy, as well as of all others, and that is, not to pass by the work now offered for their consideration, without notice; but let it be closely scrutinized, and if it cannot be refuted in a spirit of fairnes(s), and in a satisfactory manner, to admit it is truth. But if, on the other hand, any man can show in a satisfactory manner that my views are unscriptural, let him do it, the sooner the

better. When this is done, I pledge myself frankly and unreservedly to acknowledge my errors. But long cherished opinions, and all history not found in the word of God, must be left entirely out of the question. I have nothing to expect from the sympathies of any sect of religionists now in existence, for I know well that all their strength will be arrayed against me. But from candid and sober argument I have nothing to fear. If my sentiments are unscriptural, it is a pity if it cannot be shown in a spirit of fairness and good feeling.”¹

OUR APPROACH TO INTERPRETATION OF THE SCRIPTURES

Because we have grown up in a specific milieu of biblical interpretation – and that being one which fixed a futuristic view of Revelation and other prophecies such as Matthew 24 in our minds – we really understand that people are traditionally inclined to read the Bible against all their fixed perceptions from the word go. Because we were taught that so many prophecies still have to be fulfilled, we naturally tend to read all prophecy from this firmly established futuristic mindset. Where Jesus would say “...when you see these things...”, we would read ourselves into the picture as the ‘you’ that he addressed, even though we are almost 2000 years removed from the ‘you’ he was actually speaking to. This is something that Martie and I have had to address in our own make-up, and still have to do.

Relatively wide accord among scholars accepts Terry Milton’s book *Biblical Hermeneutics*, a book from the late 19th century, as the benchmark of works in this area. We quote two important paragraphs from this book:

- *“In the systematic presentation, therefore, of any scriptural doctrine, we are always to make discriminating use of sound hermeneutical principles. We must not study them in the light of modern systems of divinity, but should aim rather to place ourselves in the position of the sacred writers, and study to obtain the impression their words naturally made upon the minds of the first readers.”*
- *“When a writer says that an event will shortly and speedily come to pass, or is about to take place, it is contrary to all propriety to declare that his statements allow us to believe the event is in the far future. It is a reprehensible abuse of language to say that the words **immediately**, or **near at hand**, mean **ages hence**, or **after a long time**. Such a treatment of the language of Scripture is even worse than the theory of double sense.”²*

Unfortunately preachers, teachers and authors throughout centuries have allowed themselves to be influenced by *“hidden meanings, and spiritualizing processes, and plausible conjectures.”³* This, of course, is due to the influence of the techniques of ancient Greek philosophy. Sadly, too much of that has also found its way into Bible translations and we have paid the price for our inability

If we want to determine what the text means, we need to determine what the text says.

(through lack of teaching) and even unwillingness to know and understand the original meanings of words and concepts. When Paul writes to the Thessalonians, for example, that *“then we which are alive and remain (...)”*, his reference to ‘we’ applies to him and his generation, not to a generation thousands of years removed in the future. For us to do otherwise is to read above what is written.

As I (Gerrie) was working on the original draft of this document and was looking for something on my computer, a book dating back to 1894 caught my eye. In his foreword Alexander Brown wrote:

“This book is a humble plea with all who are concerned with Scripture interpretation to re-consider the whole question of the Coming and Kingdom of Christ. It proceeds upon the principle that prophecy is not couched in occult or deceptive language, though strongly Hebraistic in conception and expression, and aims at showing that what Christ and His Apostles foretold was strictly true when their language is interpreted in its directest sense, and in remembrance of the spiritual ends they had in view. The substantial accuracy of our conclusions may almost be presumed from the fact that New Testament prophecy is found self-consistent and easy of interpretation, and the outcome entirely worthy of the Gospel of God’s salvation.”⁴

In his last contribution and summary of the book, Brown made the following observations:

“(...) current methods of interpretation are condemned by their sadly disappointing results – dates minutely fixed, prophecies falsified, hopes deferred, new methods of interpretation invented to be falsified in turn, and, on the surface, the wildest liberties taken with the Sacred Word.”⁵

DEATH, HELL AND RESURRECTION

What we write now will undoubtedly have a lot of hair stand on end. But, as we plead in our writings, let the reader carefully weigh the content after the example of the Bereans (Acts 17:11), and if some feel what we have written is in error, please feel free to show us our error from the Scriptures. We will not take offense – remember that here in our late sixties we are trying to replace many years’ ‘Bible knowledge’ with ‘Bible truth’.

The Old Testament, we have correctly been taught, is a Book of Covenant – the covenant being with a very specific group of people, the posterity of Abraham, through Isaac, the son of the promise – people we came to know as the chosen people of Israel. Their election and placing within a very specific and strategically positioned land area had the purpose to bring the knowledge of the Living God to the known world of their time. It also pointed towards the Messiah that would come to fulfil (or complete) the Law and the Prophets – and the word ‘fulfil’ does not carry the meaning of enforcing the (Mosaic) Law, but gives the idea of a hollow being filled up. That which has been missing has been added/completed with the coming and crucifixion of the Messiah. This fulfilment would also bring the kingdom of God to this people, in order that it could be taken to the known world. This would then also fulfil God’s promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed in him.

One of the best known concepts we grew up with, is that of the hell. Modern ideas of people describing near death experiences, as well as other media such as paintings, have left us with this image of a place of flames and molten lava. Wherever we found the word ‘hell’ in the Bible, this was the image we had in mind. And of course, Bible translations kept us on this route. Everywhere one was confronted with verses of Scripture with a ‘turn or burn’ message.

Did you know that the word ‘hell’ is not found in the Old Testament source manuscripts and that it does not appear in the Hebrew Tanakh?

As time passed we came to realise that we often had a wrong conception. Revelation 20:13 & 14 of the old King James version, for example, stated, “*And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death*”. The New King James has already rectified this and has replaced the word ‘hell’ with **hades**. In the 1933 Afrikaans translation the more correct ‘*doderyk*’ (realm of the dead) was used and not ‘hell’.

What we have here is the old dispensation concept of a temporary destination called **sheol** in Hebrew (Old Testament) and **hades** in Greek (New Testament). Sheol/Hades was regarded as the temporary holding place or prison for the souls of those who died (went to sleep) within the Old Covenant dispensation. Here the souls of the dead waited in two sections (the righteous and unrighteous) and with a great divide between them, for the resurrection and judgment to come on the Day of the Lord. See, for example, the description in 1 Kings 2:10: “*So David slept with his fathers, and was buried in the city of David.*” The Good News Bible (also called Today’s English Version) renders it, “*David died and was buried in David’s City.*” As you can see, the word ‘died’ no longer conveys any image of the sleeping idea, and there also is no connection with the presence of his fathers. Unfortunate translation errors and biases have undeniably and substantially distorted our understanding of these concepts.

Whereas ‘*sheol/hades*’ referred to a temporary destination, we find in the concept of *gā-Hinnom* (Hebrew) and *géenna* (*Gehenna*) (Greek) the place of everlasting judgment and desolation. The word comes from the Hebrew Valley of Hinnom, which some state really was the city’s sewage gully, where even the bodies of people were thrown in addition to being used also as a place where human sacrifices and sacrifices to idols were made (e.g. people who sacrificed their children to Molech). Archaeology does not substantiate this idea of a sewage valley. The more credible explanation lies in the fact of being the place where children were sacrificed to idol gods such as Molech. It therefore came to be viewed as an accursed place and also became a figurative reference describing a so-called hell concept.⁶

Gehenna has thus become associated with a place of bodily and spiritual punishment, not only for the Jews, but for all evil people. In the NT the word *gehenna* is presented as the place in which the unrighteous will be thrown after the last judgment – a place of martyrdom for both body and soul as declared in Matthew 5:29-30. Concepts such as the pit, abyss and pool of fire are different terms, but seemingly related to the concept of *gehenna* or final judgment. We can safely say it was/is an understanding of a place of total abandonment from God.

The concepts of the resurrection and judgment that must or was to come, was/is therefore rooted in the concept of *sheol/hades*. Even the greatest sceptic who conscientiously labels the Bible as a myth, but consistently uses its text in his or her arguments about a hell or resurrection, at least needs to do so from the correct original context or meaning even in rejecting the concepts. If this is not the case, the argument’s content is already flawed from the start. How much more is it then not to be expected from the believer – irrespective of whether he/she regards the concepts as truth or symbolic? The latter is another discussion in itself.

Descended to hell

In the Apostolic Creed we were taught that Jesus was crucified, died and then descended to hell.

Our research in this regard, however shows the following:

- Speculation that the twelve articles of this creed came from the twelve apostles, cannot be supported by any sound evidence. It is a later product.
- The 'descended to hell' aspect is connected to 1 Peter 3:18-20 (*"For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: by which he also went and preached to the spirits in prison; which sometime were disobedient, when once the long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while he was a preparing, wherein few, that is eight souls were saved by water."*).
- There are considerable differences of opinion as to what exactly Peter meant, and consequently one also finds much speculation in this regard.

The declaration that Jesus descended to hell is consequently just one more example of wrong perception flowing forth from human interpretation error, as Jesus undoubtedly referred to *hades* and not *gehenna*. See Revelation 1:18, for example. The dictionary of W.E Vine's description of *hades* includes specific reference to application before Christ's ascent into heaven. William Mounce declares in his dictionary that *hades*, "(...) is conceived as an underground prison with locked gates to which Christ holds the key."

The only other applicable Scripture reference mentioned by one source is Luke 23:43 (*"And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise"*). In Jewish theology it represented the department of *hades* where the blessed souls awaited the resurrection.⁷ It is equivalent to the concept of Abraham's bosom.

HE WILL COME TO JUDGE

We now come to the Great White Throne Judgment described in Revelation 20:11-15.

The Revelation is addressed to seven specific congregations (churches) and does not describe seven church types or periods of church history from the beginning of the so-called Church Age to the end of it, as the modern end-times theology would have us believe. There were already more than thirty congregations throughout the Roman Empire at the time (that is, just counting those mentioned in the Bible). These seven are those in which the apostle John had been active according to tradition, which also has it that they were congregations of Jewish converts. The Revelation opens and ends with them. The ecclesia of the Ephesians in Revelation and may even be a different one to that which Paul wrote. The Jewishness of the seven congregations is further strengthened by the fact

The Revelation provides a summary of the Old Testament History.

that the Revelation provides a summary of the Old Testament history. This is in harmony with the open expectation of Revelation 1:3, that the original recipients would

have understood the prophecy. The whole book is compiled of images/events from the history of Israel.

Do you find this difficult to accept? Then consider the following from Daniel 12:1-2:

*“At that time Michael the great prince who stands watch over **your people** will rise up. There will be a time of distress such as never has occurred since nations came into being until that time. But at that time **all your people** who are found written in the book will escape. **Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth** [therefore in sheol/hades] will awake, some to eternal life, and some to shame and eternal contempt.”*

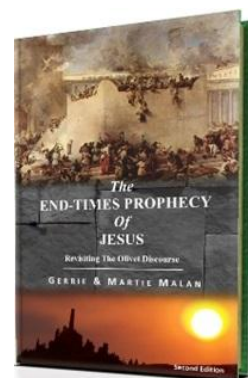
We must constantly bear in mind that the Hebraic worldview was based on a context of God’s people on the one hand, and the nations (gentiles) on the other. With the New Testament dispensation this differentiation came to an end. The sea that was no more according to Revelation 21:1 was a prophetic-poetic reference to the nations aside from the remnant of Israel (which referred mainly to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin at the time of the Revelation).

The judgment of Revelation 20 was the judgement that took place with the return (*parousia*) of Jesus in judgment and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple 40 years after His crucifixion. After that no temporary holding place of the souls of the deceased applied again. See also Daniel 12, which entails the same message pertaining to the end of that dispensation. Please note the statement in Daniel 12:1-2 that we quoted earlier.

“And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell [hades] delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell [hades] were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.” (Rev 20:13-15).

The Mosaic dispensation which was founded on and rooted in works according to the Law had come to an end. [We recommend our book, *The End-times Prophecy Of Jesus* in this regard].

Only after this judgment was fulfilled does one find John describing the vision of the New Heavens and New Earth – which John Lightfoot and others pointed out in centuries past was the prophetic imagery of the New Testament dispensation. In prophetic context one then also finds, as mentioned before, that the concept of the sea is used to present the nations. Remember that the most important principle involved in understanding the Scriptures, is that Scripture best interprets Scripture. [Please read our articles on the New Jerusalem and the New Heavens and New Earth.](#)



WHERE DOES THIS BRING US TODAY?

Let us simply consider a number of Scriptural evidences and then weigh their consequences:

- *“For God sent not his Son into the world [kosmos, humanity] to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he*

that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (John 3:17, 18).

- *“He that believeth on the Son of God hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him” (John 3:36).*
- *“**Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out**” (John 12:31)*
- *“For it pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell; and, having made peace through the blood of his cross, **by him to reconcile all things unto himself**; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven ” (Col 1:19, 20).*
- *“But Christ being come a high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he **entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us**” (Heb 9:11, 12).*
- *“but ye **are come** unto mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant (...)” (Heb 12:22-24).*
- *“Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4:16). But then we read in Revelation 15:8, “And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God, and from his power; and **no man was able to enter into the temple, till the seven plagues of the seven angels were fulfilled.**”*
- *“we are confident, I say, and **willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord**” (2 Cor 5:8).*

Let us stop there. As we understand them, they all contradict the idea of another great judgment day that still awaits humanity, for that would imply the continued existence of *hades* to which the souls of men depart when they die, to await that judgment. We find nothing in the Scriptures describing or supporting such a situation.

Given the fact that Revelation 20:14 declares that those who had been judged at the Great White Throne Judgment had been thrown into the pool of fire and had received the second death, it seems (our assumption, as it is not spelt out) on the grounds of John 3:18, for example, that the New Testament person who rejects Christ while he lives, will have already received the ‘second death’ (complete removal from God’s presence) when he dies here on earth. Also consider Revelation 15:8 – do I have entry to God’s throne of grace as declared in Hebrews 4:16, or don’t I? If Revelation 15:8 still lies somewhere in our future, then Scriptures states that I do not have such right of entry and the Epistle to the Hebrews is filled with untruths (aka lies).

Alexander Brown summarised his understanding of the whole Gospel well in his foreword in the following words:

“The unvarying testimony of the Scripture is, that the same generation sees the consummate sacrifice of our great High Priest and the desolating judgements of our righteous King. The New Testament day of judgement is the historical boundary line between the legal age and that gospel era which is ‘the acceptable year of the Lord.’ It takes both the first and second, the suffering and reigning Christs, to introduce the gospel dispensation; just as it takes the dead and risen Christ to constitute that one Mediator who can save unto the uttermost all who come unto God by Him.”⁸

A SECONDARY QUESTION FLOWING FROM THE ABOVE: Are we, then, of the opinion that the world around us, the towns and cities will remain forever?

We have been asked this question a number of times.

From a scientific and physical viewpoint it is probably quite possible that parts or the whole of our earth could be destroyed by an atomic war or by the impact of a giant meteorite or other heavenly body. **However, that would not be the fulfilment of a biblical ‘end-time prophecy’, for those prophecies all referred to very specific people and within a very specific world environment of the time involved.** That is the issue we need to understand, and if we do, there should not be a repetition of the more than 200 end-times frenzies the world has seen over centuries (with more than 40 in only our generation).

One last quotation from the work of Brown – the introduction of the final summary of his findings, which largely echoes our views of major parts of modern church doctrines:

“It may be well in closing this volume to bring into distinctive array the prominent findings of our finished research. These we doubt not will be disappointing, if judged from the standpoint of current beliefs in the Church; but we claim that the latter are groundless inventions, drawn from Scripture on principles that are violations of fair and candid exegesis (...).”⁹

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Picture of the Great White Throne Judgment:

http://s292.photobucket.com/user/iam733_photos/media/white_thrown-1.jpg.html

¹ CURRIER, E. 1841. *The Second Coming Of Christ And The Resurrection*. Skowhegan. Digital version by Google Books.

² MILTON S. TERRY. 1883. *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments*. New York: Phillips & Hunt, 495-496, 595.

³ TERRY, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 152.

⁴ ALEXANDER BROWN. 1894. 2nd ed. *The Great Day Of The Lord: A Survey Of New Testament Teaching on Christ's Coming In His Kingdom, The Resurrection, And The Judgment Of The Living And The Dead*. London: Elliot Stock. iii, iv.

⁵ ALEXANDER BROWN. 389.

⁶ Gehenna. *Jewish Encyclopedia*. 1906. Jewish Encyclopedia.com.
<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/6558-gehenna>

⁷ VINCENT. *Vincent' Word Studies*. e-Sword[®], Version 10.1.0, 2000-2012, Rick Meyers.

⁸ BROWN. 2.

⁹ BROWN. 389.