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# 'Thou Hast Forsaken Thy First Love': Soteriological Contingency in the Book of Revelation

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'Can I lose my salvation?'

'My mother doubted her faith before she died. Did she fall away?'

Debates over these personal and deeply existential questions rage throughout much of the evangelical world, frequently posing particularly difficult pastoral ministry challenges. Everyone from Southern Baptists to Methodists to Presbyterians is engaged in this theological contest, with no end in sight until Jesus returns.

In this paper, I will examine what the book of Revelation has to say concerning this debate. My thesis is that John the Seer<sup>1</sup> portrays soteriology as contingent and dynamic, flexible and open, and thus by implication not predetermined. This does not necessarily mean that the totality of the New Testament presents soteriology in conditional or contingent terms (although I believe it does). However, I contend that the Apocalypse consistently and coherently presents the dynamics of soteriology in that manner.

## I. A Word on Words: Methodology

My line of inquiry can be reduced to the question, 'Is salvation contingent?' I use the word *contingent* to encompass two concepts. First, it means that an event or outcome is subject to change. Second, contingency is predicated upon certain conditionals or actions on the part of mutually self-aware agents—that is, people who are aware of their freedom of choice when presented with conflicting options.

The debate over determinism involves both compatibilist and deterministic models within various competing theological systems. Determinism can be defined as 'the metaphysical thesis that the facts of the past, in conjunction with the laws of nature [or, for evangelicals, God's determinative will], entail every truth about the future'.<sup>2</sup>

A consensus in the classic debate relating to free will and determinism

<sup>1</sup> I do not believe that the author of the gospel of John is the same person who wrote the book of Revelation. As such, when I refer to John in this work, I am referring to John the Seer.

<sup>2</sup> Michael McKenna and Justin D. Coates, 'Compatibilism', in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/compatibilism/>.

remains elusive, but we should keep an open mind when approaching the evidence on whether soteriology is a contingent or determined matter. We are to build our theology on what is revealed to us, not what we desire to be true. As an evangelical Christian, I must be most concerned with what Scripture says rather than my own feelings. I concur with John Jefferson Davis's admonition that 'further progress in the study of this doctrine [perseverance of the saints] calls for continuing exegetical studies of the pertinent biblical texts on election, regeneration, and warnings of apostasy as well.'<sup>3</sup> I hope that my work here, albeit tentative, will contribute to such progress.

## II. Important Words and Concepts in John's Vision

Specific Greek verbs like *akouō* ('to hear, understand/comprehend') are often central to the Spirit's messages to the seven assemblies in Revelation 2–3. This verb occurs nine times in those chapters out of a total of forty-three appearances in the book. In context, the word calls for understanding or comprehension of a concept, rather than simply the auditory intake of words or knowledge. Other words (both as nouns and as verbs) centre on the activity of human repentance, such as *metanoēō* (to repent or change one's mind; used ten times in Revelation),<sup>4</sup> and must also

be considered contextually and theologically. More important to this study are various conditional or contingent particles in the Apocalypse. John uses them twenty-three times (*ei* fourteen times, *ean* nine times), often at key points. The relationship of these two particles to matters of soteriology, judgement, ecclesiological participation and potential apostasy is often neglected.

Although the conditional particles have various nuances, it seems fairly clear that they are used contextually and semantically to describe provisional or contingent statements. The particles can be used in a variety of contexts with different moods and tenses, and hence our discussion of the Apocalypse must reflect these nuances.

## III. Conditional Particles in Revelation

John's uses of the various particles in his apocalyptic visionary experience do not conform to a specific and narrow semantic domain. Rather, context dictates the relevance of each usage. The Greek particle *ei* ('if') occurs throughout Revelation in a variety of contexts and each instance must be exegeted properly. We begin with its uses in the letters to the seven churches.

**Rev 2:5:** 'Therefore, remember from where you have collapsed,<sup>5</sup> and repent (*metanoēson*) and do the

<sup>3</sup> John Jefferson Davis, 'The Perseverance of the Saints: A History of the Doctrine', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34, no. 2 (1991): 228.

<sup>4</sup> Revelation 2–3 uses *akousatō* specifically in relation to an ethical admonition or im-

perative to correct behaviours.

<sup>5</sup> The verb *piptō* occurs ninety times in the New Testament, often in a literal sense (Matt 7:25, 10:29, 13:4, 15:27, 17:15, 24:29; Luke 10:18, 11:17, 13:4; Acts 1:26, 5:5, 9:4, 20:9; Rev 2:5, 6:13, 7:16, 9:1).

works you did at first. But if you do not (*ei de mē*), I will come to you and I will remove your lampstand from its place, if (*ean*) you do not repent (*mē metanoēsēs*)' (all translations are my own).

The word 'collapsed' (*peptōkas*)<sup>6</sup> seems to be used here in the sense of a spiritual or moral falling or failure, suggesting former sins or a status of sin among those who were formerly not in Christ (i.e. non-Christians).<sup>7</sup> Other instances in Revelation (11:13, 14:8, 16:19) suggest that the word is functioning metaphorically to describe the destruction of a city. This specific syntactical construction *ei de mē* is echoed in Gen 20:7 LXX, where Abimelech is given a choice to return Sarah to Abram, but 'if you do not (*ei de mē*), know that you will certainly die.' In the Greek text of the LXX (Gen 30:1; 42:20; 43:5; Ex 7:27; 40:37; Josh 24:15), this word always denotes conditionality and contingency as it relates to God's interaction with humanity. 1 Maccabees 15:31 is rather explicit in asserting that if a fellow ruler does not acquiesce, there will be war. The notion of conditionality and contingency runs throughout Jewish literature in discussions of the fore-

stalling of divine and human wrath, and even of God's own desire to pause or relent from wrath against sins such as economic injustice (Sir 29:6).

John the Seer echoes this sort of conditionality in his admonition to the assembly in Ephesus to repent for the purpose of 'reform and renewal'.<sup>8</sup> This conditionality is rooted in the particle *if*. If the church does not repent (turn away from sin), then God will remove (*kinēsō*) the 'lampstand', which John uses to represent the status or perhaps presence of an assembly (Rev 1:20b). God can indeed remove the status of a church, but this judgement can be undone via repentance from sin. Gregory Beale states, 'If they do not repent, Christ will come and judge them. They will cease to exist as a church when the very function that defines the essence of their existence is no longer performed.'<sup>9</sup>

The repeated active tense forms (including imperative and subjunctive moods) strongly emphasize the nature of repentance and the turning away of divine wrath. If the Ephesian assembly does not remember, repent and do their first works, then Jesus will utterly remove them from their privileged status before him. This is echoed in Joel 2:14 (LXX): 'who knows if he will turn and repent' (*epistrepsei kai metanoēsei*).<sup>10</sup> The conditionality is centred on human action in response to Christ's admo-

6 The perfect tense-form suggests their former inoperable state, and an act of repentance and expressed allegiance is what moved them from this 'fallen' state.

7 Rom 11:11, 22. Paul's response is countering the hypothetical: they 'did not fall' when it appeared that they had fallen. This presumes the possibility of some sort of fall, and the response is based on how God decides to deliver Israel. This is confirmed by Paul in Rom 11:22 where the Gentiles are told that they too could be 'cut off' and are not free from apostasy, which includes those who have 'fallen'.

8 Ian Paul, *Revelation* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018), 80.

9 G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 232. Beale is himself Reformed.

10 Joel 2:13 LXX makes this point as well, indicating that the person is to 'turn towards the Lord', which clearly involves conditionality. See also Jonah 3:9 LXX.

nition. Christ's apocalyptic return is imminent; the consequence of his return is conditioned on humanity's response and repentance. The judgement of God is truly universal, and not even the church will escape it except through the act of repentance.<sup>11</sup>

**Rev 2:16–17:** '[Therefore],<sup>12</sup> repent! And if you do not (*ei de mē*), I will come to you in swiftness (*tachu*), and wage war (*polemēsō*) with you all by the double-edged sword from my mouth. The one who has an ear, let them hear what the Spirit says to the assemblies: to the one who conquers I will give (*tō nikōnti dōsō*) to them the manna which is being hidden, and I will give to them a small white stone, and upon the stone a new name is being written, which no one knows except (*ei de mē*) the one who has obtained the stone.'

The reference to 'swiftness' echoes the immediate judgement that God will perpetrate on Satan (Rom 16:20) in the eschatological end. This is John's method of asserting the most severe apocalyptic form of violent eradication, as shown by the future tense use of the verb 'wage war'. In the New Testament, this verb is found almost exclusively in the Book of Revelation (12:7 twice; 13:4; 17:14; 19:11), and the noun is used extensively as well (Rev 9:7, 9; 11:7; 12:7, 17; 13:7; 16:14; 19:19; 20:8).<sup>13</sup> This

usage echoes the Maccabean warfare against the Jewish people (1 Macc 3:14).

No mere excommunication is depicted here. Rather, the allegiance of the Pergamum assembly has shifted away from Jesus and their lack of repentance—as indicated by the conditional particle—will result in their violent demise, most likely their being denied according to Christ's proclamation (Mt 25:41–46). Leaving aside the notion of 'hearing' in verse 17a for later, God's response to false teaching (likely idolatry leading to sexual immorality; see verses 14–15) is again a call to a change of mind and heart, which is possible because of God's empowering activity and invitation.<sup>14</sup>

The second use of the particle here concerns a contrastive element, delineating an exceptional concept or person: 'the one who has obtained the stone'. The active substantival particle (*ho lambanōn*) assumes self-agency on the part of the person who has obtained the stone, an act predicated upon the person's repentance in verse 16a. Hence, John's vision indicates God's demand that the assemblies repent and turn back towards him, and his warning that if they do not, God will wage war upon them as if they were part of the evil empire to be utterly destroyed at the end of all things (1 Cor 15:23–26).<sup>15</sup>

**11** Beale, *Revelation*, 232ff focuses almost entirely on the conditionality of Christ's return but does not focus on the particle and the nature of what the conditionality implies concerning what happens to everyone else where Christ returns.

**12** This conjunction is missing in 01 Sinaiticus and is thus textually suspect.

**13** The noun is used in Mt 24:6; Mk 13:7; Lk 21:9; 1 Cor 14:8; Heb 11:34; Jam 4:1.

**14** Hence, the case for prevenient grace becomes a central tenet and helps to prevent us from falling into the trap of meticulous determinism. For a helpful work on this topic see W. Brian Shelton, *Prevenient Grace: God's Provision for All Humanity* (Anderson: Warner Press, 2014).

**15** Beale, *Revelation*, 251 correctly observes that the church will not escape judgement. But he does not speak of the specific condi-

**Rev 9:4:** 'And it was said to them that they were not to mistreat the grass of the land, nor any green thing, nor any tree, but only (*ei mē*) those people who do not have the seal of God upon their foreheads.'

After the fifth trumpet is blown, chaos erupts from the abyss (9:2–3). In this instance, the negated particle *ei mē* refers to human beings who do not have (*ouk echousi*) God's seal on their foreheads. This sealing process appears to occur in Revelation 7:2–3 and presumably continues throughout the apocalyptic narrative in chapters 7–9, but it is still conditioned upon repentance and allegiance. Asserting that this is left up to 'God's decreative will'<sup>16</sup> does not take into account the evidence of human participation and allegiance that we have seen, and will continue to see, throughout Revelation. Moreover, no decree from God is present here. The negated particle specifies a distinct grouping of people who have been set apart, most likely because of faithfulness and repentance (2:10; 13, 19).<sup>1</sup>

**Rev 11:5:** 'And if anyone (*ei tis*) desires to harm them, fire bursts forth from their mouths and it will devour their enemies. If anyone (*ei tis*) desires to harm them, this is how they will die.'

There are two uses of this conditional particle here; the context is clearly, though perhaps not exclusively, figurative. Both particles appear in hypothetical statements, but John applies a contingent, fatal judgement to those who might bring harm to the

witnesses. God's protection will be over them, for anyone who attempts to cause them harm will instead be harmed.

**Rev 13:9–10:** 'If anyone (*ei tis*) has an ear, hear this! If anyone (*ei tis*) is taken into captivity, into captivity they will go; if anyone (*ei tis*) is to be killed by the sword, the sword will kill them. Here is the perseverance and the faithful allegiance (*hē pistis*) of the holy ones.'<sup>17</sup>

Similar to 11:5, this passage contains three uses of the particle-plus-indefinite pronoun construction. The first use assumes contingency on the part of the various Christian victims of the Beast, although the second and third uses clearly reflect the 'call for the endurance and trust of the holy ones' (13:10b). A multiplicity of interpretive options are in play, but clearly the threats are real, especially when viewed as a result of sin.

The repeated call for 'perseverance' undermines a deterministic reading here, for at least two reasons. First, unless one assumes that people are incapable of following God's commands and calling, there is no logical reason to believe that this call carries with it a deterministic element. Second, and more importantly, John does not describe faith as a gift (as one finds, for example, in Ephesians 2:8). Rather, the call for perseverance and allegiance confirms the need for tenacious faithfulness to God, the one who has been faithful to them, at a time when the danger of falling away was very real. A person who does not 'hear' or 'comprehend' what the faithful are called into 'will go into captivity

tionality of repentance.

<sup>16</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 496. The rather loaded language here is unsustainable when we consider what John has already shown us.

<sup>17</sup> John is clearly referencing Jeremiah 15:2 LXX.

ity'.

**Rev 13:17:** 'So that no one would be able to buy or to sell if they did not have that imprint (*ei mē ho echōn to charagma*), the name of the beast or the number of its name.'

In imposing universal martial law, the Beast has seized control of the various socio-economic spheres of life (see Revelation 18),<sup>18</sup> requiring all to possess an 'imprint' or mark. The survival of a multitude of people within the ancient world now depends on the sands of shifting allegiances; without the mark of the Beast, they are not permitted to buy or sell and will starve. Although the passage does not directly address apostasy, it does make one's fate conditional on specific actions and reactions between agents.

**Rev 14:9–11:** 'And another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a great voice, "If anyone (*ei tis*) worships the beast and its image, and wilfully takes (*lambanei*)<sup>19</sup> the branding mark upon their forehead or upon their right hand, that person will also be made to drink from the wine of the wrath of God poured full strength in the cup of his anger, and they will be tormented in fire and sulfur before the holy angels and before the Lamb,

and the smoke of their torment<sup>20</sup> will ascend into the ages of the ages and they will not have rest day or night, the ones worshipping the beast and its image, and if anyone (*ei tis*) has wilfully taken (*lambanei*) the branding mark of its name.'"

Space does not permit us to exegete this complex and disputed passage at length, but we can make several key observations. The conditional particle used to bookend verses 9–11 strongly stresses human agency in relation to the active verbs that follow this particular syntactical construction: *ei tis proskunei* (v. 9) and *ei tis lambanei* (v. 11). Both verbs are in the present tense-form<sup>21</sup> and active, suggesting that those who have taken the mark of the Beast have done so freely and with full knowledge of their rebellion against God.<sup>22</sup> Had they not done so, God's judgement would have been averted. Swift destruction<sup>23</sup> is the end result of a life lived in active rebellion

<sup>18</sup> See especially Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (New York: T&T Clark, 1993), chapter 10.

<sup>19</sup> Many English translations render this verb as 'receive'. However, the proper meaning is more like 'takes' or 'accepts', especially as it relates to the human person actively or wilfully partaking in evil. In essence, the dehumanizing act of branding a slave is forcefully desired, and the person is therefore professing a perverse allegiance to the empire.

<sup>20</sup> Although this incredibly harsh language suggests the traditional doctrine of eternal torment, the highly symbolic nature and the blatant literary echoes of Isaiah 34:9–11 (where nations are leveled and the 'smoke' rises from the destruction) suggest that this imagery denotes literal obliteration, not torment. See Paul, *Revelation*, 250–51.

<sup>21</sup> With Beale, it seems difficult grammatically and contextually to take these verbs as truly 'futurist' as opposed to 'true present verbs'. See Beale, *Revelation*, 758.

<sup>22</sup> Significantly, the nations and the enemies of God in this apocalyptic vision never cry out, 'Why are you doing this?' or 'Why is this happening?' Part of comprehending God's judgement is recognizing the self-inflicted nature of rejecting Christ.

<sup>23</sup> The intertextuality between Isa 34:9ff and Rev 14:11 suggests that the torment language is a metonym for destruction, not a literal symbol.

against God.

God's conditional response to judgement illustrates his own patience (Rom 3:24–26) towards those who have rejected God's mercy and must face the justice of God. Mercy is God's prerogative, but not at the expense of injustice and exploitation and oppression; God will respond to such repeated sins with full and unfiltered force. Included in this eschatological response are the powers and those who profess allegiance to them.<sup>24</sup>

**Rev 20:15:** 'And Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.'<sup>25</sup> And if anyone was not found (*kai ei tis ouk heurethē*) written in the scroll of life, they were cast into the lake of fire.'

Our last two texts concerning this particular construction are centred on God's final judgement. In 20:15, John states that anyone not found within God's sovereign plan 'in accordance with their works' (*kata ta erga autōn*) is removed from creation. The conditionality of the particle presses us to see that, even after the destruction of all sinful powers, God will make a final tally of what people did during this apocalyptic time period.

Soteriological contingency also plays a part in how we conceive of the status of a person within the scroll of

life: are they marked there forever, or is there a notion of removing oneself from God's kingdom? This verse indicates that unless a person is in the scroll, that person's fate is death. Judgement is contingent upon what a person does in this life. Salvation is conditioned upon faith and repentance.

Furthermore, John's use of *ean* throughout Revelation speaks to conditionality and contingency as it relates to repentance (2:5, 22), keeping watch (3:3), response to God's discipline (3:19), hearing and freely responding to God's voice (3:20), the authority of the two witnesses to destroy if they desire (11:6), participating in or refusing to join in worship of the Beast (13:15), and finally if someone adds to God's word (22:18–19).

**Rev 21:27:** 'and nothing unclean will enter into the city, nor anyone who does detestable things and speaks lies; only the ones (*ei mē*) who are written in the scroll of life of the Lamb.'

John's final use of this construction is similarly sobering: the exclusive and provisional nature of the Lamb's scroll is predicated upon faithfulness and the purity of the new creation (22:1ff). Those who wash (*hoi plunontes*) their robes in the river of life are granted eternal life in Christ. This conditional particle clearly indicates contingency as it relates to one's status before God and the Lamb. For those who are not part of God's kingdom people, if they have participated in evil (Rev 14:9–11) there is nothing but destruction, but even this is contingent upon accepting the imprint of and wilfully professing allegiance to the Beast. Only those who wash their

<sup>24</sup> David A. deSilva, 'A Socio-rhetorical Interpretation of Revelation 14:6–13: A Call to Act Justly toward a Just and Judging God', *Bulletin of Biblical Research* 9 (1999): 114ff.

<sup>25</sup> John immediately clarifies the 'hell' language with imagery designed to give a plain meaning: the use of 'torment' and 'day and night' is spoken of as 'second death', a literal cessation of existence for Death and Hades (cf. 1 Cor 15:26).



robes in the river (22:14),<sup>26</sup> repent (2:5, 16–17), and persevere in allegiance to Christ (13:9–10) are granted eternal life in the new creation.

The frequent use of conditional particles demonstrates John's intent: repentance and a change of heart and mind will protect one from the coming wrath. A failure to repent will result in eternal death, even for those who have at one time claimed allegiance to Christ (Rev 2–3). That is, the angelic invocations throughout Rev 2–3 directed towards specific, explicitly identified historical churches suggest that some may have at one time given allegiance to Christ but are in the process of being removed or removing themselves from the assembly, as expressed through warfare language (2:16). Hence, the Apocalypse establishes a rather firm layer of theological bedrock characterized by soteriological contingency.

#### IV. Repentance and Contingency in Revelation

A second major issue concerning apostasy or the contingency of salvation resides in repentance as the mechanism of contingency. Every occurrence of *metanoëō* in Revelation occurs in the active tense-form, often as an imperative or a subjunctive.<sup>27</sup> The intent is to influence or command someone to act in a particular man-

ner.<sup>28</sup> Repentance, according to Rev 2:5, will lead to 'do[ing] the works you did at first' and the consequence of failing to respond to this imperative is communal apostasy (2:5b). In Revelation 2:16a, this same logic applies: 'Repent!' (*metanoëson*). This assumes the status of the church as the body of Christ and also that due to immorality this status can be revoked—even violently through means of divine warfare (see the discussion above on the use of war language). Because it has fallen into this risky status, the assembly is explicitly called to repent.

This is especially true in the stark portrayal of the assembly at Thyatira (2:21–22). God's explicit reasoning for granting them more time (*chronon*) was for the purpose of repentance. What was the result? The immoral people in the local assembly 'did not want to repent' (*ou thelei metanoëσαι*), and therefore God cast them into great affliction, which also ultimately results in death (2:23)<sup>29</sup> for those who wilfully resist repentance (*ean mē metanoēsōsin*).

As opposed to righteous deeds in 2:5, the deeds of the assembly in 2:22 are to be repented of. Refusal to do so results in expulsion and death. The call to remember is directly continued in Revelation 3:3, where the assembly of Sardis is called to remember what they repented from, especially as it

26 Whether this washing takes place in the eschatological future or in John's post-visionary experience is irrelevant to my argument.

27 As Stanley E. Porter notes, 'The imperative form is normally used to direct someone's action.' Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 53.

28 The relationship between the indicative and the imperative suggests that the status and the command are not to be separated or bifurcated. Rather, the indicative and the imperative should be taken together as forming a singular reality that can be altered via a failure to participate in the imperative.

29 See Mt 10:28. This verb most often refers to someone's death, sometimes in an eschatological or final way.

relates to what they have ‘obtained and comprehended and kept’ (*eilēfas kai ēkousas kai tērei*).<sup>30</sup> Repentance in 3:19 also is used also as an imperative (*metanoēson*) for the assembly at Laodicea, and this is placed within the sphere of ‘discipline’ (*paideuō*). To discipline someone is to seek to correct one’s behaviour for that person’s own good, as many Second Temple Jewish authors stressed (2 Macc 6:16; 10:4; 4 Macc 5:24, 34).

The negative side of this call to repentance is seen with vivid force in Rev 9:20–21. The negated aorist verbs showcase humanity’s hardness of heart in response to God’s call and judgement. The refusal to repent is exhibited in their worship of demons and idols (9:20), showing that they have committed direct and egregious apostasy, worshipping created things rather than the Creator God. Not only this, but they did not repent of the sinful actions that arose from their idolatry: ‘murders or magic or sexual immorality or stealing’ (Rev 9:21). Sinful desires are actively deployed and there is no longer any resistance of evil behaviour. Despite God’s will that they repent, they refused the grace of God in exchange for their pleasures and their fate.

A refusal to ‘repent and give glory’ (*ou metenoēsan dounai autō doxan*) to God (Rev 16:9) is an additional corollary of contingency. Eventually, blasphemy, in combination with sexual immorality, economic exploitation and the extreme perversity of the sinful human mind, reaches its climactic peak in 16:11. God was willing

to grant repentance earlier in John’s vision, but now they have pressed themselves into God’s wrath. In contrast to good works in Rev 2:5, the evil deeds in 16:9–11 are celebrated and taken to their final extreme. Repentance is the final mechanism to remain in Christ; when repentance is ignored, God responds.

Throughout John’s vision, repentance is the thing that assuages divine wrath. In this section, we have seen Revelation’s depiction of immoral creatures who have given themselves over to their base desires, refusing repentance and life with God. Repentance is not ‘a sorrow for actions that have been done or for sins that have been committed’;<sup>31</sup> it involves a reorientation of the whole person. Salvation, even for the various assemblies in Asia Minor, is contingent upon repentance.

## V. Faith and Perseverance: Contextual Relationality

I will now turn to two positive words that appear frequently in Revelation: perseverance (*hupomonē*; 1:9; 2:2–3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12) and faith (*pistis*;<sup>32</sup> 2:13, 19; 13:10; 14:12). John

<sup>30</sup> The final imperative in this chain suggests active observance or obedience in relation to something being asserted or commanded.

<sup>31</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 798.

<sup>32</sup> Matthew W. Bates and Teresa Morgan have both successfully demonstrated that the word group for ‘faith’ more properly refers to ‘allegiance’, or that it has ‘relational components’ and may indicate virtue. Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017); Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

places the two words in relation to each other; both appear in the messages of chapters 2 and 3. Neither word occurs in the verb form in Revelation.

John's use of *hupomonē* in Rev 1:9 is placed in parallel with 'affliction' and 'kingdom', suggesting that all three nouns are governed by the single article (*tē*) and therefore present a specific chain of meaning: the three nouns are complementary but not synonymous. Taken together, the syntax points to people's anticipation and expectation 'in Jesus', but the notion of perseverance is intensified if we consider John's exile on Patmos, which highlights his faithful witness to Jesus (1:9b) through affliction and pain. The will to persevere 'because of the word of God' (1:9) is a testament to the enabling power of the Spirit.

Concerning the church in 2:2–3, John uses *hupomonē* twice. The first use is clarified as 'your perseverance' (*tēn hupomonēn sou*), thus personalizing the church and identifying its enduring witness to Jesus. This includes the believers' work (*erga sou*) and labour (*kopon*) in responding to the 'false apostles' (2:2). Their remaining in Christ throughout this troubling period is contingent upon several factors. First, they are told to 'have perseverance' (*hupomonēn echeis*), signifying the active and continual need for people to participate and not 'stop working' (*ou kekopiakes*) in 2:3b.<sup>33</sup> The charge to persevere is a charge to remain steadfast in Christ, illustrating symmetry between Christ's work and

human agency in response; human perseverance is central to God's invitation to participate in the kingdom of Christ (Eph 5:5).

Faith (*tēn pistin*) in Rev 2:13 carries something stronger than merely a belief in an object or person. The text reads, 'You seized my name and you did not renounce my allegiance.' The political overtones here are overwhelming. The issue of the 'name' is central to professing allegiance to someone or something.<sup>34</sup> The assembly 'seized' or held onto this name, despite Satan's 'throne' being present amongst them. The political pressure was immense, but they resisted and did not renounce their allegiance to God. This resistance in a time when martyrdom was a real possibility testifies to the power of the Spirit. Trajan's comment in a letter to Pliny (*Letters* 10.96–97) proves the point: 'Whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it—that is, by worshipping our gods—even though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain pardon through repentance.'

The risk of renunciation underscores that faith can be lost or forsaken by those who do not wish to participate in God's kingdom. We see this quite clearly in Rev 2:19, where *hupomonē* and *pistis* appear together: 'I know your works (*erga*) and love and allegiance (*tēn pistin*) and your perseverance (*hupomonēn sou*), and your latter works are more than the former.' Here allegiance and perseverance are tied together with love. The emphasis on the church's works, love, allegiance, and perseverance con-

<sup>33</sup> The charge not to stop working, or to continue labouring, strongly implies the ability or desire to do so. Otherwise this language would be rhetorically ineffective and needless.

<sup>34</sup> See Philippians 2:9–11 where people bow the knee to Jesus—and, by extension, not to anyone else.

firms the sense of contingency, i.e. the need to actively pursue and honour God during trying times.

God's protection is contingent upon perseverance again in Rev 3:10, where the word 'because' indicates conditionality and result. Because the church kept (*etērēsas*) God's word, God will keep (*tērēsō*) them safe from temptation.<sup>35</sup> God's combination of sovereignty and patience in response to human activity is a testament to his loving kindness.

The final two uses of each noun occur together, signifying a complementary semantic domain in Revelation 13:10 and 14:12. In 13:10, the threat of violent death calls for 'the perseverance (*hē hupomonē*) and the allegiance (*hē pistis*) of the holy ones'. Martyrdom is central to much of Jewish thought (e.g. Dan 12:1–2), and endurance unto death illustrates the allegiance that God desires for himself alone. A similar call for endurance and for keeping faith in Jesus occurs in 14:12. Salvation is conditioned upon a person's willingness to participate in Christ, without coercion and without any guarantees of his or her outcome in this life.

## VI. The Dynamics of the Scroll of Life

The contingency of the 'scroll of life' is perhaps the strongest support for the conditional nature of soteriology in Revelation. Although the word group

for 'scroll' (*biblion* and its cognates) occurs twenty-four times in John's apocalyptic vision, only six occurrences are central to our point (3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27) and the first of these offers clear evidence.

**Rev 3:5:** 'The one who conquers, this one will be clothed in white robes and I will not obliterate<sup>36</sup> his name from the scroll of life. I will acknowledge his name before my Father and before his angels.'

Both the conditional particles and the nature of perseverance and triumph are found in 3:5. Additional elements that indicate a predetermined soteriological outlook (13:8; 17:8) should be interpreted through the lens of 3:5. The ultimate triumph of the church is central to John's imagery, but the triumph promised in Revelation is predicated upon allegiance, perseverance and the will to be faithful to Jesus.

The dynamic nature of the scroll of life centres on the contingency of who is in it, and if they can be removed from the scroll; Rev 3:5 says they can. Being written in the scroll of life does not mean one cannot be removed from it, just as the status of the church can be revoked (2:1–19). Even those whose names have been written 'in the scroll of life from'<sup>37</sup> the foundation

<sup>35</sup> John Wesley interpreted the *hoti* clause as 'because'. See Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, 12th ed. (New York: Carlton & Porter, n.d.) 663. This conjunction likely refers to 'a causal or inferential' connection (Porter, *Idioms*, 237).

<sup>36</sup> See Ex 32:32. Literally 'blot out', but the use of 'name' functions as a representation of the whole person, and so this blotting out denotes a form of obliteration.

<sup>37</sup> I thank Brian P. Roden, 'The Doctrine of Election: Corporate Calling of a People with Conditional Individual Participation in the Elect', <http://evangelicalarminians.org/brian-roden-the-doctrine-of-election-corporate-calling-of-a-people-with-conditional-individual-participation-in-the-elect/>, for this insight, and specifically for pointing out

of the world' (Rev 13:8; 17:8) are not determined unconditionally to be in this scroll. The progressive nature of the verbs used to describe the 'writing' process (*gegrammenōn*; 20:12; 21:27; 22:19) suggests a dynamic outlook concerning soteriology (that is, an ongoing process of participation in Christ via being written in the scroll of life), not a deterministic model wherein salvation is established from before creation. Rather, salvation is contingent upon a person's response to God's work in Christ.

In other words, being included in the scroll of life is predicated on the work of God in Christ to achieve atonement for the entire world (1 John 2:2), but *remaining* in the scroll of life is predicated upon human allegiance and faithfulness. This fact necessarily includes the possibility of apostasy on the part of people who reject God. The sovereignty of God encompasses God's decisions as to how he will act, and he has decided that if anyone does not persevere and turns to idolatry, that person will be blotted out and will go into eternal death (Rev 20:11–15).

Regardless of the positive affirmation of Revelation 3:5,<sup>38</sup> the implicit threat of being blotted out remains untouched as it relates to the contingency of being in the scroll of life. The notions of triumph (3:5) and repentance (3:3) reinforce that both condi-

tionality and a legitimate threat are present in Rev 3:5.

My interpretation, of course, has dissenters. Gregory Beale has offered three objections, each of which I will address. First, he says, 'None of the promises to the overcomer contains such an implicit threat of losing a salvation once gained, but they are coined in purely positive terms.'<sup>39</sup> This objection could be taken as a retreat from the actual data. Contingencies are an integral part of John's entire vision, and the idea of having one's spiritual status (or even one's church) removed is surely a rather explicit threat, especially as it relates to God waging war on that church body (2:16). Beale assumes that providing a positive assessment of benefits excludes the implicit existence of the negative. My reading fits the broader context better as Revelation 2 and 3 are full of overt threats and exhortations to the churches, which are directly related to God's judgement.

Second, Beale claims, 'Another reason this should not be understood as referring to a possible loss of authentic salvation is that in John's scheme throughout the names of those who ultimately prove themselves unbelievers are never at any point associated positively with the book of life, but the books of judgment.'<sup>40</sup> This is a *non sequitur*. Beale assumes two things here that he does not prove: he does not explain the questioned status of unbelievers in terms of mechanism or result. That is, he does not ask *how* or *why* they are not believers. Did God predestine them, through his own decretive will or through sec-

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the misconception of the preposition *apo* and the mistranslation of the Greek text by the ESV.

<sup>38</sup> See Grudem, *Systematic*, 802. He asserts that this verse 'is just a strong assurance that those who are clad in the white garments and who have remained faithful to Christ will not have their names blotted out of the book of life'.

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<sup>39</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 279.

<sup>40</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 280.

ondary causes, not to be in the book of life? Would they consider themselves non-believers? How are we to know they are non-believers? Revelation 20:15, located in the central text about eschatological judgment, uses the phrase 'book of life'; there do not appear to be separate books for God with regard to the eschatological future and the fate of humanity. Also, Beale's language lacks nuance: what does 'ultimately prove themselves unbelievers' mean within John's scheme? What does 'authentic' salvation look like outside of 'deeds' or 'works' (Rev 20:15)? Contingency language is compatible with this language, but one is left wondering precisely what Beale means in light of unstated theological convictions. Hence, the most likely option in understanding Rev 3:5 in light of its context is that salvation is contingent.

Third, Beale asserts that 'the metaphor of erasure does not imply loss of actual salvific life.'<sup>41</sup> But this statement simply begs the question. God's conditional demands and calls throughout Revelation render this interpretation unsustainable, especially in light of the reference to the person who 'triumphs' in 3:5a—a conditional description of salvation. Beale's claim faces stiff obstacles: does God plan on making eschatological war against the churches in chapters 2–3 but then forgiving them in the afterlife? What does warfare mean here in the context of salvation?<sup>42</sup> Unless one presumes soteriological determinism,

one cannot make such an argument.<sup>43</sup>

John's language clearly references Ex 32:32–33 LXX, where God says to Moses, 'If anyone (*ei tis*) commits a sin before me, I will blot them out from my book.'<sup>44</sup> John is drawing upon the strongly contingent language of the Old Testament narrative to support his claim here; where idolatry and sin govern human hearts, the consequences include being blotted out of the book. As such, the language of contingency throughout Revelation also seems to undermine Beale's claim.

God's response to sin is therefore consistent with both Exodus and Revelation: apart from repentance, continual sin by a faithless person or empire results in eternal death. John's presentation of soteriology is thoroughly and coherently contingent, despite arguments to the contrary. Whether he is discussing the possibility of being blotted out of the Lamb's scroll of life, faith, perseverance, comprehending and participating in the gospel, or the contingency and conditionality of salvation, John is clear: salvation is a process that can be undone, even by those whose names are already in the scroll of life.

## VII. Pastoral Implications

I have a genuine concern for the women, men and children who sit in the pews of the Baptist church I help to pastor. All theological reflection or

<sup>41</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 282.

<sup>42</sup> Warfare in Scripture certainly includes the loss of bodily life, and in the case of the New Testament's apocalyptic outlook, it certainly includes 'eternal destruction' (2 Thess 1:9ff).

<sup>43</sup> The verb 'to cancel, blot out' here refers to human agents who have turned against God, indicating their loss of both the possibility of salvation and their physical lives.

<sup>44</sup> Both Grudem and Beale are aware of the intertextuality between Ex 32:32–33 LXX and Rev 3:5.

preaching is, ultimately, a matter of praise, worship and discipleship. For many who struggle with doubt and pain regarding themselves or their loved ones, the pastoral implications of soteriological contingency are very real. However, John's message for pastors is simply to proclaim the forgiveness, peace and kindness of Christ.

The genuine call to repent and to reconfigure one's heart and life around the witness of the Holy Spirit is centred on the fact that God is love (1 Jn 4) and that God forgives our sins (Rom 3:21ff). Sin is a crippling and terrifying reality by which many are held captive. The clarion call of John's vision of contingency does not imply that God is not forgiving, loving, or kind. Rather, it is *because* God is all these things and more that we can trust him to empower us to persevere in even the most troublesome or terrifying situations.

## VIII. Conclusion

Conditionality and the contingency of salvation are a central theme in John's wild vision. The repeated emphasis on persistence, perseverance and the need to triumph over the various powers remains crucial to the life of the church. Debates between various models of election and soteriology will undoubtedly remain entrenched and heated until the Lord returns, but in the book of Revelation, I believe that the contingency of salvation and hence the plausibility of apostasy are clearly and decisively affirmed.

This fact does not, of course, express the totality of the biblical data concerning this pressing question—a topic worthy of further exploration in biblical and systematic theology. However, we should keep John's biblical vision in mind in our preaching and disciple-making activity as we advocate for believers not to forsake their first love and for all people to repent, return to Christ, and participate in the kingdom work to which God has called us by his Holy Spirit.